



TRENDS

RECONSTRUCTING THE GLOBAL (DIS)ORDER

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RECONSTRUCTING THE GLOBAL (DIS)ORDER

BSC Trends: Reconstructing the Global (Dis)order

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Foreword

In your hands lies the publication 'BSC Trends: Deconstructing the Global (Dis)Order,' the companion publication to the Belgrade Security Conference 2023, held in Belgrade from October 11th to 13th, 2023.

This publication aims to shed light on and discuss, following the style of BSC discussions, the most significant global, regional, and local events, phenomena, and developments that have marked this year. These topics were part of the panel discussions in this year's BSC conference program.

The authors of the texts in this publication have taken an additional step by attempting, thoroughly and analytically, to foresee events in the near future within each of the covered subjects. The significance of this publication lies in its capacity to indicate, over an extended period, the primary directions in the development of foreign and security policies, international relations, the European Union, the third power influence, the existence of the global order, and the phenomenon of globalization. It explores how these aspects impact geopolitics, the Balkans, international relations, EU enlargement, the rise of right-wing politics in Europe, the Ukraine conflict, and the Middle East.

Starting this year, after each edition of the Belgrade Security Conference, this publication will be released to capture the essence of the discussed themes that defined the conference. Furthermore, it will expand these themes through analyses by the finest researchers of the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, along with our external partners, friends of the institution, and other invited authors.

I extend my gratitude to all the authors of these texts: Dr Predrag Petrovic, Director of Research at BCSP; Srdjan Hercigonja; Dr Vuk Vuksanovic; and Jelena Pejic Nikic, esteemed senior researchers; Milica Starinac, a promising junior researcher, and Bojan Elek; Deputy Director of BCSP. We are particularly delighted to welcome Zoran Kovacevic and Isidora Stakic, associates of BCSP. A special appreciation goes to Dr Helena Ivanov, the editor of this edition of BSC Trends, who took on the task of editing this publication. Dr Ivanov has also become an external associate of BCSP, bringing invaluable knowledge and experience that will undoubtedly assist BCSP in remaining the most significant and pertinent think tank in the Western Balkans which will continue to provide a rich source of new, thought-provoking, and fresh ideas and analyses that steer the direction of the Balkans, Europe, and the world, reflecting upon society and Serbia's foreign and security policies.

Igor Bandovic

Director,

Belgrade Centre for Security Policy

Introduction to the Publication

In the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the geopolitical landscape has undergone tectonic shifts, setting the scene for a year of profound global transformation. The consequences thereof have spilled into 2023, a year that has brought on even more seismic changes to the world order. Across the globe, nations are grappling with a mounting cost-of-living crisis, stemming from the post-COVID economic rebound, and exacerbated by the strategic manipulation of energy resources by Putin's regime against the Western interests. This economic turbulence has left many citizens, especially in the West, dissatisfied with the existing governments, prompting a turn towards far-right political parties in search of solutions. As we approach 2024, which many call the critical election year, the pivotal question lingers: can established centre and left-leaning parties present viable solutions, or are we poised to witness a rise of far-right political parties across the West?

Further complicating this picture is the ongoing Israel-Hamas war which began when Hamas, a designated terrorist organisation, launched an attack on Israel on 7th October, killing around 1200 people and taking hostage over 200 people. Following this, Israel initiated a military campaign in Gaza, an operation that shows no signs of conclusion despite a brief operational pause during which Israeli hostages were swapped for Palestinian prisoners. The potential implications for the broader region remain uncertain, sparking concerns about the possibility of further escalation.

The end of Russia's invasion of Ukraine is also nowhere near in sight, further amplifying concerns. The staggering cost of Ukraine's post-war reconstruction already exceeds three times the magnitude of the Marshall Plan, and the battleground has reached a deadlock which further prompted fears about the Western fatigue regarding the conflict. With impending 2024 elections and this weariness, there is a growing uncertainty about the West's sustained support for Ukraine and the potential repercussions for the ongoing war. Amidst these global transformations, China remains a persistent challenge to the established global order. Western nations grapple with the daunting task of devising a strategy to address this threat while navigating the complexities of defining and managing their relationship with China.

Moreover, as we approach election years with two major wars occurring simultaneously, the world witnessed a massive increase in disinformation – coming both from foreign hostile actors like China and Russia, but also from domestic sources who, for various reasons, have an interest in disseminating fake news. While many are aware of the dangers that disinformation poses, few have been able to offer effective ways of combatting it.

And, as the world deals with all these challenges, the Western Balkans is also feeling the consequences of the tectonic shifts, as it tries to deal with its own internal problems – from state capture which is omnipresent across the region, to territorial and political disputes most notably between Serbia and Kosovo. Secondly, the once-coveted prospect of EU membership, while lingering as an option, loses favour among several Western Balkan states dissatisfied with the slow and uncertain accession process, fostering a belief that the EU membership may remain elusive. Finally, the increased involvement of Russia and China in the region, and especially in Serbia, pose a further challenge to the EU accession process. Compounding this, disagreements within the EU itself arise regarding the pace and terms of potential expansion, casting shadows on the path ahead for both the Western Balkans and the European Union.

This publication, stemming from the insights gleaned at the 2023 Belgrade Security Conference, serves as a lens through which one could examine the nuanced evolution of these challenges throughout the year behind us. By dissecting the intricate interplay of global events, it offers a forward-looking assessment, illuminating potential trajectories for these complex issues. As we contemplate the lessons learned and possibilities unveiled, this analysis equips us with valuable foresight to navigate the uncertain terrain of global affairs in the times that lie ahead.

Dr Helena Ivanov

Part One

The changing global order



The Gaza Dilemma

Sources of Israeli Failure and Challenges

Dr Vuk Vuksanovic,

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Israeli leadership has officially declared that its war aim is to ensure that Hamas is destroyed. By setting to achieve such overly ambitious goals, Israel will face numerous strategic challenges, neither one of which is pleasant for Israel.

— Introduction

Hamas shocked the world on October 7 when it launched a series of terror attacks against Israel. The attack resulted in the death of over 1200 Israelis and approximately 230 soldiers and civilians taken to Gaza as hostages.¹ The attack commenced with missile strikes against Israel, during which Hamas fired 2200 missiles toward southern and central Israel. What followed was a series of attacks by air, land and sea against the Israeli civilian, military and police targets. Hamas militants breached a border security fence separating the Gaza Strip from Israel and used motorboats and even paragliders.² Israel responded with continued air and artillery strikes against Gaza, which killed close to 15000 Palestinians by late November, most of them civilians.³ Despite the temporary humanitarian truce, there is no genuine end in sight, and uncertainty is looming on whether Israeli forces will try to enter Gaza City. This creates the need to examine critical issues. The first one is what are the drivers of the Israeli failure to predict the attacks, and the second what are the risks facing Israel going forward if Israel continues its current course of action.

— Failure of Intelligence

The first issue concerns the intelligence warnings. Some accounts claim that the US and Israeli intelligence reports expected rising tensions with Hamas, but it does not appear that these reports were indicating a specific attack coming.⁴ After Hamas's attacks, the Egyptian intelligence official said that Israel had ignored repeated Egyptian warnings that Hamas was planning "something big."⁵ However, even this report is vague as it does not highlight whether the Egyptian warnings were along the same lines as the US and Israeli reports about coming escalation with Israel or whether they were warning about the very specific, upcoming attack against Israel. If former, Israel might have ignored these reports.

— Overconfidence and the Wrong Conception

This begs the question of why and brings us to the second reason. That reason is overconfidence and experience of previous conflicts. As it is widely known, the Israeli military is deemed to be one of the most formidable armies in the world, backed by one of the most competent intelligence apparatus. Given that both the Israeli military and its security services have a strong track record of engaging Israeli enemies, the overconfidence leads to a lack of preparedness for new attacks as no one believes that their enemies will be able to mount an effective attack. Indeed, in a week preceding the attacks, an intelligence briefing to Israeli leadership claimed that Hamas was effectively deterred.⁶

This type of failure is not unrecorded in Israeli military history as there are already many comparisons with the 1973 Yom Kippur War when Israel failed to predict Egypt and Syria launching a new offensive war. The main driver of the 1973 failure was the wrong concept that the Arab neighbours would launch an unwinnable war against Israel, particularly after the impressive Israeli victory in the 1967 war.⁷ It can be said that the wrong concept of overconfidence in one's own ability played a key part in the 2023 failure to anticipate a Hamas attack.

— Stone Age Techniques

There is also an issue of techniques used by Hamas. Israeli intelligence has some of the most advanced surveillance and technological capacities in the world. These include spyware other governments have misused for tracking journalists and opposition figures worldwide.⁸ Hamas was clearly aware of Israel's technological superiority, which is why, in planning and executing its attacks, it avoided all electronic communications like mobile phones and computers. Instead, as retired Israeli general Amir Avivi said of Hamas: "They've gone back to the Stone Age."⁹

— National Security Impeded by Politics

Ultimately, the abilities of the Israeli national security apparatus have been impeded by political divides and dysfunctional politics. The incumbent Israeli government is the most far-right government in Israeli political history, gathering Likud party led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and numerous radical right-win parties and players, of which the most prominent is Itamar Ben-Gvir who leads the religiously conservative Jewish Power (Otzma Yehudit). Ben-Gvir has been appointed the minister of national security and has been known for his hateful stance towards the Palestinians.¹⁰ As Ben-Gvir has been a strong advocate of forming the National Guard in Israel to strengthen the national police force, Ben-Gvir's biography leads many to fear that the National Guard would become his personalist militia if it were to be formed.¹¹

More importantly, Israel has been plagued by protests for months and opposition to the government's effort to overhaul judicial ability to overturn the government's policies, endangering Israel's democratic credentials. This effort is widely believed to be motivated by the desire to prevent the Israeli judiciary from interfering with the policy of settlement building in the West Bank and persecuting Prime Minister Netanyahu for alleged corruption. That type of politics doubtlessly played a part in weakening Israel's security services in predicting and preventing the tragical attacks.¹²

— Israeli Challenges

This brings us to the second issue. What are the challenges facing Israel going forward? Israeli leadership has officially declared that its war aim is to ensure that Hamas is destroyed.¹³ By setting to achieve such overly ambitious goals, Israel will face numerous strategic challenges, neither one of which is pleasant for Israel. Israeli army counts Israel 169,500 active military personnel and 465,000 people in its reserve forces.¹⁴ In response to Hamas's attacks, Israel reportedly mobilised 360,000 reservists.¹⁵

— Tough Terrain

The big question is whether this military will be forced to fight one of the hardest and most unpopular forms of warfare for any military formation: urban warfare. This would be dangerous for the Israeli military that is trained and intended to wage manoeuvre warfare on an open terrain.¹⁶ It is estimated that Gaza is home to 2.3 million people, of which 1.7 million are refugees.¹⁷ Almost 40% of the population in Gaza are children under the age of 15, and the Gaza Strip has one of the highest birth rates in the world.¹⁸ The total territory of Gaza is 360 square km, and with 15,371 people living per 2.58 square km, it is the second most densely populated area in the world behind London.¹⁹ In case Israel decides to go into Gaza as the invading force, it would need at least a traditional 3:1 ratio in number of troops.²⁰ Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas, counts between 30,000 and 40,000 fighters.²¹ Israel has numerical superiority, but fighting in a tight urban environment imposes a serious risk for Israel of losing a disproportionate number of fighters. Among especially risky prospects for Israel is the network of tunnels that Hamas has built, which are estimated to be almost 483 km long.²²

— The Pain of Urban Counterinsurgency

Defeating Hamas would also imply a longer stay of Israeli forces in Gaza as the counter-insurgency force. Namely, it has usually been defined that for a successive counter-insurgency, and even this claim has its critics, the army holding a territory would

need at least twenty soldiers per 1000 local inhabitants.²³ That would also strain Israeli resources, particularly since Israel would almost certainly have to reinforce troops stationed in Gaza. If Israel decides to take over Gaza, it will also have a difficult time governing that area and population. In Gaza, 80 per cent of the population lives in poverty, with 46 per cent of the population unemployed.²⁴ Gaza also has a major problem with water supply. According to UNICEF, 96 per cent of water from Gaza's sole aquifer is unfit for human consumption.²⁵ There is also an issue of ineffective sanitation, as 108,000 cubic meters of untreated sewage flow daily from the Gaza Strip into the Mediterranean Sea, equivalent to 43 Olympic-sized swimming pools.²⁶

— Civilian Casualties and Israel's Image

The civilian casualties imposed by Israel in its retaliation against Hamas are already hurting Israel's international reputation. The war in Gaza has already motivated Saudi Arabia to put the process of establishing diplomatic relations with Israel on hold.²⁷ There has already been a rise in the number of pro-Palestine protests in the West and the Middle East.²⁸ As the war goes on and as reports of Palestinian casualties continue to reach the global public, the passion of domestic electorates on the conflict will also rise. In the process, even the relations between Israel and the Western governments supporting it will not be immune to this backlash from national and global public opinion. If Israel were to engage Hamas in the urban environment of the Gaza Strip, Hamas would have an effective campaign of showing the world destruction and civilian casualties that would inevitably result from Israeli fighting in the urban settlements.²⁹

— Playing Into Hamas's Hands

Israel's continued fighting with Hamas would only increase Hamas's stature. The ongoing military operations in Gaza, with the high number of civilian casualties, will only lead to further radicalisation.³⁰ That type of radicalisation will allow Hamas to grow in stature, appearing in the eyes of both Palestinians and the wider Islamic world as the champion of the struggle for Palestinian liberation. What has already been reported is that Hamas's political rival among the Palestinians, moderate Fatah governing in the West Bank, is losing popularity as it is being perceived as overly subservient to Israel.³¹ In an unlikely scenario that Israel succeeds in destroying Hamas, a question remains on who will replace Hamas as the governing political force in Gaza since Fatah is already showing that it is now willing to assume this role if it is the product of Israeli military intervention.³² Ultimately, even if Israel were to achieve the unimaginable and destroy Hamas, a new organisation would take Hamas's place because the main cause of the conflict, the stateless status of the Palestinian community, remains unresolved.³³ Israel evidently faces tough times ahead.

