



TRENDS

# IN DEFENCE OF HUMANITY

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**BCSP**

Belgrade Centre  
for Security Policy





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BELGRADE 2024



# IN DEFENCE OF HUMANITY

BSC Trends: In Defence of Humanity

## **Publisher**

Belgrade Centre for Security Policy  
Djure Jakšića 6/5 Beograd  
[www.bezbednost.org](http://www.bezbednost.org)

## **Design and Prepress**

Srđan Ilić

## **DOI:**

<https://doi.org/10.55042/BLVY6861>

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Belgrade, December 2024

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## Introduction

Another year, another Belgrade Security Conference (BSC) is behind us, leaving us with important insights and discussions on the pressing global issues of our time – issues that seem to grow more complex with each passing year. Once again, BSC brought together a diverse range of distinguished speakers who tackled these challenges head-on.

Some topics echoed those of previous years due to the unfortunate perseverance of many global crises. The Russian invasion of Ukraine remains unresolved, with no clear end in sight. Meanwhile, the Israel-Hamas conflict has intensified since last year, and the region has seen further turmoil with the onset of a war between Israel and Hezbollah. Despite a recent ceasefire offering a glimmer of hope, peace remains precarious.

Democracies worldwide are under siege, facing threats both from external adversaries and internal forces aimed at eroding institutions and restricting the freedoms that define democratic societies. Closer to home, the Western Balkans continues to wrestle with longstanding challenges, with sustainable resolutions still out of reach.

This year also introduced new challenges to the global stage. The re-election of Donald Trump has sparked widespread concern, both within the United States and internationally, about the potential direction of global politics under his leadership and the implications for liberal institutionalism.

But, beyond America, this election year also highlighted concerning political trends. Far-right parties gained significant traction, fuelled in part by perceptions of the centre and left parties' inability to address key voters' concerns. Among these are inflation and the cost-of-living crisis, but most notably, immigration – a topic that has emerged as the key issue in election campaigns across the globe. These developments also revealed a concerning level of polarisation – with looming questions about politicians' ability to unite highly divided societies and consequences thereof.

As in previous years, the conference once again proved to be an essential platform for dialogue, reflection, and the pursuit of solutions to build a more stable and just future. In that regard, four big topics were covered across a diverse set of panels: the re-election of Donald Trump, the state of democracy worldwide, global wars, and the ongoing situation in the Western Balkans.

The re-election of Donald Trump led to an insightful discussion among the panellists, who agreed on several critical issues likely to define his upcoming term. Chief among these were the ongoing war in Ukraine, the escalating conflict in the Middle East, and the potential trade war between the United States and China. Concerns were also raised

about Trump's impact on liberal institutionalism and his potential to embolden illiberal political movements across the globe.

Panellists deliberated on the future of Transatlantic unity, particularly in light of Trump's "America First" foreign policy approach. Some expressed fears that an isolationist United States could create a political vacuum that China or Russia might eagerly fill, concluding that Europe must adopt a more proactive role on the global stage.

While there are legitimate concerns about what a second Trump presidency may mean for the world, it is important to note that Trump's platform does not advocate for complete US withdrawal from international affairs. His campaign placed emphasis on resolving the major conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, indicating that his approach may not be wholly isolationist.

There was also a discussion about the factors behind Trump's victory, with some noting that the Democratic Party's campaign failed to address key voter concerns. Indeed, across the world, many experts characterised the Democrats' strategy as, at best, disconnected from voters and, at worst, divorced from reality – leaving significant space for Trump's populist messaging to resonate.

The key lesson for liberal leaders is evident: they must address the pressing concerns of their constituents to diminish the allure of populism and prevent political gaps that these leaders and parties can exploit.

This lesson extends far beyond the American context. Across Europe, there has been a troubling rise of far-right political parties in countries such as France, Germany, and the Netherlands. In many instances, these parties have positioned themselves as more capable of addressing key issues like immigration and the cost-of-living crisis – concerns that voters see as having the most significant impact on their daily lives.

Moreover, this surge in far-right support has been accompanied by a deeply concerning level of polarisation. This division has created fertile ground for foreign powers like Russia and China to exploit through disinformation tactics, further destabilising democratic institutions. The combination of rising far-right influence and increasing polarisation has placed basic freedoms and liberties under threat. Alarmingly, some have suggested that this could lead to restrictions on fundamental rights such as free speech and the right to assembly.

As many of our panellists emphasised, it is imperative for centrist and left-wing parties to respond effectively. They must offer tangible solutions to voters' pressing concerns, foster unity within increasingly divided societies, and counter the polarisation that threatens democratic values. By doing so, they can help restore public trust and prevent the erosion of freedoms that underpin democratic life.



Further contributing to this growing polarisation is another major topic explored by our panellists: the proliferation of conflict zones around the globe, most notably in Ukraine and the Middle East. Europe, they agreed, is caught between a rock and a hard place. On one hand, achieving a ceasefire in Ukraine – likely requiring territorial concessions to Russia at this stage – would politically fracture an already divided Europe. On the other hand, allowing the war to continue not only deepens public divisions but also poses significant threats to Europe’s political and military stability.

The re-election of Donald Trump adds further complexity to the situation in Ukraine. Panellists noted that his presidency would likely influence both the level of material and military aid provided to Ukraine and the morale of the Ukrainian people. Whether the war will end soon, and on what terms, remains uncertain.

The conflict in the Middle East also shows little sign of resolution, despite a recent ceasefire between Hezbollah and Israel. However, even if the violence subsides, critical questions remain about the region’s long-term stability and what “the day after” peace might look like.