The Rise of China: A Critical Assessment

Zoran Kovacevic,

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In the foreseeable future, it is more plausible to anticipate China assuming a larger role within the current global order than to envision China replacing the existing order with its own.

— Introduction

Although there were hints after the Cold War, and particularly after September 11, 2001, that China might assume the role of a new global superpower and replace the Soviet Union in a bipolar world, there are reasons to be sceptical that this Asian country can achieve such high-ranking status in the international arena. Despite its obvious successes in many fields, China is still facing huge obstacles ahead. The problems that China is encountering are not trivial, to say the least, and that is why this text will investigate some of the key issues that will not be easily resolved in the near future. It will unveil if China has the genuine potential to become a global threat, as many scholars and analysts have claimed in previous years. For instance, many hard-line realists, such as John Mearsheimer and Henry Kissinger, warn against the threat that China represents for the US and the rest of the world.³⁴ This paper will also examine the rise of China in relation to the West and objectively analyse its abilities in today's highly competitive world. The key point will be to show that China's growth will certainly continue, but due to internal and external circumstances, its impact on the international stage will be significantly less dreadful than what is now imagined.

— China's Ascent

China has undeniably achieved remarkable progress across various domains in the past few decades, and precisely these achievements were used as a foundational argument for its positioning in the global hierarchy. First and foremost, China's economic transformation has been unprecedented. It subtly shifted from a centrally planned to a market-driven economy, becoming the world's second-largest economic power. This country experienced rapid industrialization, leading to substantial GDP growth rates and, at the same time, lifted millions out of poverty. China has also made significant

strides in the technological and innovational spheres. It has become a global leader in areas like 5G technology, artificial intelligence (AI), quantum computing, and renewable energy.

Its military achievements are also worth mentioning. The Chinese government has undertaken significant reforms to modernise and restructure its armed forces, aiming for a more agile and technologically advanced military. This includes the development of advanced fighter jets, naval vessels, missiles, and cyber capabilities. In addition, China's prestige and status on a global scale are ascending since it has actively engaged in many diplomatic efforts across various regions. This has naturally contributed to its growing geopolitical significance, especially in Asia. Overall, with its highest rate of economic growth, its population of a staggering 1.4 billion people, its largest army in the world, and a military budget that grows each year, China does seem to be the only 'real' competitor for the United States so far. China's endeavours were certainly propelled by its grand vision to be recognised as the world's leading power by the centenary of Mao Zedong's great victory in 2049. However, while its parameters really do seem impressive, they are still insufficient to position China as the new leader of the world order.

— Three Reasons to be Sceptical

The first reason why China doesn't have the capacity to represent a major threat worldwide is because it can't, in effect, control even its immediate surroundings. One of the key determinants of a superpower is its ability to transport its power so that it exerts an immediate and clear influence (or pressure) on a certain country or region. A country that is unable to do something like that in its immediate environment cannot be seriously considered a global threat. China's most significant challenge in this regard arises from East and Southeast Asia, as these intricately complex and diverse regions serve as a battleground where various interests collide. China's influence is undoubtedly substantial in those two regions, yet it still doesn't hold the ultimate say. Many states, such as Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, are unlikely to embrace a relationship with China that limits their ability to pursue other interests and connections, especially with Western powers. China faces a central challenge as numerous East and Southeast Asian countries aim to enhance trade and investment connections with it, all the while strengthening both commercial and security bonds with the West, particularly with the United States. In other words, many countries in East and Southeast Asia still look towards the West for leadership, support, and sometimes assistance.

In addition, China's strategy of intimidating neighbours into suppressing their interests has also unsurprisingly boomeranged. It has been embroiled in several territorial disputes that are still on the table, including the Sino-Indian border dispute, cross-strait tensions between Beijing and Taipei, the disagreement between China and Japan

regarding the Senkaku/Diaoyudao Islands, and tensions between China and various ASEAN claimants in the South China Sea. Such exposures could potentially become Achilles' heels for China in the future, posing challenges that the nation may need to navigate with care. Most importantly, the still unresolved issue of Taiwan is the biggest challenge the Asian colossus is facing. For China, asserting Taiwan as its inalienable part has become the crux of its geopolitical stance and its annexation to the mainland represents the highest goal of President Xi Jinping's policy. Since China is highly sensitive regarding this matter, it is clear to many powerful players in the international realm that Taiwan also represents its greatest weakness.³⁵

The United States, on the other hand, has direct or indirect control over the political flow in its region. It is almost unimaginable for Canada or Mexico, let alone the Central American States, to behave differently in the international realm contrary to American foreign policy interests. Essentially, from the Monroe Doctrine onwards, the United States followed a core tenet of adopting a proactive approach on both regional and global stages, underscoring its dynamic and forward-thinking diplomatic strategy. The United States will therefore strive to be both present and active in the East and Southeast Asian region in the future. To illustrate this point, the US did shift its naval power from the Atlantic to the Pacific as a response to China's rising influence in the region. The Philippines, South Korea, Japan, and a few others are witnessing a growing deployment of American troops. One also needs to bear in mind the formidable presence of the US Seventh Fleet whose capabilities are beyond any question. In stark contrast, current Chinese engagement in the American sphere of influence suggests that, for the time being, it is unlikely to substantially challenge or undermine the still ubiquitous Monroe Doctrine. Despite having numerous economic partners, China possesses a limited number of politico-military allies, especially in its sphere of interest. Having said that, for China to truly ascend as a superpower or global hegemon, it must possess the capability to project its influence primarily in its vicinity and, if required, extend that reach to any corner of the globe.

The second challenge China will be encountering in the years to come is its economic potential. After experiencing nearly two centuries of foreign colonization and domestic turmoil, China has indeed managed to achieve in approximately thirty years a level of industrialization that took certain Western countries nearly a century to accomplish.³⁶ However impressive this sounds, China's share of global GDP today is around 18%, still far from the 50% embodied in post-World War II America.³⁷ Moreover, the GDP per capita of the EU and US is still more than four times that of China.³⁸ While there is considerable potential for economic development, China is nonetheless significantly impacted by evolving external circumstances and internal dynamics. In the years to come, China must identify a fresh growth model due to ongoing challenges related to multiple factors such as production costs, industrial structure, financial risks, division of labour, and macro-control. Additionally, China will need to adopt more favourable

policies that specifically support small and micro businesses. Beijing has for those reasons sought to implement a so-called “new normal” growth model internally while at the same time launching grand international initiatives such as the ambitious “One Belt, One Road” and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

Since its launch in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) served as China’s own powerful idea of globalization which relies on employing economic instruments devoid of any ideological or normative commitments. Although widely praised globally for its grand scale and vision, in practice, it faces growing criticism regarding its implementation and practice. For instance, in Southeast Asia, reservations about the terms of agreements associated with the BRI have resulted in delays for several projects.³⁹ On top of that, BRI-related projects naturally pushed many nations into debt traps, which forced them to distance themselves from this type of Chinese neo-imperial policy.⁴⁰ In this respect, accounts of the overwhelming Chinese presence and its adverse outcomes are prevalent across Southeast Asia. Even in nations highly reliant on China, like Cambodia and Laos, there is a sense of resentment and grudge. Many countries that are included in BRI were rightfully afraid that China was going to ask for political allegiance in return for economic support. Even though those countries welcomed Chinese investments, they were highly suspicious of Chinese neo-mercantilism.

The fact that China’s growth hinges on its exports to America and Western Europe also speaks volumes about its economic flexibility. Simply put, China is overly susceptible to the economic influence of those Western nations with substantial purchasing power. As a result, one can anticipate that China’s future economic development will be heavily influenced by both financial strength and potential economic setbacks originating from the West. China’s geopolitical “wiggle room” is consequently highly influenced by its economy. If China decisively wants to reclaim Taiwan, the economic consequences will be devastating. Estimates from The United States’ National Security Council (NSC) show that a China-Taiwan armed conflict would probably cost the global economy over \$1 trillion annually as a result of disruptions in the semiconductor industry alone.⁴¹ One should also add China’s great dependence on energy resources, which will only increase in the years ahead if it wants to keep the high pace of its economic progress.⁴² As of January 2022, China is the largest consumer of energy, the world’s largest importer of oil, and the second-largest refiner of oil. It is also one of the largest importers of other raw materials that are necessary for its economy. In this sense, China is extremely vulnerable to any kind of blockade or isolation that the West might impose at any point. Taken together, all this will force China to lead a tactful foreign policy with the West to satisfy those vital energy interests.

The final facet one needs to consider about the rise of China is how it ranks against other major powers. The official Beijing stated many times that it wanted above all a peaceful rise and development. President Xi Jinping himself proposed the so-called win-win political, economic, and cultural cooperation with the rest of the world. This is not accidental because China cannot lightly ignore other very important actors in international relations. The most important one is of course the United States. While the gap between the United States and China has diminished, the United States is poised to maintain its status as the foremost global power across various critical criteria—military, economic, technological, and cultural. The US still dominates the global economy, excelling in finances and ranking always among the top three gas exporters and oil producers in the world. It possesses an inventory of 3,700 nuclear warheads, which is way more than 500 that of China, enabling it to exert conventional military influence worldwide.⁴³ Furthermore, as demonstrated by Great Britain in the past and the US today, global supremacy and the global threat of a particular country is only possible once its naval fleet unrestrictedly commands the seas and oceans. China, however, with its three aircraft carriers in contrast to America's eleven, cannot significantly control the events in the maritime domain. Despite China's notable technological advancements, the US maintains unparalleled technological prowess. In terms of soft power, it is needless to say that China's position is beyond any comparison with that of the US. Last but not the least, the US benefits greatly from an extensive network of political and security partnerships worldwide, a dimension where China faces tremendous limitations.⁴⁴ All things considered, the United States maintains military and economic dominance and is expected to continue doing so in the foreseeable future. China is unlikely to succeed in a conflict between the two, and a loss, or even a stalemate, could jeopardise the 74-year rule of the Chinese Communist Party. Moreover, according to Jeffrey D. Sachs, the idea of labelling China as "the new enemy" is increasingly gaining acceptance and becoming a prevailing belief within Washington.⁴⁵ As a result, the US representative, as well as the executive branch, will actively support the so-called "containment grip" on China in the decades to come. Overall, America has not, and will not, sit idly by while China grows both economically and militarily.

Even though it seems that the Russian-Chinese relationship is blooming and that cooperation in the economic and political spheres is gaining importance, these two countries behave more like frenemies in the international arena rather than actual partners.⁴⁶ Historical mistrust, differing regional interests, and the fact that both nations are independent actors pursuing their national interests mean that the partnership is not without its serious challenges. China is for instance facing competitive power dynamics with Russia in their shared backyard of Central Asia. As part of its exclusive sphere of influence, Moscow continues to have substantial influence over the five former Soviet republics of Central Asia: Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. However, China has rapidly replaced Russia as the larger trading partner of all five Central Asian states, a move that Vladimir Putin is not taking carelessly.

Simply said, the Russian-Chinese relationship appears to be more of a transient alignment rather than a profound or enduring alliance. Other powers mustn't be overlooked either. While they may no longer hold the title of the world's foremost powers, Great Britain, France, and Germany are still factors to be reckoned with in international relations. In Germany for instance, China is no longer viewed as an inherently dependable economic partner. Numerous factions within Germany are urging the country's leadership and policymakers to reassess and limit various forms of collaboration with this Asian giant, spanning from economic ties to engagements in science and education.⁴⁷ Equally important, the European Union hasn't changed its Strategic Outlook document published in 2019 where it explicitly marked China as a "systemic rival."⁴⁸

— Conclusion

Without a doubt, Asia will be the central focus of geopolitics in the 21st century, with China positioned at its core due to its swift economic, political, and military ascent. However, the global political order installed by the Western powers after World War II is likely to change, although the direction this will take remains to be seen. In the foreseeable future, it is more plausible to anticipate China assuming a larger role within the current global order than to envision China replacing the existing order with its own.

As for the Western approach to China, it is expected to remain relatively unchanged in the medium and long term. First of all, Western powers will tactfully cooperate with China politically, while making further economic collaboration at the same time. On the other hand, the West will continue to restrain and prevent China's potential influence and control over its many neighbours. More crucially, China's appetite for any form of territorial expansion will be severely punished by the West, a scenario similar to the one which Russia is facing today in Ukraine.

Stalemate in Ukraine

Approaching the Ceasefire

Srdjan Hercigonja,

Senior Researcher, Belgrade Centre for Security Policy

The pressure that the Western governments are facing is coming from different sources; it's not only that citizens' demand is likely to be to ask for some kind of negotiation with Moscow, it's also the economic reasons that will likely force the Western governments to put pressure on Kyiv to agree to a certain type of ceasefire.

The long-awaited Ukrainian counter-offensive, which had been announced in the beginning of 2023, and commenced in late spring, has failed to meet hopes, but also high expectations by Kyiv and the Western capitals. The Ukrainian forces haven't liberated the Russian-occupied territories in eastern and southern parts of the country in the manner expected after the successful 2022 counter-offensives in the Kharkiv and Kherson regions. In 2023, the frontline hasn't significantly changed, with Russian and Ukrainian troops entrenched along the demarcation lines with heavy artillery and large mined areas backing the positions. The unconditional support to the Ukrainian military goals by major countries in the West, mainly from the United States, the United Kingdom and the European Union could be shaken due to the following reasons:

- Russia's ability and preparedness to conduct war operations for long period of time;
- Inability of the Ukrainian forces to liberate the occupied territories with the military technology already provided to Kyiv;
- Adaptation of the Russian state and society to new economic and political context created with the Western-backed sanctions;
- Challenges of Ukraine's European integration ;
- Political position of the vast majority of Asian, African and Latin American countries vis-à-vis the war in Ukraine;
- Political and social challenges in the Western countries, more precisely, elections in the United States and elections for the European Parliament;
- Other global security challenges, more importantly escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war.

All these factors have contributed to the emergence of war fatigue in the West, which could significantly re-shape the wider context of the war in Ukraine, and will likely influence the political, but also military dynamics in Kyiv.

— Without Significant Changes on the Frontline

Ukraine is slowly entering the third year of war caused by the 2022 full-scale invasion by the Russian Federation. Despite the hopes that the spring and summer of 2023 would see the liberation of occupied territories in the southern and eastern front, the Ukrainian counter-offensive was not as successful as its Western partners and allies hoped to be. Ukrainian Army made territorial gains in the occupied parts in the Zaporizhzhia area, but since the liberation of Kherson in late 2022, Ukrainians haven't made territorial gains that would be considered strategically, or more importantly symbolically significant. After the Russian forces seized Bakhmut, and with the fate of the strategically important town of Avdiivka in Donetsk region still being unknown, other significant military operations could be expected in air, and likely in sea (drone attacks on Crimea and inside Russia, missile attacks on Kharkiv region, and energy infrastructure), but not on the ground. Russia's military positions are very well-entrenched, and the country boosted the production of missiles and ammunition, while simultaneously importing drones from Iran and material support from North Korea.⁴⁹ Ukraine has already received substantial military aid, both through financial packages and in equipment. Until August 2023, the United States alone donated \$46.6 billion for weapons and equipment, while Ukraine also received advanced military technology, including Patriot air defence missile systems, and Abrams and Leopard tanks.⁵⁰ Ukraine will continue to receive military aid, however it is unlikely that the amount of aid would increase, and that more sophisticated military technology would be donated to Kyiv, again raising concerns that Ukraine will not be able to achieve all its military goals in 2024.

The possible stalemate does not mean that there won't be any territorial advances by Ukrainian forces, particularly in Southern and Eastern front, more precisely in Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk and Lugansk regions. However, these advances come with a high price in human casualties, resulting in thousands of dead Ukrainian soldiers. High expectations of the Spring 2023 counter-offensive combined with high death toll has boosted a sense of pessimism among many Ukrainians, and it is likely that the stalemate-like situation will have significant negative influence on the Ukrainian morale. Public opinion polls show that there is growing percentage of Ukrainian citizens who would support a negotiated settlement with Russia, although a vast majority is still against giving up the territories in exchange for peace.⁵¹

— Putin Strengthens his Rule and Position

The totalitarian crackdown of political opposition and of anti-war movement has made any alternative to the current Kremlin establishment impossible, and it is highly unlikely that Putin will be replaced by someone else soon. With presidential elections in Russia scheduled for March 2024, and with firm electoral support for Putin and its decisions vis-à-vis Ukraine, it is difficult to imagine that the Kremlin's strategy would change. By

prosecuting any possible threat to his regime, Putin and his closest allies created an almost totalitarian state within which any credible alternative to current Moscow's policies seem impossible. Russia's economy has been hit badly by the West-imposed sanctions, with middle class being particularly vulnerable to imposed measures.⁵² It is estimated that hundreds of thousands of Russians fled the country in several waves of emigration since February 2022. Apart from those who left due to political reasons and due their opposition to the war and Putin's regime, many Russians left for economic reasons and to avoid mobilization. Among hundreds of thousands of people who fled Russia since the invasion of Ukraine, high percentage of them are high skilled individuals whose departure from the country may severally impact its productivity.⁵³ However, the state has managed to financially compensate those citizens most affected by the war thus keeping the "social peace" among the large portion of Russian citizens. As the majority of Russian soldiers fighting in Ukraine come outside of big cities such as Moscow and Sankt Petersburg, even financial support for the fallen and injured soldiers serves as significant financial boost for small communities in remoted areas.

— The Pace of Ukraine's EU Integration

The Euro-Atlantic integration of Ukraine additionally serve as security guarantees against Russia's military and political goals. The European Union recommended the beginning of accession negotiations with Ukraine which is a significant step in the EU integration process, and which was celebrated in Kyiv as a historic step forward.⁵⁴ However, there are at least three factors which might affect any possible "fast forward" membership possible: the EU's integration capacity, Ukraine's preparedness to fill out criteria for joining the EU, and hesitance of some EU member states to support Ukraine in its membership bid. Even significantly smaller by size and population, the Western Balkan countries have been in the process of EU integration for almost two decades, and still without a clear perspective when these countries will become EU member states. One of the reasons claimed by some EU member states is the need for the EU to reform itself and boost its integration capacities before these countries could join. Ukraine, the largest European country by territory (not including Russia), and with population of roughly 43 million, would significantly change the balances within the EU and would probably require some kind of reform of its institutions. Secondly, even if the EU is completely ready to admit a big country with unsecure and disputed borders, the question is will Ukraine be ready. Apart from many issues, and as Hannes Swoboda, the President of the International Institute for Peace, noted and rightfully warned during the second edition of the Belgrade Security Conference:

"We cannot imagine the effects this war has on Ukraine the moment the war stops. What kind of divisions inside the country will be? Because there will be strong division and antagonism about the questions: was it right to have the war stopped

now; the negotiations, the compromise... The physical damage, the psychological damage to many people, how many people will return, will not return? And the people had been outside will have been called traitors. So, it's not just another country that is coming." ⁵⁵

Finally, unanimous vote is needed for any substantial progress in the EU integration with the current rules of decision-making in EU institutions. The September 2023 Slovak parliamentary elections unveiled just how fragile to European solidarity towards Ukraine is, as it appears that this country has joined Hungary in its rejection of "fast-forward" integration of Ukraine.

— Upcoming Elections in the USA and the EU

The elections in Poland and Slovakia showed the strength of pro-Russian narratives and those narratives that would lead to the halt of the military and financial aid to Kyiv. However, it is not only Slovakia and Hungary that keep maintaining pro-Russian narratives. The public opinion surveys show that the citizens' support for the Ukrainian cause is in sharp decrease in the West. It is even expected that this support might be even lower in the light of elections that are taking place in the United States and for the European Parliament. Major public opinion poll has shown that large number of Europeans believe that Russia is likely to win the war within five years (30%) compared to 38% believing that it is Ukraine that is more likely to win the war. ⁵⁶ Even in the United States, the percentage of those who replied that Russia is more likely to win the war within the next five years is at 35%.⁵⁷ Support for the American military and economic aid in the United States is still strong but has waned.⁵⁸ In the light of the elections in the United States, and in the light of the elections for the European Parliament, it's likely that the populist parties advocate for decrease or even the halt of financial aid to Ukraine. This is particularly the case in the United States, where the polls show that the Republican voters are quite sceptic about the continuation of military and economic aid, with a vast majority of them voicing the opinion that the United States should encourage negotiations. ⁵⁹

— The Israel-Gaza War: A Shift of Global Attention

The Israel-Gaza war which began after an unprecedented Hamas attack on Israel, has shifted the global focus from Ukraine to the Middle East. The scale and scope of the war has sent shock waves across the region, seriously affecting the loose balances of power. Everyday news from Gaza and Israel, followed with disturbing images of civilian casualties coming from both sides have flooded the news of traditional media, while social media accounts have become a place of war of narratives characterised by enormous

amount of misinformation and disinformation. The possibility of the spill-over effect of the war to the neighbouring countries, and of direct involvement of other regional actors, particularly of Iran, have mobilised almost every important actor on international stages, both the great powers and international organisations alike. The war has contributed to the deepening of differences between the Western countries and most Asian, African, and Latin American countries vis-à-vis war in Ukraine. Not only that many countries of the so-called “Global South” have accused the West of hypocrisy and of promoting double standards in relation to these two wars, but this position is shared by significant members of global governance, including international organisation and international non-governmental organisations. The huge military aid that the US approved to Israel after October 7th attack raises question of potential bi-partisan agreement on the next package of military aid to Ukraine.⁶⁰

— War Fatigue in the West

The West seems tired from the war in Ukraine. It is expensive for the Western countries, while the Western governments are faced with the growing pressure from their own citizens who seem to begin prioritizing peace in Ukraine over victory in Ukraine. As a quick military victory for Ukraine appears to be impossible in the near future, and with the number of casualties growing day by day, it is likely that more and more citizens will require peace in Ukraine and support some kind of peace negotiation with Russia through mediator. The pressure that the Western governments are facing is coming from different sources; it's not only that citizens' demand is likely to be to ask for some kind of negotiation with Moscow, it's also the economic reasons that will likely force the Western governments to put pressure on Kyiv to agree to a certain type of cease-fire. The war has become too costly. It became evident in the light of dramatic escalation of Israeli-Palestinian conflict that the West is currently engaged on multiple fronts in the context of the rapid change of the global (dis)order, and that it cannot be focused on one single conflict. Without global consensus on the view of conflict resolution in Ukraine, with elections in the United States and for the EU Parliament which would shift the focus on domestic issues, and with economic costs of unconditional support for Ukraine, Kyiv will be under huge pressure to engage in talks about the cease-fire. It doesn't mean that the West will abandon Ukraine, but it will put on hold the support for the Ukraine's current military goals which is complete liberation of all occupied territories in the country. The West will continue to substantially support Ukraine though the European integration process, and with likely new security guarantees, which will not include NATO membership, but which will satisfy Kyiv's needs for security and stability of the country. The war fatigue has emerged in the West, and it will highly influence political and military dynamics in the period to come.

Expanded BRICS

Rebellion Against the West, but Not Western Replacement

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Despite these limitations of BRICS, the world, beyond any doubt, is moving from US-led unipolarity towards a multipolar system. Sino-American rivalry will be the dominant trend, just like the Soviet-American rivalry dominated the second half of the XX century.

Introduction

In August 2023, BRICS, an international group gathering non-Western powers (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), decided to expand. During the BRICS Summit in South Africa, an invitation for membership was extended to six countries: Argentina (which seems to have rejected the invitation following the elections of Javier Milei), Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, with their membership set to take effect from January 1, 2024.⁶¹ This begs the question of what the geopolitical ramifications of this transformation are. The best answer would be that while it is premature to call BRICS an alternative to the Western-led order, this process should not be discounted. The expansion of BRICS manifests the displeasure that many countries worldwide feel towards the system of Western dominance and a manifestation of a world in which the distribution of power between Western and non-Western powers is set to become more equitable.

BRICS – Origins and Reasons Behind its Expansion

The term BRICS began as BRIC, an acronym coined by Jim O'Neil, a former Goldman Sachs Asset Management Chairman, in 2001.⁶² By this acronym, O'Neil referred to the economies that need to be integrated for the world economy to be fully functional: Brazil, Russia, India and China. In the wake of the global financial crisis in 2008, the BRIC as a formal grouping was officially formed in 2009 after their first summit in Yekaterinburg, Russia.⁶³ In 2010, South Africa joined the group, renaming it into BRICS.⁶⁴ Since then, apart from symbolism, the large grouping failed to produce the consequential geopolitical transformation it promised. However, the coming expansion of the organisation is generating a strong impression that BRICS is back into the equation larger and more powerful than in the past.