During the conference, attention was also drawn to less publicised conflicts, particularly across Africa. Many speakers highlighted the lack of media coverage and Western engagement in these regions, which they argued has created a vacuum now being filled by Russia and China. In the African context specifically, this shift in power dynamics poses challenges to both regional stability and Western interests.

Russian and Chinese influence is also on the rise in the Western Balkans, a region where waning confidence in EU membership has created fertile ground for external powers to expand their reach. The seemingly never-ending EU accession process has left many disillusioned, eroding trust in European integration. This influence is best visible in Serbia’s balancing act – in which Serbia has successfully maintained EU candidate status even though it has continuously refused to impose sanctions on Russia.

Over the past year, little progress has been made on key issues in the Balkans. Persistent challenges such as state capture, the stalled Kosovo-Serbia normalisation talks, and the sluggish EU accession process remain unresolved. These topics, particularly the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, sparked the most heated discussions at this year’s conference, illustrating their deeply polarising nature and the shadow they continue to cast over the region’s stability and progress.

However, new issues have further complicated the situation. In Serbia, the controversial Rio Tinto lithium mining project, initially halted after widespread protests, appears to have resumed, sparking fresh outrage among the public. Protests against the project have been reignited, but the ultimate outcome remains uncertain.

Adding to the unrest, a tragic incident at the Novi Sad train station, where a canopy collapse claimed 15 lives, has triggered mass protests and unrest. Several politicians have been taken into custody in connection with the tragedy, but public trust in the institutions' ability to conduct a fair and independent investigation is worryingly low.

These developments highlighted a troubling dynamic in the Western Balkans: unresolved long-term challenges are now compounded by new crises, further destabilising the region and highlighting the urgent need for effective leadership and institutional reform.

As the conference came to its conclusion, we were left with few key takeaways. First, throughout the conference, a recurring theme emerged: the West's growing reluctance to assert its influence is leaving gaps increasingly filled by Russia and China. This trend, if left unchecked, is likely to create long-term challenges for Western nations in maintaining both their strategic and ideological foothold globally. Second, both democracy and humanity are under a threat from internal and external actors seeking to erode the fundamental principles, liberties, and freedoms that define democratic societies. This threat has intensified since last year, and without decisive action, the outlook for next year's conference may be even grimmer.

As we step into 2025, it is essential to prioritise addressing these issues. Defending democracy and humanity must remain at the forefront of global efforts to ensure a more stable and peaceful future.

This year's BSC Trends will offer a comprehensive analysis of key global developments, including insights into Trump's second term and its implications for the future. It will examine the challenges facing democratic regimes, ongoing conflicts around the world, and the current dynamics in the Western Balkans. Additionally, the publication will feature a Young Leaders' Essay section, with the top three essays from participants in the BSC Young Leaders Program.



## Donald Trump Returns – US and the World After Donald Trump’s Electoral Triumph

On the opening day of the conference, a panel was held dealing with the fallout of the US and EU elections, and there was another panel dealing with whether Europe will survive and/or thrive in the emerging world order. The panellists perceived Donald Trump as a leader who would abandon liberal internationalism and in favour of isolationism. The three key foreign policy challenges for the forthcoming administration have been identified as the war in Ukraine, the war in the Middle East and a possible trade war between the US and China. The panellists equally expressed concerns about Trump acting as an encouragement for illiberal political forces around the world.

Thomas Countryman, Board Chairman of the Arms Control Association, has been among those who expressed concern about Trump acting as an inspiration for illiberal leaders worldwide, and he questioned his ability to resolve the Ukraine war while being concerned about Ukraine being compromised by the new administration. Federica Mogherini, Rector of the College of Europe and Director of the European Union Diplomatic Academy expressed similar concerns. She expressed belief in the European ability to find unity in a changing world and would reinvigorate the policy of EU enlargement.

Wojciech Przybylski, Editor-in-chief of Visegrad Insight and President of the Res Publica Foundation, mainly focused on the potential fracture in the Transatlantic alliance as the direct consequence of the Trump presidency. In a similar spirit, Thomas Gomart, Director of Institut français des relations internationales, stressed that despite the potential damage posed by Trump to the alliance with Europe, Europe lacked the

political will to make preparations for a new Trump administration. During the European panel, David Donoghue, a Distinguished Fellow of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), expressed concern that China and Russia will fill the vacuum potentially left by the Trump administration and that Europe needs to step up.

While some US allies in places like Europe need to be concerned about Trump's cynical attitude towards them, it is imprecise to label Trump's policies as isolationist since Trump is not advocating for a full US retrenchment from the world. On the contrary, Trump's vision of the world order involves engagement with some of the strategically most consequential regions, primarily East Asia and the Middle East. However, what distinguishes Trump from his predecessor is that he is less inclined to conduct foreign policy on the basis of liberal principles.

It remains to be seen how Trump will change US policies on the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the Middle Eastern conflict. As the past has shown, all the previous presidents who, early at the start of the term, would pledge the end of old policies would be eventually forced to give up due to unforeseen circumstances. In the case of Ukraine, it remains dubious whether Trump can reach an agreement that is acceptable to both Ukraine and Russia. It is also questionable whether Trump can overcome the strong anti-Russian sentiment in the rest of the US policy community and whether the Russians are interested in the peace deal with the progress of the conflict and the battlefield balance shifting in Moscow's favour. In the Middle East, it is unclear how Trump can reconcile his desire to act as the deal-maker with his ties to Israel, which are potentially even stronger than those that the Biden administration had.