One can say that after a long period of stagnation, BRICS has been temporarily revitalized, largely as a result of two occurrences: the first one is the crisis of the global supply chain, and the second one is the displeasure over the dominance of the US dollar. The first reality became evident both in light of the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic aftershocks of the war in Ukraine as Russia's energy, wheat, metals, and rare earth were not fully available in the global market, causing a crisis in their supply and rising prices of these commodities.⁶⁵

— The Strength of BRICS

As BRICS has countries that are major exporters of commodities like Russia and Brazil, and major importers like China and India, there is an evident interest of these countries to develop the system and rules of a new supply chain to deal with challenges of the fragmented world and one where the West does not dominate.⁶⁶ In 2022, during the BRICS video summit organised by China, member states agreed to work jointly on addressing the challenges of the global supply chain.⁶⁷ Now, BRICS will account for 45 per cent of the world's oil production and possesses significant iron ore, coal, and bauxite reserves, alongside the agriculture heft that countries like Russia and Brazil bring.⁶⁸

The war in Ukraine has raised alarms in developing countries about the dominance of the US dollar and the American ability to punish the unruly countries with financial sanctions. This is part of the reason why the Global South is unwilling to join the Western sanctions against Russia and is searching for long-term alternatives to dependency on the US dollar and Western financial institutions.⁶⁹ The presence of commodity exporters like Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the expanded BRICS gives China, the leading non-Western economy and power, the hope that, in the long term, introducing a new currency that is not the US dollar might be more attractive and realistic.⁷⁰ Even without the alternative currency, the threat to the system of the US dollar may not be a replacement but the system on which the members of BRICS will use their currencies in bilateral trading.⁷¹ In its expanded form, the BRICS went from gathering 42 to 46.5 per cent of the world's population with control over 36 per cent of global GDP based on purchasing power parity (PPP), surpassing on that metric G7 countries that control 30.39 per cent of global GDP based on PPP criteria.⁷²

— BRICS Has its Limitations

Naturally, the BRICS, while revitalised, are still far from being a coherent bloc as the grouping unites countries from different regions with different political systems, different models of socio-economic development and different levels of development. Saying that BRICS should work on a new currency is one thing, but introducing a new currency is quite another one. Forming a single BRICS currency is difficult since the BRICS countries are reluctant to hold large reserves of each other's currencies, and it is equally difficult to form working joint institutions like the already formed New Development Bank where it is unclear how the funding for the bank will be distributed among BRICS members.⁷³ There are differences among BRICS members that can impede the evolution of BRICS. Brazil is willing to cooperate closely with China. Still, it also wants China to be more active in doing its share of combating global environmental threats that are salient for Brazil and preventing deindustrialization and job loss as an unintended consequence of cooperating with China.⁷⁴ The latest decision by Argentina to reject the invitation to join only further complicates the picture. The most serious internal division within the BRICS will be the increased security and geopolitical competition between India and China, not least over their disputed border in the Himalayas.⁷⁵

— Waving Goodbye to Unipolarity

Despite these limitations of BRICS, the world, beyond any doubt, is moving from US-led unipolarity towards a multipolar system. Sino-American rivalry will be the dominant trend, just like the Soviet-American rivalry dominated the second half of the XX century. However, in this world, alliances and alignments will not be as rigid and fixed as during the Cold War. Consequently, the countries of the Global South, especially those set to join BRICS, see membership in groupings like the BRICS as a way to hedge their bets without fully joining either Washington's or Beijing's camp.⁷⁶ For the countries that are interested in joining BRICS or engaging in it, there is a powerful displeasure with the US unipolarity. The current Israeli war against Hamas in Gaza is, for many in the Global South, a sign of double standards where Western powers show solidarity with Ukrainians but not with the Palestinians.⁷⁷ On top of that, when they engage the Global South, non-Western powers like Russia frequently invoke US military interventions as signs of negative manifestations of the unipolar world by invoking US wars in Yugoslavia (1999), Iraq (2003) and Libya (2011).⁷⁸

— Not Anti-Western but Multipolar World

This does not necessarily mean it is an anti-Western shift but a move of countries seeking an independent course. Indeed, by July 2023, according to South African officials, more than 40 nations had shown interest in joining BRICS.⁷⁹ Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva says that BRICS is not “a counterpoint to the G7, G20 or the United States” but a method of organising developing countries internationally.⁸⁰ However, the sheer numbers of BRICS countries expressed through population, territory, and natural resources should still earn the group a lot of respect on the international stage.

More recently, Jim O’Neil, who coined the term BRIC, wrote that BRICS has grown in symbolic power, but that is not the same as replacing the Western system. In O’Neil’s own words: “What these dynamics suggest is that neither the G7 nor the BRICS (expanded or otherwise) makes much sense for tackling today’s global challenges. Neither can do much without the direct, equal involvement of the other.”⁸¹ Indeed, what we are witnessing is not necessarily a process in which the Western institutions get replaced with whatever the expanded BRICS delivers. Still, it is a process in which the distribution of power and wealth between regions, particularly the Atlantic and Indo-Pacific, will become equitable in time primarily because of the rise of China and India. In that world, many countries see an opportunity to voice their worldview by hedging and balancing in a multipolar world instead of simply following the West. This speaks of a complicated reality that strategists must take seriously. The impact of the expanded BRICS should not be overstated but should not be underestimated either.



Part Two

Challenges to Western Democracies

Disinformation in Western Democracies: An Evolving Threat

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Since the war in Ukraine started, Russia has heavily relied on using disinformation to influence public opinion in the West regarding its invasion – a report by EEAS has found that in 60 out of 100 cases, supporting the invasion was the main motivation behind the use of information manipulation tactics by Russia

— Introduction

As technologies evolve, so does their potential for producing harmful effects. One of the most prominent illustrations thereof is the use of digital technologies in spreading disinformation, “a weapon in hybrid warfare”,⁸² by culprits ranging from authoritarian regimes to non-state actors. Disinformation campaigns, growing in scope and evolving in methods, present a threat not only to political processes in the Western democracies, but to their core values such as security and health as well. From the worldwide infodemic⁸³ regarding COVID-19 which negatively impacted vaccination rates, to the scandal of Cambridge Analytica and the 2016 presidential elections in the United States and the latest Russian attempts to influence the public opinion regarding the war in Ukraine, the use of disinformation as a tool in domestic and international political arenas is drawing more attention and demonstrating that it’s here to stay. Before coming to the issue of who stands behind disinformation, how is it spread and what impacts does it have on Western democracies, let’s first set the terminology straight.

— Construing disinformation

For the purpose of this paper, we are adopting the following definitions:

Dis-information	“Information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organisation or country”
Mis-information	“Information that is false, but not created with the intention of causing harm.”
Mal-information	“Information that is based on reality, used to inflict harm on a person, organisation or country.” ⁸⁴

Another related term, arguably popularised by Donald Trump, is fake news. Fake news “as a genre” refers to disinformation or misinformation imitating the form of regular news, while fake news “as a label” refers to the use of the term in attacking or delegitimizing media.⁸⁵ Therefore, disinformation can emerge in the form of fake news, but the former is a broader concept than the latter.

— Background Conditions Behind the Era of Disinformation

While the use of false information for political or economic purposes is probably as old as society itself, disinformation as a political tool has never been as present or influential as in the last decade. Majority of literature on the issue identifies the following three factors as the main catalysts that enabled disinformation to reach such a high spot on the list of threats to Western democracies:

Firstly, the rapid development of information technologies, including social media, created a number of channels for sharing information – but also mis- and disinformation. Anyone on the internet can now create content and attempt to brand it as legitimate information, which can go viral within hours. It is precisely the “reach, speed and low cost of disseminating disinformation over social media”⁸⁶ that has allowed the issue of disinformation to become one of the main and fastest-evolving threats to democratic processes.

In addition to emergence of alternative information sources on the internet, trust in mass media has been in decline. Research from 2022 showed that a record low of 16% of US citizens have “a great deal” or “quite a lot” trust in mass media outlets.⁸⁷ While the situation is somewhat better in the EU, a significant percentage of the population (39%) has low or no trust in the media.⁸⁸ This provides space for alternative and unreliable sources to establish themselves in the media landscape.

Another reason is the rise of “clickbait media” and the political economy behind it. In the digital age, the press rely on measurable digital advertising for revenue, which some of the low-cost and dubious outlets posing as legitimate news sources exploit for economic gain – by sharing the so-called “clickbait news” with the main purpose to attract viewers.⁸⁹ Their lack of responsibility facilitates the spread of disinformation, but also pushes traditional media towards an asymmetrical competition for the attention of readers with low-credibility websites, which can in turn influence the quality of their own output.⁹⁰

— Disinformation Campaigns in Western Democracies

Foreign Disinformation

When it comes to foreign information manipulation, Russia is rightfully recognised as a “leader” in this field. The Gerasimov doctrine provides a blueprint of Russian tactics to use disinformation as one of the tools in achieving “an environment of permanent unrest and conflict within an enemy state.”⁹¹ While the list of elections in which disinformation created or supported by Moscow is long and includes the 2016 US presidential elections (with posts shared by the accounts linked to the Russian Internet Research Agency reached 126 million Facebook users⁹²), French and German elections in 2016 and 2017, and Czech presidential elections in 2018, this constitutes only a portion of disinformation activities played out by the Russian Federation.⁹³

However, Moscow’s objective goes beyond influencing a specific political event and includes undermining trust in Western media and political institutions, as well as exploiting divisions in societies. One of prominent examples is the 2016 “Lisa case” in Germany, which saw the Russian disinformation ride on the anti-migrant sentiment to deepen this cleavage in German society.⁹⁴ Since the war in Ukraine started, Russia has heavily relied on using disinformation to influence public opinion in the West regarding its invasion – a report by EEAS has found that in 60 out of 100 cases, supporting the invasion was the main motivation behind the use of information manipulation tactics by Russia.⁹⁵ The same report found that the tools in spreading disinformation are multi-lingual and mostly based on images and videos.⁹⁶

Speaking of Chinese disinformation campaigns, collusion with the Russian is existing, but limited.⁹⁷ The agendas of Chinese disinformation campaigns include promoting favourable view of Chinese government in Western democracies, as the case of Italy - where a 2020 poll revealed that Italians had more positive attitudes towards China than some European partners - has shown.⁹⁸ Besides promoting pro-PRC narratives, Chinese disinformation also focuses on countering criticism over its human rights practices or the issue of Taiwan.⁹⁹ A recent study has shown that the presence of Chinese disinformation in Central Europe has sharply increased since the 2019 Hong Kong protests and that China tends to imitate the Russian disinformation tactics in this area, using similar channels and targeting the same audience disillusioned by the West.¹⁰⁰ One of the key features of the Chinese disinformation campaigns is the use of online trolls – named “fifty-cent party” after the price per post – in flooding information space, promoting the CPP-supported narratives and “pushing independent voices out of public spaces.”¹⁰¹

The main points of impact of foreign disinformation campaigns include deepening of citizens’ distrust in traditional media and democratic institutions, by promoting

narratives that incite confusion and question the functioning of Western democracies. Moreover, disinformation campaigns also target political cohesion by exploiting existing divisions in the society – in the aforementioned “Lisa case”, disinformation campaign resulted in protests in Germany.¹⁰²

Since 2015, the EU has taken a number of actions against disinformation, such as forming the East Strategic Communication Task Force and adopting the EU Action Plan against Disinformation. In February 2023, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borell warned of a “new wave” of fabricated images, videos and websites targeting European audiences and announced creation of a new EU platform to counter Russian and Chinese disinformation.¹⁰³ While warning about the expected increased the use of private messaging applications, chat bots, voice-operated systems and AI in spreading disinformation, the HLEG strongly advised the Commission against turning to simplistic solutions and censorship.¹⁰⁴ Long-term measures focused on increasing reach and visibility of fact-checked information, promoting media transparency and responsibility, as well as increasing citizens’ resilience towards disinformation through media literacy campaigns, proposed by the EU strategic documents in this area, seem like promising solutions, however the effectiveness of their implementation is yet to be seen.

Domestic Disinformation

While the Russian and Chinese disinformation is well-research and documented, disinformation spread by a variety of actors within the EU causes did not receive equal attention. In recent years, governments with authoritarian tendencies within the EU have started to increasingly exert control over traditional media and use information technologies in promoting their own agendas, which often includes spread of disinformation. In Hungary, since Viktor Orban came to power, ownership over 50% percent of media outlets came in the hands of circles close to the government.¹⁰⁵ Orban and his allies have used their influence over Hungarian media to share disinformation such as that Iranian students and illegal migrants were to blame for the spread of COVID-19, or that George Soros was responsible for tanking Hungarian currency.¹⁰⁶ In Poland, the state-controlled media were used to attack some mayors and blame them for the spread of the virus¹⁰⁷ or to discredit President Andrzej Duda’s challengers by misinterpreting their quotes.¹⁰⁸ Polish government has also been linked with Visegrad 24, a Twitter account which “pretends to be a news agency, but just repackages material with a conservative spin”¹⁰⁹ and which is known for sharing disinformation at the beginning of war in Ukraine. This section would not be complete without mentioning the infamous Brexit campaign, during which disinformation was a prominent tool used especially by the Vote Leave campaign and its Tory members. One of the main claims by the campaign was that NHS would get 350 million pounds a week if the UK left the EU – while it was proven to be a case of disinformation, over a half of the UK citizens believed it.¹¹⁰

The dangers behind domestic information manipulation in Western democracies reflect in misusing democratic institutions to reach undemocratic ends – such as establishing control over the narratives around elections or referenda, promoting false stories to advance political actors’ own agendas and targeting political opponents or minority groups, especially by the right-wing political actors. The case of the US and micro-targeted political ads – such as the ones used by the Trump campaign in 2016 to deter the African Americans from voting¹¹¹ – illustrates the dangers of disinformation campaigns to democratic processes. In the US, disinformation has been used for voter suppression, especially targeting marginalised communities with social media ads that contained false information about location or date of the elections.¹¹² Experts warn that this trend might worsen in the upcoming 2024 presidential elections if no action is taken against such phenomena.¹¹³ The previous attempts to ban microtargeted political ads or to recognise voter suppression in the online sphere have failed due to lack of bipartisan consensus, which stressed the need for an approach beyond legislative regulation based on cooperation among the government, politicians, platforms and civil society.¹¹⁴ Unfortunately, it seems that besides civil activism, no effective measures to tackle domestic disinformation campaigns have been taken, while in the EU the assessment remains the same as for the foreign disinformation campaigns – long-term solutions seem plausible, but their results are yet to be seen.