Ultimately, in a polarized and divided America, the animosity towards China, the one country that is a direct challenger to the US primacy, is one of the rare things that unite Republicans and Democrats. In that context, the US allies, including in Europe, need to be aware that irrespective of who is in the White House, they will have to adjust to the world of Sino-American rivalry and that in the world where the US main security priority is in the Pacific region, and not in the Atlantic region, they cannot take US security guarantees for granted. While it is reasonable to argue that Trump might embolden individual illiberal leaders in various countries around the world, this outcome is not dependent solely on the winners of US elections but on the ability of liberal actors to address the concerns of people who believe that they have been left behind in recent decades. Without this effort, there will always be a new Donald Trump.

## The Fragile State of Global Democracy

Democracies worldwide, including the most established ones, are facing unprecedented threats from both internal and external forces. This year has seen alarming gains for far-right parties, raising concerns about the future of democratic institutions. In Germany, the AfD achieved historic success; in France, the National Rally dominated the first round of snap elections; in Croatia, the ruling HDZ allied with the far-right Homeland Movement; and in Portugal, Chega quadrupled its parliamentary seats. If centrist and left-wing parties fail to address voters' key concerns effectively, support for the far-right will likely grow, pushing democracies in these nations to a precarious brink.

The danger is not limited to the rise of far-right populism. Democracies are also buckling under growing polarisation, which some believe is further exacerbated by disinformation campaigns from actors like Russia and China. Divisive issues – immigration, rule of law, environmental sustainability – are becoming harder to resolve as societies fracture along ideological lines. Moreover, the past failures of the elites, like managing the global financial crisis of 2008 and the migrant crisis of 2015, alongside the spread of misinformation and disinformation has significantly eroded public trust in key institutions. Media outlets, NGOs, CSOs, governments, and businesses are all experiencing declining credibility, further complicating efforts to address and resolve critical issues.

Finally, it appears that crucial and fundamental freedoms and liberties have also come under a threat, including but not limited to freedom of speech, the right to protest and the right to assembly.

To safeguard democracy, centrist and progressive forces, along with institutions such as the EU, must urgently reconnect with voters and address their concerns meaningfully, regaining their trust during the process. Equally vital is the responsibility of global political leaders to foster unity and combat polarisation before divisions deepen irreparably.

The dangers of not addressing these issues were recognised by the BSC panellists. For example, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, National Leader of Belarus, the Head of the United Transition Cabinet and the President-elect of Belarus, warned us all “peace is fragile when democracy is weak” suggesting that a lot of voters no longer value democracy as much as they did in the past which poses a unique threat to peace and stability worldwide. Along the same lines, Adrian Balutel, Chief of Staff to the President of the Republic of Moldova, discussed that threats to democracy range from mis- and disinformation to outright electoral interference including vote buy-out and control of political parties.

Alarmingly, the panellists highlighted a growing threat to fundamental liberties and freedoms, particularly the right to protest. There was broad consensus among the panellists that civic rights are in decline, with whistleblowers and activists – key defenders of democracy – facing increasing intimidation, especially in the Western Balkans. Clement Voule, former UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Peaceful Assembly and Association, emphasised that free speech and the right to associate are foundational to any democracy. In his view, any restriction on these rights constitutes a clear sign of democratic backsliding. He further stressed that fostering tolerance between law enforcement and protest leaders is crucial for the well-being of all parties involved.

Finally, the panellists discussed how will Europe cope with the current geopolitical challenges, as well as internal and external threats to its stability. David Donoghue, Distinguished Fellow of ODI, took a more realistic approach saying Europe is likely to survive the crises but is unlikely to thrive during this period. Along the same lines, René Troccaz, Special Envoy for the Western Balkans of the French Republic, said “Europe will survive, and Europe has to live and to get stronger.” To that end, it is crucial to confront all the aforementioned challenges directly and decisively.



Photo credit Videadar Studio

## Living with the Scourge of War

This year, BSC had several panels that addressed the issues of ongoing wars and conflicts. The panellists dealt with the two conflicts that dominate the news, the one in Ukraine and the wars in the Middle East. However, the BSC also dealt with conflicts that were beyond the scope of news headlines, like the ones in Africa and the South Caucasus.

In regards to Ukraine, the panellists tried to formulate strategies for Ukrainian potential victory. Maxim Tucker, a Correspondent for Ukraine and Eastern Europe for The Times, pushed for the need to defeat Russia and pointed to a sense of betrayal felt by Ukrainians that was generated by Donald Trump's electoral win. Nathalie Tocci, the Director of the Istituto Affari Internazionali, claimed that a ceasefire would politically divide the EU. At the same time, the continuation of war would be both a threat to Europe and a factor of political unity.

Oleksandr Chalyi, Associate Fellow at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, stressed the need for a Russia-Ukraine peace deal to be based on the norms of international law, particularly respect for the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Velina Tchakarova, the Founder of FACE For a Conscious Experience, advocated a three-dimensional approach that involves aid to Ukraine, sanctions imposed on Russian commodities, and international diplomacy.

Despite the Ukrainian heroic displays on the battlefield for the past three years, the balance of power has changed in Russian favour, particularly in the context of Ukrainian acute manpower shortage. The mentioned ascendancy of Donald Trump will also affect the conflict dynamic, perhaps not necessarily in terms of material aid to Ukraine but almost certainly in the decline of Ukrainian battle morale. It is unclear how European unity can be easily preserved, given that the public will increasingly grow tired of conflict and will be more preoccupied with other issues. The rise of populist forces also puts a question mark next to the notion of European unity.

The chances for the full restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity are slim primarily because there is no prospect of Russians giving up on seized territory and no military force that can force them to do so. Moreover, while the non-Western parts of the international community will not recognise Russia's territorial acquisitions, it will not follow the West enthusiastically out of disdain towards Western prior violations of international law and its current course of action in Gaza. It remains questionable whether the sanctions against Russian commodities would be effective since they would raise the prices of commodities globally and damage the global economy and the Global South. It is also certain that Global South countries and non-Western economies like India and China would not go along with that since they do not want to say no to Russian resources.

The BSC also dealt with another major war impacting the global community, the ongoing multi-front conflict in the Middle East. The panellists concurred on the uncertainty of what post-war Gaza looks like and that a two-state solution is the best and only viable solution to this conflict, no matter how elusive it appears now. The ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah was deemed more attainable than the one between Israel and Hamas.

Arie Kacowicz, Professor of International Relations and the Chaim Weizmann Chair in International Relations at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, believed that a cessation of the conflict would most likely be due to the stalemate and saturation with the conflict. On the second point, Kacowicz pointed out that the Israeli youth is particularly interested in the end of war, and so is the wider population. Kacowicz still believed in the two-state solution as the only long-term viable solution to the conflict. Kacowicz believed that a two-state solution could come about as part of the wider peace deal between Israel and the Arab world, potentially oriented against Iran.

Yezid Sayigh, Senior Fellow at the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, placed a strong focus on the role of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his compromise with Israel-far right, placing Israel under the rubric of the global rise of right-wing forces. The right-wing tilt in Israeli politics will remain a major obstacle to the ultimate resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Boushra Jaber, a Visiting Fellow at



the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, also pointed out the possibility of peace between Israel and Hezbollah but warned that it would be complicated to maintain that peace. Similarly, Jaber noted that Hezbollah had captured the Lebanese state, creating a risk of social conflict. Still, it cannot be removed completely because it is integrated into society by virtue of representing the Shia community.

The words and predictions of the panellists on the Israel-Hezbollah ceasefire were vindicated as the ceasefire agreement between Hezbollah and Israel was reached on November 27, 2024, with mediation by the United States and France. The ceasefire can be seen as a result of the damage inflicted on Hezbollah by the Israeli forces but also an acknowledgement that Israel cannot fully defeat Hezbollah and carve a security perimeter in South Lebanon. Despite the ceasefire, a question mark remains whether, in the long-term perspective, the conflict will resume. Sayigh's analysis of the fact that Netanyahu has staked his political fate on the ongoing war in Gaza and the right-wing shift in Israeli politics serving as obstacles to peace are highly salient.

The future brings uncertainties. While the Israeli population may be tired of the ongoing war, the question is whether the Israeli national security elite is tired of the war to the extent that they engage in a reevaluation of Israeli long-term strategy, especially since the Palestinian side in the war is almost certain to become more radicalised and more hostile after the Gaza war. In light of both the war in Gaza and the Israeli settlement building in the West Bank, the two-state solution is still the only reasonable end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but one that remains elusive. It is equally hard to see a full-fledged alliance between the Arab nations and Israel since the elites in Arab countries will be domestically paralysed by the anger of their respective populations over the plight of the Palestinians. While the weariness of Iran still exists, the obstacle to the formation of an anti-Iranian coalition is the fact that the fallout of the ongoing Gaza war has overshadowed weariness over Iran.

This year's BSC also engaged with conflicts that are not in the global focus, as one in seven people around the world experience some conflict, including frozen conflicts from around the world and regional conflict theatres like Africa. Udo Jude Ilo, Senior Fellow of the Center for Civilians in Conflict and Founding Partner at Thoughts and Mace Advisory, pointed out that conflicts like the ones in Africa do not get enough media attention, either because they are not interesting or because they are outside the scope of geopolitical influence of great powers. However, neglecting conflicts in Africa leaves an opening for players like China and Russia, which is why Europe needs to step up.

Thomas Mayr-Harting, Former EEAS Managing Director and former Ambassador of the EU and Austria to the UN in New York, noted that frozen conflicts in the Euro-Atlantic area prevent Euro-Atlantic integrations and that conflicts in Africa primarily concern the artificial borders drawn by former colonial powers. Mayr-Harting stressed that wars that

relate to territorial integrity, like the one in Ukraine, should be of greater concern to the Global South and emphasised the importance of international organisations in conflict resolution. Yoko Hirose, Professor, Faculty of Policy Management, Keio University, pointed out the importance of international attention as frozen conflicts can unfreeze and become hot ones very easily and very quickly.

In the world that is upon us, it will be tougher to resolve these forgotten conflicts, particularly through international institutions. The key global and regional powers around the globe will be even more opportunistic in a multipolar world ridden with rivalry and suspicion, leading them on the path of peacekeeping and conflict resolution but towards seeking short-term geopolitical gains. The international organisations in that type of world will frequently be paralysed even on mundane, procedural issues, let alone strategic issues, like conflict resolutions in distant and diverse regions. Still, given that a large portion of the global population lives in the Global South, how the conflicts in the Global South are diplomatically addressed will also be part of the global battle for soft power prestige involving both Western and non-Western powers.