— Countering Negative Impact of Disinformation While Respecting Freedom of Speech

The negative impact of disinformation campaigns can take many forms – from distorting the citizens’ knowledge about important political issues and preventing them from making informed choices, over fuelling already existing xenophobic narratives and deepening divisions in societies, to reducing trust in media, institutions and political processes. With studies showing that “false news spread faster than the truth”¹¹⁵ and that exposure to disinformation leaves people doubting their knowledge while also relying on inaccurate information to complete subsequent tasks,¹¹⁶ the dire consequences of disinformation campaigns clearly affect society from the level of government to the individual level.

With the European Parliament elections coming up in 2024, the fear of foreign election manipulation is strong, with MEPs adopting a report calling for a coordinated strategy to increase resilience to foreign information manipulation. One of the recommendations of the report is banning the Chinese social network TikTok on all levels of national governments and in the EU institutions.¹¹⁷ Another issue is the regulation of the role of big platforms such as Meta, which collect a lot of user data, while also presenting the

environment in which many disinformation campaigns occur. The debates about platform regulations are ongoing in both the EU and the US, while the former UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression David Kaye expressed concern about such regulation allowing platforms to arbitrarily decide on content removal without public oversight.¹¹⁸

Finding a way to counter ever-evolving tools of disinformation without endangering the right to freedom of expression will remain one of the key challenges for the authorities – and the latest war between Israel and Hamas further complicates the picture. The EU has taken some promising steps in the direction of countering malign foreign influence, but more needs to be done, especially when it comes to domestic disinformation as well. In the US, despite several attempts in Congress to prevent the use of disinformation in election campaigns, the dangers of disinformation being used for voter suppression remains high, especially when it comes to minority groups.

The High Cost of the Cost-of-living Crisis: The Surge of the Far-right in Europe

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In the context of rising inflation rates and the cost-of-living crisis impacting household purchasing power, almost two-thirds of EU citizens express dissatisfaction with the measures implemented by their national governments to address these issues. Also, satisfaction with the government's response to crises has declined in 14 countries in the past six months.

Europe was still recovering from the consequences of the global economic (2008) and big migrant crises (2015) when the COVID-19 pandemic hit (2020), closely followed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine (2022). These crises have disrupted the global supply chains for industrial products, food, and energy, resulting in a substantial price increase and an energy crisis. The most drastic example is the gas price, which reached €300 MWh in mid-2022. Before the war in Ukraine, the prices of Russian gas were between €15 and 25 MWh. The surge in energy prices has further fuelled inflation, which was already present due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, annual inflation in EU countries averaged 9.2% in 2022, and it was highest in the Baltic states, reaching a staggering 19.4% in Estonia. Compared with 2021, when the annual value was 2.9%, it more than tripled, thus reaching levels unprecedented in the previous four decades.¹¹⁹

Such a significant price increase had a direct effect on citizens' living standards, and substantially increased the prices of food, goods, services, and housing. However, wage growth has not kept pace with rising prices, leading the EU into a cost-of-living crisis. The consequences of this crisis are so profound that citizens continue to live in economic uncertainty and fear, despite the gas prices returning to pre-war levels in Ukraine (€35 per MWh) and inflation being halved in the autumn of 2023.¹²⁰ Extreme right-wing parties capitalize on the widespread fears and dissatisfaction among the EU citizens to garner votes, contributing to their continuous growth. Even more problematically, neither centre nor left-wing parties have been able to offer adequate solutions, thereby allowing the far right to emerge as the political winner of this crisis. In fact, even before the latest crisis, the far right has shown itself capable of capitalizing on many issues targeting the EU citizens, with high inflation rates only further contributing to the rise of the far right.

— How Severe is the Crisis?

The cost-of-living crisis has significantly impacted the quality of life for citizens in the EU. The most recent European Barometer on Poverty and Precariousness revealed that nearly one-third of Europeans characterise their financial situation as “precarious,” with any unexpected expense posing a significant challenge due to the rising inflation rates. Only 15% of the respondents said they were confident and did not feel the need to pay attention to their everyday expenses. In response to the severe financial conditions, EU citizens have had to make compromises, such as skipping meals despite hunger (18%), not heating their homes (23%), limiting travel (29%), borrowing money from family and friends (30%), and even skipping necessary medical treatment (21%). The severity of the situation was evident in the responses of many parents (20%), who said that they’d had to restrict their food intake to feed their children.¹²¹ Research also indicates that over 90 million people are at risk of poverty or social exclusion, with the highest rates in Romania (34.4%) and Bulgaria (32.2%).¹²²

Even though inflation has been contained in the EU since September 2023, the cost of living continues to worry citizens greatly. Thus, the public opinion polls suggest that more than half of the respondents were concerned about dealing with inflation and potential rises in food, energy, and miscellaneous costs. The study indicates that 62% of the citizens are troubled by the prospect of escalating food prices, while unexpected expenses and the cost of gas are sources of worry for 59% of the respondents. Moreover, most citizens are pessimistic, believing that their compromised standard of living will not improve in the next year.¹²³

In the context of rising inflation rates and the cost-of-living crisis impacting household purchasing power, almost two-thirds of EU citizens express dissatisfaction with the measures implemented by their national governments to address these issues. Also, satisfaction with the government’s response to crises has declined in 14 countries in the past six months. Presently, citizens in only three countries (Luxembourg, Denmark, and Ireland) report satisfaction with their government’s crisis measures. Socioeconomic factors show that satisfaction levels are highest among managers and white-collar workers.¹²⁴ These research findings come as no surprise, given that The International Monetary Fund has indicated that the profits of large corporations play a significant role in driving inflation in Europe, and the burden of crises has not been evenly distributed among all citizens and social classes.¹²⁵

— The Far-right Exploits Crises

For years now, the extreme right has been utilizing various issues in their campaigns, such as migration or energy policies – and have effectively secured votes on those grounds, especially because the centre and the left-wing parties have failed to offer satisfactory solutions to their voters. In addition, the far right has been very effective in amplifying dissatisfaction and fear among citizens often by highlighting or introducing topics that evoke negative emotions. These strategies have helped far right gain prominence on political stages across Europe and achieve the results that were unimaginable in the past.

The latest living-cost crisis and the adverse effect it had on citizens' lives further enabled the far right to extend its influence and attract voters for several reasons. Firstly, structure-wise, economic crises are always a fertile ground for the far right. Some recent studies have even highlighted that far-right parties' percentage votes can be related to the rise and fall of the GDP and unemployment throughout Europe.¹²⁶ Second, the far right was able to tap into people's fears and link issues such as migration to the current living-cost crisis. For instance, some citizens fear that migrants will take away their jobs¹²⁷ and that they represent a burden to the (already struggling) national economy.¹²⁸ Thus, the pre-existing concerns about migrants posing a threat to national identity are now also accompanied by worries about the impact migrants may have on the national economy and living standard.

Finally, the centre and left-wing parties' inability to offer adequate solution has enabled the far right to attribute the country's dire situation to the corrupt and alienated establishment. The far right successfully portrayed the establishment as prioritising profit over the well-being of its own citizens, and in a situation like the one we have today, where most citizens struggle to live through a month, such discourse has become particularly appealing. A similar pattern of linking other issues to the current living-cost crisis emerges across other issues, serving the extreme right to politically capitalize on long-standing citizen dissatisfaction with current relevant topics.

The effectiveness of this strategy and the far-right campaigns more generally is obvious – with the extreme right doubling in growth over the past 15 years, suggesting a prolonged and consistent upward trend with no signs of decline. What is more, it seems to be the case that the current political-economic conditions enable far right to recover quickly after political setbacks, with cases like AfD and The Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), both currently enjoying high popularity, serving as good examples.

All of these factors have created an environment in which the far right has substantial impact on politics now. In certain countries, they have either formed or entered the central government power. Examples include the Brothers of Italy, Fidesz in Hungary, The Finns Party in Finland, and, until recently, Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland.

In Sweden, the Sweden Democrats support a minority government. In other countries, the extreme right strengthens, achieving good electoral results at the regional and local levels, enabling them to form or influence governments at those levels. This is evident with VOX in Spain or Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany, or Wilders in the Netherlands. In France, Marine Le Pen, the leader of The National Rally, ensured around 40% of the votes, securing the second position in the presidential elections, while in Greece, three extreme right-wing parties entered Parliament. Eastern and Central Europe are not exempt from this trend, as the extreme right gains strength in Estonia, Croatia, Romania, and Bulgaria. Finally, even the successful ousting of the far right doesn't seem to be enough. For instance, while the ousting of Poland's PiS from power was celebrated as a victory for liberal democracy, some experts suggest that the new government led by Donald Tusk will face challenges in dismantling the structures established by PiS over the years, and they predict a potential return of PiS to power.¹²⁹

But it is not just the rise of the far right that is problematic, instead, the impact that the rise of far right has on the rest of the political spectrum is likely to have long-term consequences. Studies have indicated that the key factor contributing to the growth of the right-wing is the fact that, in response to the challenges posed by the crisis and the far right, the centre parties have moved towards the right, causing particular harm to centre-left parties. More specifically, the centre-left political parties have shifted to the centre concerning economic matters. This shift involves embracing "neoliberal" reforms, such as privatizing public sector segments, implementing tax and welfare state reductions, and deregulating the business and financial sectors. While this adjustment may have seemed reasonable in the short term, its enduring impact has proven harmful and potentially disastrous. It not only diluted the distinct historical identity of the left but also left social-democratic parties incapable of capitalizing on the widespread dissatisfaction stemming from the aftermath of crises.¹³⁰

Social democrats ceased presenting themselves as vigilant overseers of capitalism, recognising the necessity to protect society from its drawbacks. Instead, there was a growing tendency to frame their mission in technocratic and efficiency-oriented terms. This evolution aligned with a change in the leadership of the left, moving towards highly educated elites whose perspectives on various issues diverged from those of traditional left-wing voters.¹³¹ Only five out of the 27 European Union Member States are governed by socialist-led administrations: Portugal, Slovenia, Malta, Denmark, and Germany.

The centre-right parties have drifted even further to the right, adopting the talking points and policies of the extreme right. They have engaged in political agreements and arrangements with the far right, thereby legitimizing the political agenda of the far right. The far-right ideas are infiltrating mainstream right-wing parties, as evidenced by the radicalisation of parties like the Austrian People's Party, the People's Party for Free-

dom and Democracy in the Netherlands (VVD), and the remnants of the Republicans in France following their 2022 presidential setback. However, the continuous upward trend of the far right demonstrates that this centre-right strategy is not successful. As Jean-Marie Le Pen explains, why would voters choose a copy if they can have the original?¹³² The recent victory of Geert Wilders and his far-right Freedom Party over VVD¹³³ convincingly affirms the assertion that embracing the narratives and agenda of the far right cannot save centre-right parties from losing voters and, ultimately, losing power.¹³⁴

Thus, it is not just that the far-right has been successful in capitalizing on the modern-day inflation crisis. Instead, the centre and the left have both failed to offer alternative solutions, and decided to move right on the political spectrum in the hope this may help them secure votes and increase their popularity. As it stands, looking into the forthcoming European elections it seems that this strategy is unlikely to work for the centre and the left.

— What to Expect From the EU Elections?

The forthcoming 2024 European Parliament elections are very important, as the newly elected Members of the European Parliament (currently 705 but expected to increase to 720 post-elections) will play a vital responsibility in shaping policies, legislation, and the overarching trajectory of the European Union in the upcoming years, or at least until the conclusion of their mandate in 2029. The results of the national elections usually indicate the results of the European elections, as there are no significant discrepancies as to which parties will enter the European Parliament. This was confirmed by the latest public opinion polls in the 27 EU Member States, which indicate that the upward trend of right-wing and Eurosceptic political parties from the 2019 EU Parliament elections will continue in the 2024 elections. Simultaneously, a further decline is anticipated in political parties aligned with the centre. Therefore, the coalition of extreme-right political parties gathered in The European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) is projected to secure 16 more seats than in 2019, bringing their total to 82 in the Parliament instead of the previous 66 MEPs. Additionally, the far-right coalition of parties within Identity and Democracy (ID) is expected to increase its MEPs by 6. Furthermore, the polls predict relatively significant gains among the non-attached members, especially among the right-wing MEPs.¹³⁵

On the other hand, centrist parties grouped in the European People's Party Group (EPP), the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) and Renew Europe (previously ALDE) will lose over 30 MEPs after the 2024 elections. Thus, the EPP is expected to have 159 seats instead of the current 176. S&D will lose three seats, reducing their count to 141 from the previous 144, while the liberals in the Renew group

will decrease from 101 to 88 MEPs. The worst result will be the Greens/EFA, which will lose 26 of the current 72 seats and only have 46 seats.¹³⁶ This projection of seat distribution after the 2024 elections implies that the EPP and S&D will hold only 40% of the seats in the EU Parliament. Their parliamentary majority, amounting to 55%, will only be achieved when joined by the liberals from the Renew group. A coalition led by the EPP, which would include extreme right-wing parliamentary groups, is unlikely due to opposition from individual political parties within these groupings.