## The Western Balkans: What's at Stake and How to Move Forward?

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Serbia's refusal to impose sanctions on Moscow, the Western Balkans has been mentioned as one of flashpoints, where the conflict winds of Ukraine could reach. Concerns linger about the stability of Pristina-Belgrade relations and the possibility of a Ukraine-like scenario between Serbia and Kosovo. However, such a scenario remains unlikely due to the presence of KFOR troops that serve as a strong deterrent and the apparent unwillingness of both governments to escalate into open warfare.

That said, the region is far from realising its full potential, and progress in normalisation talks remains elusive. These negotiations often resemble a "one step forward, two steps back" process, where agreements – whether verbal or written – frequently go unimplemented and are often followed by new rounds of escalation. For instance, more than a decade has passed since the Brussels Agreement was signed, and yet the Association of Serb Municipalities (a commitment Kosovo has accepted) is far from being created. In the end, it seems that the EU – the mediator in the talks – has been unable to force the two sides to honour their respective parts of the deal.

Adding to the uncertainty are growing doubts about EU accession prospects. Many believe that Western Balkan states may never join the bloc, either due to the EU's hesitancy to expand, as voiced by some European politicians in the recent past, or because of insufficient reforms by regional governments. Public enthusiasm for EU membership is also waning in several countries, further frustrating the accession talks and weakening the prospect of alignment with EU norms.

This erosion of EU appeal has created a political vacuum, eagerly filled by external actors like Russia and China, although we can see more efforts from the latter and more entrenchment from the former in light of its preoccupation with war in Ukraine. Both powers have ways to exercise their influence in the region, complicating an already complex geopolitical landscape.

Domestically, the Western Balkans face significant internal challenges, including state capture, democratic backsliding, and persistent waves of protests. Serbia, in particular, has seen public demonstrations over issues ranging from lithium mining and the Novi Sad rail station tragedy to the aftermath of two devastating mass shootings last year.

Addressing these challenges will require a renewed commitment from both regional leaders and international stakeholders to foster stability, promote democratic reforms, and restore public trust in institutions. The Western Balkans stands at a critical juncture, and the path forward demands bold and decisive action.

But the path forward is fraught with challenges, as vividly demonstrated by the BSC panels, where the discussion on normalisation talks was marked by sharp disagreements, making it the most contentious debate of the conference.

Jeta Xharra, Founder and Director of the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network in Kosovo, criticised the very framing of the panel, arguing that its title implied a dialogue between two cities rather than two equal nations. She further contended that the Association of Serb Municipalities (ASM) should not be established until all other agreements are finalised and implemented, despite the ASM being Belgrade's primary objective and a Brussels Agreement obligation that Kosovo has formally accepted. Xharra also accused the EU of appeasing Serbia, even as the latter continues its cooperation with Russia.

Borko Stefanović, Deputy President of the Party of Freedom and Justice, strongly disagreed with Xharra, arguing that her rhetoric exacerbates the already difficult dialogue between the two sides. Despite further divisions among the panellists, they found common ground on two critical points: the dialogue is failing, and the EU is an ineffective mediator in the process.

Other Balkan-focused panels at the conference saw greater consensus among the speakers. For example, during discussions on the EU's 'Growth Plan,' panellists agreed that it is a valuable tool for fostering economic integration. They emphasised that the EU must send more positive signals to Western Balkan countries to sustain the momentum generated by renewed interest in enlargement.

Similarly, on the topic of lithium mining, Jelica Minić, a Member of the Executive Board of the European Movement in Serbia, and Julian Popov, former Bulgarian Minister of the Environment and Senior Fellow at the European Climate Foundation, found common ground. Both acknowledged that lithium mining is crucial for enhancing Europe's competitiveness but agreed that the handling of lithium mining in Serbia has been a public relations and governance disaster. For any such project to succeed, they underscored the importance of transparency and active involvement of local communities.



## BSC Young Leaders' Essays Belgrade Security Conference 2024

The Belgrade Security Conference (BSC) is one of the leading regional forums for dialogue on global and regional security challenges, bringing together policymakers, experts, and activists to discuss pressing issues.

As part of its broader efforts to engage young people in security and foreign policy discussions, the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) established the BSC Young Leaders program, aimed at empowering and connecting young leaders from the six Western Balkan countries: Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania. The program provides participants with opportunities to contribute to discussions, share their perspectives, and connect with experts in the field.

To further encourage critical thinking and creative engagement, the BCSP also organized an essay contest for the young leaders. Participants could choose from six pre-defined topics for their essays, allowing them to explore and address key security and policy challenges relevant to the region:

- 1) Are the Western Balkans Destined to be in the EU, or is the Region Doomed to be a European Periphery?
- 2) Is Migration an Inevitable Part of the Modern Era or a Key Political and Geopolitical Challenge of the Modern Age that Needs to be Tackled?
- 3) To Continue Arming Ukraine or to Push for Peace Talks?
- 4) Critically Discuss These Three Prospects Regarding BRICS: Alternative to the Western Order, Failed Initiative, or Hedging in a Multipolar World.

- 5) Identify and Critically Assess Three Key Obstacles to Regional Reconciliation in the Western Balkans.
- 6) Is Israel on the Path to Victory or on a Path to Strategic Fiasco? - Assess These Two Prospects in Regard to Israeli Operations Against Either Hamas or Hezbollah.

After the selection by several BCSP staff members and some of BCSP's partners, the three best essays were selected. These three essays are by Tamara Drndarević, who wrote an essay on the topic "Is Migration an Inevitable Part of the Modern Era or a Key Political and Geopolitical Challenge of the Modern Age that Needs to be Tackled?"; Uroš Popadić, who wrote an essay on "Identify and Critically Assess Three Key Obstacles to Regional Reconciliation in the Western Balkans", and Anja Šofranac, who wrote an essay on the topic of "Is Israel on the Path to Victory or on a Path to Strategic Fiasco? - Assess These Two Prospects in Regard to Israeli Operations Against Either Hamas or Hezbollah." These three essays are published now as an annexe to the BSC Trends 2024.

In her essay on migration, Tamara Drndarević argues that migration is an integral part of the human condition and that it has always been with us throughout history. The essay displays various motives that get people to migrate and how this process is genuinely global in the age where migration has become one of the most dominant and one of the most divisive issues in the politics of Western countries. In that context, while not everyone will agree with the key points of the essay, it is important to keep in mind the various angles of a highly complex issue and the moral and strategic dilemmas that the issue of migration entails.

In the essay on obstacles to regional reconciliation, Uroš Popadić identifies three problems related to peace: nationalism, societal insecurity, and the culture of peace. What distinguishes Popadić's essay is that he employs theoretical concepts to engage with practical political problems. Nationalism is being assessed from the standpoint of Social identity theory; and societal insecurity is being utilized as one of the more novel concepts in security studies that are becoming more mindful of the emotional factor and the culture of peace, together with the use of the lenses of norms and memory. This tells us that policy practitioners, while they are frequently weary of theories, can still benefit from them, especially when they come from young minds.

Finally, in her essay on the Israeli war effort, Anja Šofranac shows the full complexity of the strategies employed by Israel in its multi-front military engagement that involves clashes with Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran. The essay demonstrates the duality between concepts of victory and fiasco in Israel's current course of action. Šofranac argues that while there may be some developments that Israel can define as a triumph, like inflicting physical damage to its adversaries, long-term prospects for Israel remain uncertain in light of its rapidly hostile regional security environment and equally hostile Palestinians.

## Is Migration an Inevitable Part of the Modern Era or a Key Political and Geopolitical Challenge of the Modern Age that Needs to be Tackled?

Ever since we evolved into *Homo sapiens*, we have been on the move. This is how we discovered there was more to the world beyond Eurasia and how our ancestors reached North America long before Christopher Columbus did. Migration is a part of us; you could say it is in our DNA. We have always searched for something better – better shelter, more food, warmer weather. Today, we are still migrating – just for different reasons. Or have the reasons more or less stayed the same?

In today's modern world, migration has become one of the most important issues in international relations. According to data from the International Organization for Migration, the number of migrants in the world has been increasing since the 1970s, and it is going to keep rising.<sup>1</sup> We are moving now more than ever, for whatever reason. A lot of people, when they hear the words “migration” and “migrant”, think it is a person running from war and violence. That is the case, but migration also involves studying abroad and searching for better socioeconomic opportunities. In fact, some statistics show that only 1 in 10 migrants are refugees, while others are economic migrants.<sup>2</sup>

These economic migrants have risked their lives and left their home country, poor living conditions, violence and poverty. They decided to find something better, to provide for their children, to give them access to higher-quality education. It's often seen as the “poor South” reaches for the “rich North”. Hundreds of people are leaving their home countries in Central and South America, embarking on a dangerous journey to reach North America, mainly the United States. Better economic opportunities, a safer environment and higher living standards attract them. We also see similar trends in the Middle East, including the wealthy Arab Gulf countries.

Huge numbers of immigrants who arrive in Qatar, Kuwait and neighbouring countries work in households as nannies, house cleaners and drivers. The journey itself might not be as dangerous as the one to the USA. Still, the goal is the same – reaching better socioeconomic opportunities and providing for their families back home. This region has one of the highest numbers of immigrants in the world. For example, they make up over 80% of the United Arab Emirates' population, with most coming from South and Southeast Asian countries.<sup>3</sup>

One important aspect of economic migration is remittances. Remittances are financial transfers migrants send to their home countries, providing support for their families while also boosting the local economy. In 2022, global remittances reached \$831 billion,



with India being the number one recipient, followed by Mexico and China. On the other hand, the United States and Saudi Arabia are the top two countries sending remittances.<sup>4</sup> Observing these statistics, we can better understand and track migration flows.

Sadly, walls are being constructed, and fences erected to block these migrants from seeking a better life in a stable and safe environment. Instead of offering solutions to the root causes of migration, many countries focus on fortifying their borders. This approach often overlooks the humanity and resilience of those simply striving for a chance to live with dignity.

So basically yes, migration is inevitable. Over the last decade, it has been quite an important topic of discussion - from governments, the media and the public. Is it beneficial to society, or do immigrants “steal” jobs and opportunities from the local population? We hear these questions all the time. It is not an easy situation, of course. Many countries face their issues, and adding thousands of immigrants to it is a whole new conundrum. It impacts a country’s economy, population, job market and relationships with neighbouring countries.

The journey for the people from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria is far from easy. Most of them are fleeing war and extremism, such as the Taliban’s rule in Afghanistan. To reach safety, they are forced to pay thousands of dollars to smugglers to take them across difficult terrain to Turkey or Greece. If they are extremely lucky and manage to avoid being beaten by the border police or deported, they might reunite with their families in Germany or France. Similarly, countless families from Algeria and other African countries risk their lives crossing the Mediterranean Sea in hopes of reaching southern Europe. They do so because they do not have any other choice - their lives are in danger, and living conditions in their home countries are severe, to say the least.