Despite the projected majority of centrist political parties in the EU Parliament, the rising influence of the far right will shape the future EU's policies. The rightward shift in the EU Parliament is poised to impact industry regulation and social welfare, with market regulation taking on a more prominent role. The potential distancing of the EU from social welfare in favour of a free-market approach raises concerns about exacerbating the economic challenges lower and middle-income groups face, potentially pushing them towards right-wing political ideologies. This rightward movement of EU citizens may also prompt centre-right political parties to adjust their positions further rightward in an effort to stop the flow of voters towards the far right.

The upcoming European Council is poised to be conservative and (extreme) right-leaning, given its composition of representatives from the heads of state and governments of EU member countries. This is highly significant as the Council determines the strategic direction and priorities of the EU. Past experiences with the Council have demonstrated a reluctance to isolate the far-right member states, even showing a willingness to support extreme right-wing initiatives, as evidenced by the endorsement of Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's push for a stricter EU migrant policy.¹³⁷

Research also indicates that the future Council is likely to be unstable due to the instability of the governments of the Member States. The average length of the national governments' terms of office has dramatically decreased in the last 20 years, amounting to just 2.5 years from 2012 to 2022. Based on current political trends, we can infer that this instability in the national governments will further strengthen the far right in the EU Member States, which will, in turn, have repercussions on EU institutions.¹³⁸

— Conclusion: Toward the Far-right Europe?

The crises that have affected the EU in the last 15 years, especially those caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, have significantly reduced the quality of life for citizens and boosted their fears. The far-right adeptly exploits the immense dissatisfaction among citizens caused by these crises to gain new voters, which is why the far-right has been consistently growing and achieving electoral successes for years. Although the EU has managed to curb inflation and ensure gas supply at more favourable prices, this has not yet led to an improvement in the quality of life for a large number of people. Therefore, it is expected that the trend of the rise of the far-right at the expense of centrist parties will continue in the coming period, especially since centrist parties have failed to reform and offer citizens credible solutions. The success of the far-right in certain EU countries can have a stimulating effect on both the far-right and voters in other countries. The far-right has already demonstrated its ambition to connect across Europe and collaborate, providing support to other smaller far-right parties. If centrist parties fail to respond to the challenges posed by crises and the far-right, it could lead to the emergence of a far-right Europe.



Part Three

The EU Expansion and the Western Balkans

EU's Appetite to Expand

A Myth or a Reality?

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It is clear that 2030 as a due date for a new 'big-bang' or 'regatta' enlargement cannot be a guarantee, but the EU should do its part to make this a viable option for those who objectively complete the criteria.

The window of opportunity for a new wave of the EU enlargement is open after a decade of fatigue and disillusionment. The Russian aggression on Ukraine in February 2022 has injected the process with additional funds and a renewed political will, coloured by geopolitical reasoning in changing and challenging times. The enlargement policy has been expanded to include three new states from the EU's eastern neighbourhood. Not to leave the Western Balkans behind, the EU has intensified its efforts in this region, too. However, there the promise of future membership doesn't shine so bright as twenty years ago, and the enthusiasm now seen in Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia has long withered away.¹³⁹ Local elites have adapted to use the best of the status quo and simulate reforms to remain in the (seemingly never-ending) accession process. On the other side of the equation, the question is whether the EU is promising more than it can deliver, for not only the candidate states but also the EU itself must reform to ensure the functionality of its prospective 30+ membership and find its place in the altered geopolitical chessboard.

The original 6-membered European Communities have enlarged in four waves in the last fifty years and have grown into the European Union, reaching 28 members with Croatia's accession in 2013, then falling to 27 after Brexit. In the golden era of the EU, after the Eurozone became operational, the Constitution for Europe was underway and the 'big-bang' enlargement was a done deal. In 2003 in Thessaloniki, the EU leaders gave the European perspective to the whole Western Balkan region (WB).¹⁴⁰ However, several crises later, absorbing 13 new member states did not go without difficulties and lessons learned. It became clear that the reform impetus in the new members diminishes significantly after accession and that the process is reversible in the absence of strong institutions and resilient democratic political culture, which take time to build. As a consequence, the EU has (at least formally and declaratively) strengthened its conditionality regarding the fundamentals (rule of law, fundamental rights) towards the aspirant states, on the one hand, and has strived to develop instruments of rule of law conditionality within the Union itself, on the other.

— Lessons Learned from the Western Balkans’ Journey Towards the EU: What Not To Do

The credibility of the EU’s Thessaloniki promise took a major blow in 2014 when the enlargement portfolio was downgraded and it was explicitly stated that there would be no new members during the Commission’s five-year mandate.¹⁴¹ By then, only Montenegro and Serbia had started accession negotiations, while Albania and North Macedonia obtained the candidate status in 2005 and 2014 respectively. All WB states except Kosovo had been granted visa liberalisation by the end of 2010, a tangible benefit for citizens that had incentivised reforms until then. With little external incentives, the accession process remained in hibernation for years to come. Serbia and Montenegro opened new chapters at an ever-slower pace, and the key reforms stagnated. The EU Member States were frustratingly unable to reach political consensus necessary to act upon the 2018 European Commission’s merit-based recommendations to open the negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania or to include Kosovo in the visa-free regime. Which is worse, these decisions were usually blocked by individual Member States led by their particular national interests which had least to do with European values.¹⁴²

The local WB elites have learned from the Croatian experience that reforms can backfire on corrupt leaders, and from the North Macedonian example that there is no guarantee that even the hardest concessions will be rewarded. By 2018, it was clear that state capture elements were present in all WB states¹⁴³ and that the flawed EU accession process had provided conducive environment for such adverse developments.¹⁴⁴ State capture implies widespread, systematic corruption and blurring of the line between the ruling party and the state to the point where institutions prioritise particular over the public interest.¹⁴⁵ Elites that have captured the state are not willing to make substantial rule of law reforms, as required by the EU, but for the sake of keeping democratic façade and staying in the process, they simulate reforms to earn at least a limited progress assessment by the EU.¹⁴⁶ The EU, on the other hand, has been turning a blind eye for a long time, prioritising stability of the region over reforms.¹⁴⁷ This stabilitocracy approach only contributed to the region steadily becoming both less secure and less democratic, further away from the EU and prone to influence of other foreign actors. Until the above approaches of both sides change, mutual trust in each other’s commitment will not be restored and the process will further degrade into a farce with no positive outcome.

— Enlargement is Back on the EU Agenda Thanks to Geopolitics

The new enlargement methodology of 2020 could not effectively tackle these problems, for the rather vague and not very innovative technical improvements it provided could not compensate for the lack of political will on both the WB's and the EU's sides to reform and enlarge.¹⁴⁸ The consequences of Russian aggression on Ukraine in late February 2022 have pushed the EU to revive the enlargement policy. It took only several days for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia to apply for the EU membership. It took them less than a month to reply to tedious EU questionnaires for the assessment of the fulfilment of EU accession criteria (political, economic and the *acquis* harmonisation). The Commission provided its opinion already in June 2022,¹⁴⁹ and the European Council endorsed it promptly, granting the candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova and the EU perspective to Georgia. In November 2023, the candidate status was also recommended for Georgia, and opening of accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, although conditionally.

This is a turbo-speed progression from the perspective of the WB states, and some of them such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo were even surpassed, although some breakthrough in 2022 was made not to leave this region behind. At the EU-WB summit in June 2022, the WB leaders were disappointed by the EU's failure to deliver to the region.¹⁵⁰ In contrast to the dynamics sketched above, it took 13 years from Thessaloniki to the Bosnian membership application, then three years to get the Commission's (unfavourable) opinion, three more to get a recommendation, while the candidate status was granted in December 2022, and opening the negotiations was recommended in November 2023, both times only conditionally. The wording of these decisions and the practice so far have shown that the conditioning is stricter for this state than for the three enlargement newcomers, and the EU has made it clear that a concession was made despite the ruling elites' failure to implement the reform priorities. North Macedonia waited for 17 years as a candidate country to start the negotiations, again but conditioned by further constitutional amendments, after it changed its name, its Constitution and conducted comprehensive efforts to overcome state capture. There is silence on Kosovo's application submitted in December 2022 due to its contested statehood (22 out of 27 EU members recognise it as a sovereign state). However, the EU finally agreed on visa liberalisation for Kosovo in spring 2023, effective as of January 2024.

While some concessions have been made to move from the WB accession process stalemate, it seems that not much has changed in the EU's approach to this region, and that different speeds and standards apply for the two regions encompassed by the enlargement policy. Experts warn of the danger of decoupling the enlargement process while pointing out the extent to which the EU has already *de facto* integrated Ukraine with its assistance measures.¹⁵¹ Leaders of the very pro-enlargement EU

Member States have raised concern that the European Commission (EC) looks at the WB “with a magnifying glass and with rose-tinted glasses at Ukraine”¹⁵², and that opening the accession negotiations with a country at war is not an objective, merit-based recommendation.¹⁵³ Comparative analyses of the EC’s country reports show no clear link between merit (state of preparedness) and the formal progress of a country.¹⁵⁴ Among local pro-reform stakeholders in WB, there is fear that again geopolitical concerns overshadow EU norms-based conditionality, diminishing its credibility as a transformative power.¹⁵⁵ However, while concessions may be given throughout the process for various reasons, in the end, the EU member states will not take the risk of accepting new members on an equal footing without substantial fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria.

The experience of the WB in pursuing the European perspective still raises doubts about the credibility of promises now enthusiastically given to Ukraine. The enlargement has been a tool of stabilisation of the EU’s southeast neighbourhood after bloody wars in the 1990s. Its reactivation in the current context serves the same purpose – border stabilisation and peacebuilding.¹⁵⁶ Taking the formal EU accession steps is of major symbolic gravity for the Ukrainian population and leadership waging a defensive war. However, all the difficult questions that arise from the actual integration of a war-torn country with vast territory and large population have been side-lined, but will eventually come to the fore. These go from effects on the distribution of budget and power in the EU institutions, on the most expensive common agricultural policy, on cohesion and infrastructure, to triggering obligations of all member states under the mutual defence clause from the Article 42(7) of the EU treaty.¹⁵⁷ Having this in mind, Ukraine is a far larger challenge for the EU to absorb than the small WB states. Moreover, the issue that neither of the three enlargement newcomers can effectively control parts of their territories is also neglected. Sooner or later, these factors are likely to become an insurmountable impediment to turning the EU’s promise into reality.

— The EU Needs to Get Ready for 30+ Membership: Absorption Capacity at Test

The credibility of the EU promises depends not only on improvement of the enlargement policy, but also on the internal reform of the EU. Neither of these processes should postpone or slow down the dynamics of the accession steps, as they have done since 2019. The expansion of the enlargement appetite to ten states has put additional strain on the absorption capacity of the Union, the unclear accession criterion on the EU’s side. It ultimately boils down to reaching a political consensus to enlarge among EU member states with divergent national interests and concerns. Nevertheless, the EU must prepare its institutional setting, decision-making procedures, and budget

to accommodate 30+ members functionally. France and Germany have pushed for debates on EU internal reform with the launch of the Conference on the Future of Europe 2020-2022, and by commissioning an expert paper on the topic in 2023¹⁵⁸. In her State of the Union speech in September 2023, the Commission President announced a series of pre-enlargement policy reviews, as well as an impact assessment on the EU institutions and budget, that it would present to the Belgian Presidency in the first half of 2024.¹⁵⁹

In November 2023, the European Parliament again called the European Council to launch a convention for treaty changes.¹⁶⁰ Since this is a cumbersome procedure, ideas have been sketched to use most of the simplified treaty revision clauses (Article 48 TEU), but they still require unanimity in the European Council. Such is the case with one of the key recommendations for preventing a single Member State's further blocking of the accession process – introducing a qualified majority vote (QMV) in the Council for decisions on interim accession steps. Proposals for switching to QMV go far beyond this policy¹⁶¹, even to areas of high politics such as foreign policy and taxation, for it is expected that the current unanimity requirement will make the EU largely non-functional with 30+ member states.

Another practical adjustment of the EU's enlarged structure would be enhancing differentiated integration, depending on the willingness and readiness of each member state. Such ideas are complementary to those of staged accession¹⁶², which implies a gradual participation of the candidate states in EU institutions and sectoral policies. However, creating a Europe of concentric circles raises fears of marginalisation and 2nd class membership for many. Seeking membership in the EU has always been a moving target since the EU is ever evolving, but the end of the process should not be less than being a club member with equal rights.

The Franco-German experts' paper highlighted key objectives and trajectories for reforms. Now is the time for all the stakeholders to actively debate such proposals and enable the next European Commission and Parliament (2024-2029) to set them in motion. This means also including the candidate states in the process, like with the Convention on the Future of Europe 20 years ago. Including them in the EU institutions, as the European Economic and Social Committee has done, or in the EU mechanisms, such as the Rule of Law Report as announced by the EC President, is a good way to communicate a shared European future. Such debates should also be salient in the Member States as 'masters of the treaty', but recent studies have shown that this is not yet the case.¹⁶³

While support for enlargement has risen in the EU, member states see its objective differently (as a catalyst for the EU's strategic autonomy or a stronger NATO role in Europe) and prioritise different accession regions.¹⁶⁴ Even the proposals of France and Germany that have taken the initiative are compromises amid growing rifts in their

positions on various issues.¹⁶⁵ Some Member States are sceptical about the French intentions with its U-turn on the enlargement, fearing it is only an excuse to push for institutional reforms without any guarantee the enlargement would follow. This means the debate will be complex and time-consuming. However, expecting the rise of the right in the European elections in early June 2024 and several national elections,¹⁶⁶ among other factors, means there is not much time to reach a deal and identify the concrete steps.