The year 2015 was quite a turbulent year for Europe when more than one million people arrived, fleeing the devastating war in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. This influx created the most severe migration crisis in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Europe struggled to respond, and for the first time in decades, the principles of open borders within the Schengen Area were put under immense strain. Some countries, such as Hungary, built a fence on their borders to prevent the migrants from entering, reflecting growing tensions and different national approaches. Border controls tightened significantly across Europe, and reports of human rights violations, including pushbacks and mistreatment of refugees, became alarmingly frequent. Despite these obstacles, many who managed to cross into the EU sought refuge in countries like Germany, which became a key destination due to its relatively open asylum policies under Chancellor Angela Merkel’s leadership. The crisis highlighted deep divisions within the EU. This crisis affected not only national and regional policies but also the general public in countries like Germany, France, Sweden and the UK.

The responses were different – some people showed full support for integration and resettling migrants, showing compassion and solidarity, while others expressed concerns about religious and cultural differences and potential economic impacts. In Germany, the government’s decision to open its borders was praised by many but also sparked backlash,<sup>5</sup> leading to the rise of populist movements.

Similarly, in Sweden and France, debates over integration and security became important, with some communities advocating for inclusive policies while others pushed for stricter controls.<sup>6</sup> In the UK, concerns about migration were a key factor influencing the Brexit referendum in 2016, showcasing how deeply the crisis shaped political and social discourse.<sup>7</sup> This shows how hard it is to manage migration in a region with so much diversity and political division.

In the context of the 2015 migrant crisis, we must mention the EU – Turkey deal, signed in 2016, aimed at managing the flow of refugees to Europe. Under this agreement, Turkey agreed to take stronger measures to prevent refugees from travelling to Greece, and in return, the EU agreed to accept one Syrian refugee for every one returned from Greece to Turkey. Turkey also received €6 billion in humanitarian aid, and its citizens were promised visa-free travel to the EU. While the deal helped reduce the number of migrants reaching Greece, it faced criticism for shifting responsibility for refugee care to Turkey, where conditions for asylum seekers remained challenging.<sup>8</sup>

The beginning of the war in Ukraine in 2022 marked another serious crisis in Europe and the whole world. More than 6 million people have fled the country, seeking safety in neighbouring countries or further. Poland, Moldova and Hungary are among the countries that received the highest number of refugees from Ukraine.<sup>9</sup> However, there are significant differences in how the EU has treated Ukrainian refugees compared to refugees from the Middle East. These differences show that the EU may not be as liberal and open as it often portrays itself. While Ukrainian refugees were allowed to enter European countries with relative ease, securing housing and jobs was also less challenging, and they did not have to go through long asylum procedures. In contrast, refugees from the MENA region often faced much worse treatment, including physical assaults, being trapped between borders, and enduring racist and xenophobic rhetoric. For those who managed to survive these hardships, asylum procedures were long and uncertain, and even after receiving asylum, many still struggled to find housing or employment.

These differences in treatment reflect the cultural and religious differences between Europe, the Middle, and North Africa, as well as the evident belief that European refugees and migrants are more likely to be integrated than those from the Middle East and North America. Studies have shown that Muslims are more likely to be rejected for asylum compared to Christians, reflecting broader societal biases.

Additionally, the media played a role in this disparity, often using different terms like “migrant” for non-European refugees, which undermines their legitimacy as asylum seekers.<sup>10</sup> These differences in treatment show underlying racial, religious, and cultural prejudices within European societies. Some EU leaders even went so far as to say that accepting Middle Eastern refugees would mean “importing terrorism.”<sup>11</sup> By accepting Ukrainian refugees with open arms, the European Union not only demonstrated its support for Ukraine but also took a strong stand against Russian aggression, reinforcing its role as a defender of democracy. This response has also solidified Europe’s moral and political stance in the international community, emphasizing the EU’s commitment to human rights and the protection of those fleeing war.

However, let’s look at the current war in Gaza and life in Gaza during the last few years. Thousands of Palestinians have tried seeking refuge in Europe, fleeing poor living conditions and violence, trying to go through Turkey and Greece. And just like in 2015, some of them faced violence, pushback, and violation of human rights on borders.<sup>12</sup> This suggests that the EU may not have learned much from the previous migrant crisis, with migrants coming from the Middle East. Those who managed to survive the difficult road and all the hardships applied for asylum in the EU, with Belgium receiving the highest number of applications in 2024.<sup>13</sup>

The delayed criticism of Israel’s actions and selective application of international law have exposed the EU’s double standards when compared to the Ukraine-Russia conflict. This has not gone unnoticed by the Global South, who saw the EU as a hypocritical organization, undermining its own values and human rights principles.<sup>14</sup> These different responses to the two conflicts showed the perception that some lives are more valuable than others, deepening global frustrations.

Migration is, at its core, a natural human phenomenon, and there are plenty of reasons for it: war, economic hardship, environmental disasters, and political instability. People seek safety, better opportunities and stability. Proper management can contribute positively to societies by enriching cultures, providing economic benefits, and fostering innovation. Migration is an inevitable part of our modern world. However, countries often face the dilemma of balancing compassionate responses with national interests. Governments may use migration to further their political goals, sometimes framing it as either a threat or an opportunity to showcase their humanitarian values. However, managing migration humanely should be prioritized.

In the 21st century, governments must recognize that showing compassion and offering assistance to migrants aligns with core human values and strengthens global cooperation. This builds a more just and inclusive international community. It is a reflection of a society’s commitment to human dignity and solidarity, acknowledging that migration is an inevitable part of our globalized world while also striving for policies that manage its impact effectively and fairly.