It is clear that 2030 as a due date for a new 'big-bang' or 'regatta' enlargement cannot be a guarantee, but the EU should do its part to make this a viable option for those who objectively complete the criteria. This also means providing clear communication and realistic promises, putting substance over form, and effectively tackling the state-capture elements in candidates and member states. Although the enlargement process in itself "is a geo-strategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity"¹⁶⁷ for the EU and reform incentive and guide for aspirant states, without a credible commitment and the end goal in sight, it goes awry. If the 20 years of troublesome WB accession process have taught us something, it is at least to avoid repeating the same mistakes.

Strategic Challenges in the Western Balkan States

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In its 2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, the EC pointed out threats to democratic stability, high-level corruption, undue influence by oligarchs, and attempts by organised criminal networks to infiltrate the economic and political systems, administrations, and media – all as persisting components of state capture in the WB countries.

The Western Balkan (WB) states are facing numerous strategic challenges most of which have been common for all the WB societies and present in the region for years. As WB states aspire to become members of the European Union (EU), a prolonged and slow European integration has been an encompassing challenge for the entire region, which is addressed in detail in the chapters “Western Balkans in Global Disorder – Towards or Away from the EU” and “The EU’s Appetite to Expand – A Myth or Reality?”

— State Capture

The failure of the progress in the EU integration of the WB is partially due to the internal problems related to the so-called state capture. For almost ten years, The EU has been noting elements of state capture in the WB region, as one of the key obstacles to the anti-corruption and rule of law reforms. State capture could be defined as a state of widespread corruption, but also a process in which political actors, with the help of clientelist networks, abuse state institutions to exploit public resources for private gains.¹⁶⁸ In 2018, the European Commission (EC) provided the following assessment: “Today, the countries show clear elements of state capture, including links with organised crime and corruption at all levels of government and administration, as well as a strong entanglement of public and private interests. All this feeds a sentiment of impunity and inequality. There is also extensive political interference in and control of the media.”¹⁶⁹

To date, this has not significantly changed. In its 2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, the EC pointed out threats to democratic stability, high-level corruption, undue influence by oligarchs, and attempts by organised criminal networks to infiltrate the economic and political systems, administrations, and media – all as persisting components of state capture in the WB countries.¹⁷⁰

Besides annual reporting, in 2015, the EC commissioned and published a special report on state capture in North Macedonia after the country had been shaken by the communication interception scandal followed by political crisis and massive protests. The so-called Priebe Report was drafted by a group of independent experts led by Reinhard Priebe. It went beyond technical tracking of alignment with the *acquis communautaire*, looked at the broader picture, offered concrete recommendations, and managed to avoid ambiguities of the diplomatic language typical for the regular EU reports.¹⁷¹ The Priebe Report paid special attention to systemic failures in the security sector as an important factor of state capture.¹⁷² The political outcome of the Report was an agreement between the Government and the opposition parties (the Pržno Agreement) that obliged both sides to follow the Report's recommendations, which eventually led to early elections, government change, and at least partial de-capture of the state in North Macedonia.

In 2019, Reinhard Priebe led another similar initiative that resulted in the "Expert Report on Rule of Law issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina", pointing to a series of concerning rule of law deficiencies in BiH. However, in its most recent regular report on Bosnia and Herzegovina, the EC observed only limited progress in implementing the recommendations of the Priebe Report.

Other WB states also struggle with state capture in numerous areas, such as judiciary, law-making, law enforcement, media, and so on. Law-making capture emphasises the important fact that the practice of capturing the state is not necessarily an illegal one: political elite dominated by private interests could take control over law-making, utilizing the parliament to merely verify government decisions,¹⁷³ which was the case in Montenegro during the Democratic Party of Socialists' government, and which is still the case in some other WB countries, such as Serbia and Albania.

In Kosovo, there are very few corruption-related cases brought to justice, especially when it comes to the so-called grand corruption which implies the abuse of high-level power. The judges lack independence, the conduct of investigation and indictments are of poor quality, defendants are of low profile, prosecutors and judges are occasionally changed in the middle of proceedings, sentencing policies are unclear, and proceedings sometimes exhaust the statutory limitations.¹⁷⁴ Albania also struggles with both tailor-made laws and political interference in judicial proceedings.¹⁷⁵ The law enforcement and judiciary in Serbia lack independence too, which appears to be the main reason for the very limited results of anti-corruption efforts.¹⁷⁶ Key stakeholders in the Serbian police and the prosecutor's office rarely investigate "politically sensitive" corruption cases if they are not sure that their action will have the support of the highest-ranking politicians.¹⁷⁷

Media capture is present in all WB states in varying degrees. Governments, as the main media captors, influence the media by regulating access to government news resources, directing advertising, and other forms of public financing, as well as through a tight grip on media regulatory bodies.¹⁷⁸ In that way, governments manage to reduce media pluralism and independence and to shape favourable public opinion. From 2016 to 2021, press freedom most significantly decreased in Serbia, while North Macedonia recorded the biggest improvement among the WB countries.¹⁷⁹

State capture is a structural issue that requires a comprehensive political change, but also a new discourse that would enable citizens to understand this concept and its relation to their everyday problems. What gives hope is the emergence of new political actors that increasingly talk about public good and the commons, as opposed to the private interests of the power-holders.

— Geopolitical Positioning

As previously stated, all the WB countries aspire to become the EU members – at least declaratively. What does that mean in practice? The governments, while declaring the EU integration as a top political priority, keep close ties with other geopolitical actors and, in certain cases, engage in double rhetoric: one directed at the EU representatives, and the other at domestic audiences.

In all the WB states except Serbia, the public opinion is highly favourable to the potential EU membership of their states. According to the 2022 polls, Kosovo is the record-holder in popular support for the EU: 85% of the population would vote for the EU membership, which is still 8% lower than in 2020,¹⁸⁰ but the fall could be explained by the very slow progress in the EU integration and the long-promised visa-free regime that was finally agreed only in April 2023. In North Macedonia, the support also dropped from 2020 to 2022 by 8%¹⁸¹ – most probably due to the fact that the name change in 2019 had not brought expected tangible results – but three quarters (74%) of citizens are still in favour of the EU membership. In BiH, public support is stable at 76%, while in Montenegro and Albania approximately seven out of ten citizens would want their countries in the EU, which is an increase for Montenegro and a slight drop for Albania.¹⁸² In Serbia, however, the support is drastically lower than in the rest of the WB: from half of the population in 2020, the support for EU integration dropped to 44% in 2022.¹⁸³ Consequently, geopolitical positioning remains a strategic challenge mostly in Serbia, and to a certain extent in BiH which has been deeply divided along ethnic lines, so that the Serb-majority entity Republika Srpska is more tied to Belgrade's than to Sarajevo's politics.

Serbia has strong ties with both Russia and China, but the channels of the Russian and Chinese influence are rather different. Serbia is still largely energy-dependent on Russian gas. In 2008, Russian company “Gazprom Neft” purchased 51% of Serbian state-owned “NIS Oil Company”. Although the national gas company “Srbijagas” remains in majority Serbian public ownership, “Gazprom Neft” is the only gas supplier that directly controls gas reserves and even parts of the pipelines.¹⁸⁴ More importantly, the Serbian Government carefully cultivates the perception of the historical friendship with Russia, i.e. the image of Russia as a great power that has always protected the Serbian national interests, primarily those related to the disputed status of Kosovo. Serbia and BiH remain the only WB countries and, besides Belarus, the only European countries that have not introduced sanctions on Russia because of the aggression on Ukraine.

As for China, its influence in Serbia is spread through various channels, but the main avenues are preferential loans by Chinese banks to fund infrastructure projects, and significantly increased Chinese investments.¹⁸⁵ Serbian authorities have shaped national legislation to fit the interests of Chinese companies, thus degrading the rule of law standards on transparency and public procurements.¹⁸⁶ Although the long-term benefits of Chinese investments are questionable, since most of the profits return to China, the Serbian Government often presents economic cooperation with China as favourable for Serbia.

It is important to note that other geopolitical players, such as the US, Turkey, and the Gulf States, also have their economic, military, and political interests in the WB region, which are not necessarily beneficial for the WB citizens. Their influences are not directly opposed to the orientation towards the EU membership, at least not to the extent that endangers high popular support for the EU.

— Ethno-nationalism and Conflicting Interpretations of the 1990s Wars

Nearly a quarter of a century since the end of the wars in the former Yugoslavia, occasional armed incidents endanger the regional security and remind everyone that sustainable, positive peace has not been achieved yet. Ethnic distance among different nations living in the WB is worryingly large, while young people, who do not have personal memories of the wars, are among the most radical nationalists.¹⁸⁷

All the WB countries, with the exception of Albania, are still struggling with the ethno-centric interpretations of the 1990s wars in which they were involved. The official memory politics often deny, ignore, relativise, and selectively use facts to fit them into the narratives that picture entire ethnic groups as either heroes and victims or villains. Such a discourse enhances ethnic distance, incites ethnic hatred, and eventually establishes ethnic identity as essential for political subjectivity.

Civil society organisations offer an alternative to the state-sponsored projects of historical revisionism. They insist on facts and, by documenting war crimes, they have done a historically important task. However, the civil sector did not manage to successfully counter the official narratives, nor to overcome the ethno-nationalist matrix. By tying the so-called “collective responsibility” for atrocities to ethnicity, instead of political and social power, non-governmental actors have only strengthened ethnic framing.

Ethno-centric interpretations of the 1990s wars are helping populist politicians acquire legitimacy and continue accumulating power. Whether the liberation narrative is dominant, such as in Kosovo, or the victimhood one, such as in Serbia and BiH, politicians in power are (ab)using recent history to mobilize popular support. They often present their nations and/or national identities as threatened by their neighbours, by the idea of multi-ethnic/non-ethnic communities, and, in certain cases such as Serbia, by the political West. Hence, the WB populist leaders are able to promote themselves as dedicated protectors of people and the only ones who know how to defend the national interests.

While in all the former Yugoslav republics ethno-nationalism is still framing political discourse and decision-making, the most acute symptoms of such ideological domination are the disputed status of Kosovo and the secessionist tendencies in the BiH entity Republika Srpska.

Despite more than a decade of negotiations between Belgrade and Prishtina under the auspices of the EU, Kosovo is still a disputed territory: the Serbian Government refuses to recognise its independence although it has not exercised full sovereign powers over Kosovo for decades, while the Kosovo Government is not able to peacefully integrate Serb-majority municipalities under its sovereign rule. The police repression in north Kosovo, and the emergence of Serb paramilitary groups that recently provoked an armed clash with deadly consequences, are only some of the grim outcomes of the ongoing dispute. The current situation is to a large extent a result of the inadequate dealing with atrocities committed during the Kosovo war. Mass crimes against Albanian civilians are officially denied and ignored by the Serbian authorities, which prevents the Serbian public from comprehending the reasons behind the current predicament. In Kosovo, the official, ethnocentric narrative about the war implies the collective Serb responsibility, which contributes to the antagonization and ghettoization of Kosovo’s Serbs. Such circumstances are most conducive to the organised crime networks that operate in a grey zone with disputed sovereignty, as well as politicians who securitise Kosovo to draw attention away from other political issues.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has often been characterised as a dysfunctional state, due to a complex power-sharing system introduced by the Dayton Agreement that ended the war in 1995, but, in fact, primarily due to deep divisions along ethnic lines, enforced and strengthened by dominant nationalist discourses. Indications of the militarization of the Republika Srpska police force, violence against Bosniak returnees, and public glorification of war criminals – are only some of the security concerns about Republika Srpska. Its leader Milorad Dodik often announces the future unification with Serbia on the basis of ethnic principles. His arguments are largely supported by the revisionist interpretations of the 1990s wars, as well as earlier periods. By depicting all other ethnic groups as a threat to Serbs, he promotes the secession of Republika Srpska and unification with Serbia as the only viable solution for the survival of the Serbian nation.

Ethno-nationalism and conflicting interpretations of historical events are the roots of many current issues among the WB states but are rarely recognised as such. A shift in the discourse about the recent past would be a necessary precondition for achieving a sustainable peace and regional security.

— Depopulation and Brain Drain

The Western Balkan countries are facing serious depopulation, with grave social and political consequences. Since 1990, Serbia has lost 9% of its citizens, North Macedonia 10%, BiH 24%, and Albania 37%.¹⁸⁸ Nowadays, working-age citizens emigrate en masse in search of a better life primarily in Western countries, fertility rates are at a historic low, while for the majority of refugees and migrants from other parts of the world the WB is only a transitory route.

The current depopulation trends are different from the past emigration waves in several aspects. During the SFRY, mostly low-skilled workers were emigrating, while today the majority of emigrants are educated and skilled.¹⁸⁹ During the 1990s, the main reason for emigration was wars, whereas today's emigration is motivated by the failed promises of the democratic and economic transition in the WB, as well as by the global financial crisis.¹⁹⁰ Finally, during the previous emigration waves, fertility rates were significantly higher. Even Kosovo, the youngest country in the region with a median age of 29, is now experiencing a demographic decline.¹⁹¹

Large-scale emigration of the working-age population is leading to a significant loss of human capital thus impeding economic growth and development. Survey results show that more than one-third of employers in the WB are unable to fill the vacancies, but also that one-third of youth expressed a strong or very strong desire to emigrate in the future.¹⁹²

Emigration from the WB is caused by a combination of push and pull factors. The push factors include high unemployment, poverty and exclusion (especially of those from marginalised groups: youth from rural areas, minorities, women, etc.), poor standard of living, corruption, low quality of public services, education, healthcare, or environment.¹⁹³ Nevertheless, one-third of youth want to emigrate for purely economic/financial reasons.¹⁹⁴ The pull factors are mostly related to visa liberalisation, geographical proximity of the EU countries, and bilateral agreements with certain EU members that facilitate employment of skilled workers from the WB.

Depopulation and brain drain is likely to continue. The reversal of this trend would require significant improvement of the socio-economic and political environment in the WB.

The Western Balkans in Global Disorder: Towards or Away From the EU

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The citizens of the WB have lost their patience, particularly in Serbia with the supporters of EU membership remaining below 50% during the last two years.

The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has put the enlargement policy back on the agenda, coupled with the discussions in European capitals about the need for the EU to reform internally in order to accommodate for the new members.¹⁹⁵ With the European Commission recently recommending the opening of accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, it appears that the geopolitical concerns have taken over the slow and steady, fundamentals first approach.¹⁹⁶ With many crises in the European neighborhood, it is uncertain whether the EU and the Western Balkans will both manage to prepare and reform for a new enlargement by 2030, now the potential target date mentioned by the European Council's President Charles Michel.

It seems the EU was reluctant to integrate the Western Balkans despite promising them a European perspective 20 years ago at the Thessaloniki Summit.¹⁹⁷ With Ukraine, however, there is a sense of urgency and a hope remains that the Western Balkans could also capitalize on the newly found momentum.¹⁹⁸ For example, it is expected that Ukrainian good progress in reforms in several areas, notably anti-corruption, should motivate the WB countries to move ahead with their own reforms.

However, an issue that is less talked about is the potential resentment over Ukraine in the Western Balkans countries and the feeling they are not being treated fairly. Despite all WB six governments being on the EU integration path at least at a declaratory level, the citizens are becoming increasingly disillusioned with the EU. For these reasons, it is worth taking stock of how the WB citizens feel in the new global disorder and whether the geopolitical turmoil is driving them away or pulling closer to the EU.

— Western Balkans Citizens on the Fence

At the first look, there are big discrepancies among the WB citizens when it comes to their views about the EU and the membership prospects. As a rule, albeit somewhat counter-intuitive, the more time a country has spent on the EU accession path, the weaker the pro-European sentiments of its people and a share of those who think they will never join the block increases (see Chart 1).

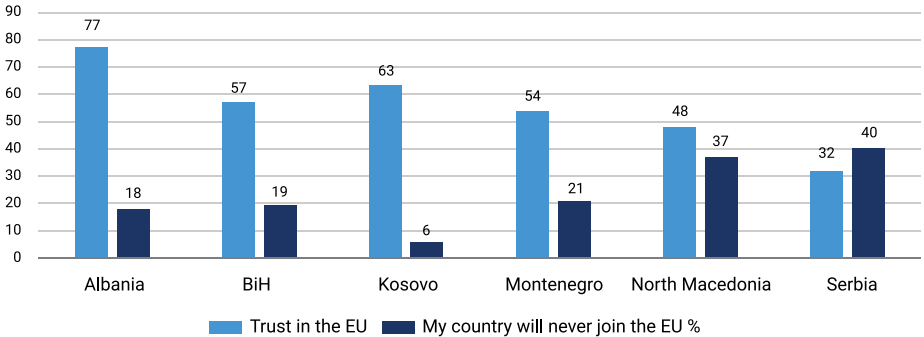


Chart 1:

Trust in the EU among the WB citizens compared to the expectations for membership. Source: Standard Eurobarometer, Spring 2023; Regional Cooperation Council's Balkan Public Barometer 2023.

This points to the popular fatigue with the accession process among the WB citizens who predominantly perceive the economic benefits of the EU integration while growing disillusioned with the membership prospects. The result is a whopping 44% of the people from the WB wanting to leave the region and work abroad, most of them in the EU countries.¹⁹⁹ It seems that, while their countries are slowly dragging along, the citizens develop individual integration strategies leading to high levels of brain drain from the region towards the EU. Meanwhile, the popular support for the EU membership changed over the course of the previous three year (Chart 2) and this merits a closer look.

% of people saying EU membership is good thing

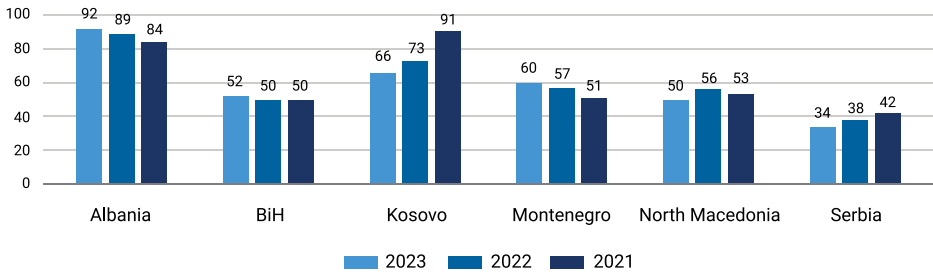


Chart 2: Support for EU membership. Source: RCC, Balkan Public Barometer 2023.

Albanian citizens are the most Euro-enthusiastic in the region and the positive outlook towards the EU integration has been on the rise. Whether due to a big diaspora in the EU Members States, a desire to “return to Europe” or purely opportunistic reasons, both the Government and the people seem to have adopted a strong pro-EU agenda. However, it is worth noting the positive sentiment is for the European project and not necessarily EU institutions. This is evidenced by the harsh criticism often directed against Brussels by the Albanian Prime Minister who, for instance, declared the enlargement process to be “crooked” and member states “impotent” and hypocritical for holding WB countries to higher standards than they hold themselves.²⁰⁰ The trust in NATO also remains higher than that in the EU and Albania has shown strong commitment to maintaining 100% alignment with the EU regarding the sanctions against Russia. The support for the EU might prove to be more volatile depending on the circumstances, especially if it falls victim to bilateral disputes, such is the current one with Greece that might threaten the opening of the first chapters in negotiations with the EU.²⁰¹

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) was only granted candidate status in December 2022, a move that was prompted by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. BiH has spent years in the waiting room, owing to the EU’s perceptions that its “politics is all about ethnicity” and that the country is “uniquely dysfunctional,” thus being subject to a set of arbitrary conditions that were eventually dropped, but only after a decade was lost.²⁰² Regardless, the people are still predominantly pro-European, with a notable division along the entity lines. The leader of Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik, long time under the US sanctions for its destabilizing and corrupt activities, remains a major obstacle. In addition to maintaining close ties with Russia, including a meeting with Putin in early 2023, he is considered as actively working against the integration process. On many occasions he has explicitly stated the EU does not want BiH, trying to utilise the speedy progress of Ukraine towards opening accession talks to prove that the EU has double standards and is fooling the people of BiH.²⁰³

Kosovo is at the back of the line owing to its unresolved status question, including the five EU non-recognisers. Nonetheless, its citizens are extremely optimistic about the EU membership prospects. The membership talks are closely tied with the outcome of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, hitherto the main stumbling block on its European path. It is expected that reaching a sustainable solution might reduce the Russian influence in the region, which primarily relies on the leverage Russia has over Serbia regarding the status talks.²⁰⁴ After the start of the Russian invasion, Kosovo expressed high levels of solidarity with Ukraine despite the fact that Ukraine does not recognise its independence.²⁰⁵ Many parallels were drawn between Kosovo and Ukraine, including by Putin himself who invoked NATO bombing of Yugoslavia and support to Kosovo as a justification for its war, one day before the invasion started.²⁰⁶ Kosovo's Government tried to capitalize on the fact Serbia kept close ties with Russia, putting the blame on Belgrade and calling for stronger action against it by the EU and the US.²⁰⁷

Montenegro has the best chance to move towards the membership, not so much because of a speedy progress but due to the lack of bilateral issues that are holding it back. The country has recently gotten out of a political crisis and the new Government has shown steady commitment to the EU integrations. The Montenegrin President even urged the EU to take the country in as quickly as possible, expressing hopes that by 2028 it could become the 28th member of the EU.²⁰⁸

North Macedonia has spent the longest time in the process, being the first of the WB countries to submit membership application back in 2004 and only opening accession talks last year. The country seems to be held hostage to bilateral issues, first for almost two decades with Greece over the name dispute and currently with Bulgaria over minority rights.²⁰⁹ The Macedonians are second only to Serbs when it comes to their disappointment with the EU, having gone through a challenging and politically costly process of changing the country's name in 2019 for the sake of starting the EU accession talks, only to be vetoed by France immediately afterwards.²¹⁰ The country's Negotiating Framework foresees amending the Constitution for the second time, which could once again destabilise the country and perhaps facilitate the return of the old nationalist powers.

Serbia is a clear outlier among the WB six, owing to its close ties with Russia despite repeated calls to prioritise aligning to the CFSP after the onset of the war in Ukraine.²¹¹ When it comes to the foreign policy alignment, among the WB countries four are 100% aligned, BiH is at 98% and Serbia comes in last with 51%.²¹² Regardless, Serbia manages to balance quite well in these circumstances, with some reports even suggesting that Serbia is tacitly supplying ammunition and armament to Ukraine,²¹³ a move that some interpreted as pivoting towards West even though not imposing sanctions to Russia.²¹⁴ Serbian citizens are the most disillusioned ones compared to their neighbors, with the support for EU membership below 50% for several years now and a staggering 40% of its citizens believing the country will never join the block (Chart 1). In addition to normalizing

relations with Kosovo and aligning to the CFSP as two top political priorities, Serbia also has to improve its rule of law track record since it is among the fastest autocratizing countries in the world.²¹⁵ Owing to its size, economy and, not least, trouble-making potential, many believe that if the EU wins Serbian hearts and minds it would propel the region forward. Therefore, it appears that only a democratic Serbia can be a precondition for the European Western Balkans.²¹⁶

— What is in the Store for the Western Balkans

What future might hold for the WB depends on a number of important events that will take place in 2024. First, in the upcoming European elections, it is expected that the right-wing parties will gain more seats and it is unclear how this will affect the EU enlargement. The so-called geopolitical Commission is expected to pay more attention to bringing Western Balkans countries into the EU fold, and the next 5-year mandate could be considered a window of opportunity for new member states. The new Growth Plan for the WB, recently presented by the EC, is expected to help with the economic convergence of the region and the new staged/phased accession proposal might provide additional momentum.²¹⁷ The upcoming US elections also have a potential to change the dynamics, perhaps even more than the European ones, since geopolitical issues require a geopolitical clout the EU is currently lacking. Lastly, political changes in the WB region might take place, with snap elections in Serbia taking place in December 2023 with an uncertain outcome.

Regardless of these push and pull factors, the main responsibility still lies with the WB countries. Observers note that the excitement over the Ukrainian prospects of joining the EU will subside over time, once the financial and political details of its membership reach the European audience. The outcome of the Russian war in Ukraine could also significantly alter the dynamics, both in terms of the enlargement momentum and by affecting long-standing political divisions in the region and the Russian influence.

For these reasons, the WB countries should ride on the wave of enthusiasm and capitalize on the readiness of EU decision makers to accept new members, by speeding up with the most urgent reforms and trying to get as far as possible before the enlargement fatigue or exhaustion once again sets in. The citizens of the WB have lost their patience, particularly in Serbia with the supporters of EU membership remaining below 50% during the last two years. Regardless of the fact this is a direct consequence of the negative portrayal of the EU in the pro-government media, the EU should work on getting the hearts and minds of the Serbian citizens, as well as the rest of the euro-sceptic ones in the region. This can be done through a more direct engagement with the citizens, with the pro-European opposition parties and political movements, as well as civil society organisations which have been the most vocal pro-European voices over the previous decade.

Conclusion to the Publication

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As shown in this publication, in the year behind us, the world has not been able to address the key political challenges brought about already in 2022. What is more, we have seen new challenges emerge – with political elites similarly unable to adequately address them. Thus, the outlook for 2024 is far from bright, and the resolution to the current problems remain the key.

Above all, the West faces an urgent need to address its internal challenges, spanning from countering disinformation campaigns within its borders to grappling with the surging influence of far-right ideologies and navigating the intricate path of EU expansion. Additionally, prioritizing the swift resolution of ongoing conflicts holds immense significance, not only to preserve lives but also to stave off the ominous threat of spillover effects and potential escalations before reaching irreversible points. Things are not that different in the Western Balkans – a region that also must urgently focus on resolving its own internal issues ranging from state capture and difficulties involved in the EU accession talks, to disputes between different countries, most notably Kosovo and Serbia.

As we enter 2024, resolving the aforementioned challenges remains the key, and the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy will continue to play its role in understanding the global and regional challenges, and offering insights and possible solutions through various platforms, most notably Belgrade Security Conference which will take place again in autumn of 2024. As we embark on preparations for the upcoming conference and its accompanying publication, we trust that this edition offers thought-provoking perspectives into the continually shifting and intricate global dynamics.

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