# Obstacles to Peace in the Western Balkans: Three Key Challenges

## Introduction

A decade after the Second World War and the Holocaust, Germany was allied to France, and fifteen years later it had even reached reconciliation with Poland. And where is the region of the Western Balkans a quarter of a century after the wars in the 1990s? In short: nowhere nearby. For the longer answer, more effort is required, and this is what this essay intends to do. As such, this essay will focus on the problem of reconciliation by breaking it down into three key obstacles: nationalism, societal insecurity and the lack of a culture of peace.

## Social Identity and Nationalism

First it is necessary to tackle the problem of nationalism and its regional consequences. To understand why people identify with a nation, Social identity theory is applied, which supposes that when individuals conceive themselves as members of a group in social situations, their group identity can determine their social behaviour and perceptions.<sup>15</sup> A social identity is a person's knowledge that they belong to a social group or category, possibly leading to negative judging of other groups and forcing a comparison.<sup>16</sup> This leads to people defining themselves by belonging to that group and adjusting their behaviour accordingly.<sup>17</sup> Negative experiences with a member from another group from that with which a person identifies with, can translate to prejudice against the whole group.<sup>18</sup> As the most common form of identification in the region is ethnicity-based nationalism, it can also be a threat to security due to the prejudice that would emerge. It is an identity-based threat to international security, being a key factor in many of the tragedies of the region, and it is still used by populist politicians, preventing reconciliation.<sup>19</sup>

Political elites seek to gain power over ethnic groups and mobilise them, often through divisive rhetoric and based on religion and ethnicity, which has cross-border implications.<sup>20</sup> Trauma caused by the conflicts of the nineties has cemented basic identities and increased polarisation. The region remains highly segregated along ethnic lines, and the legacy of the war continues to have a spillover effect on neighbours.<sup>21</sup> In Serbia, the Kosovo myth is foundational for its national identity, allowing nationalist politicians to exploit the issue and its emotional content.<sup>22</sup> In Kosovo itself, interethnic relations remain tense and are burdened by mistrust and animosity.<sup>23</sup> Conflict generally leads to a greater ethnic homogeneity, and to difficulty in reestablishing ethnic cooperation,<sup>24</sup> which is the case here as ethnicity has been a key point of contention.

The two major ethnicities have strong ethnic identification, leading to the desire for ethnic distinction, resulting in segregation,<sup>25</sup> and minimal interethnic contact.<sup>26</sup>

Once focused on, ethnicity becomes an important part of everyday politics, leading to suspicion and polarisation, as well as intolerance. Bosnia and Herzegovina is dominated by ethnic parties, and the electoral system segments the electorates of the different communities, leading to constant friction.<sup>27</sup> In Montenegro the political attitudes towards independence mirror the ethnic divide, with those people identifying as Montenegrin being more likely to support independence and Euro-Atlantic integration, while those who identify as Serb are likely to be against it. Ethnicity plays a large part in Montenegrin politics and this leads to polarisation.<sup>28</sup> This means that there are ethnically motivated political tensions and antagonisms, which nationalist politicians exploit, so much that Montenegrin nationalism has been shaped in opposition to Serbia and Serb identity. This has led to intolerance and historical revisionism.<sup>29</sup>

## Societal Insecurity and Emotion

Security issues are socially constructed through discourse and authority. Whether an issue becomes a security threat depends on fear, an emotion which succeeds where specific fears are raised in the proper context.<sup>30</sup> This can be related to the concept of societal security, which is concerned with the identity of a society within a state, rather than on the security of a state itself. As identities and societies cross state borders, the problem of societal security becomes regional.<sup>31</sup> Societal security usually refers to the nation within the nation-state, and one does not always correspond to the other.<sup>32</sup> Insecurity occurs when a society perceives a threat in identity terms, putting identity at the centre of security. In this context, the beliefs, traditions, and cultural values of a group become objects of protection.<sup>33</sup> When a state is divided into several major societal units, state and societal security can be negatively correlated, with minorities having their own identity-based societal security.<sup>34</sup> Insecurity in society has other causes as well, such as weak rule of law or challenges in transitional justice, but in the essay we will focus on identity as the strongest factor which influences all other ones.<sup>35</sup>

Ethno-national groups are emotional communities, which have collective history and trauma, with appropriate emotional responses tied to them. Their security rests on their emotional responses to other groups, as the potential loss of identity can be an existential threat for a society, even though identity is flexible and constantly changes. Collective emotions are shared judgments formed through shared experiences and meanings, rooted in cultural and social contexts, and are exploited by politicians when turning a problem into a threat. Societies and nations can also have emotional climates, which are based on collective experiences, affecting their security and threat perception. Nations can also have emotional climates, which are based on collective experiences, affecting their security and threat perception.<sup>36</sup>

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the EU has attempted to create peace by promoting societal reconciliation and building democratic governance. However, this has not solved the tensions as ethnic identity has been securitised, and limited results were reached when attempting to normalise the region through promoting the norm of reconciliation.<sup>37</sup> This means that the threat to ethnic identity has been framed as existential, and requiring extraordinary measures beyond normal political processes.<sup>38</sup>

The security and political structures in Bosnia and Herzegovina are based on ethnic lines, separating people into ethnic security zones and supporting ethnic security and identity politics.<sup>39</sup> The narrative of conflict is still widespread and affects collective identities, leading to a delegitimisation of the other groups and strong polarisation.<sup>40</sup> The crisis of identity influences both individual and collective security, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina is at the centre of social and political security. Political elites and religious leaders promote a group identity, using it to mobilise the population, destabilising the multicultural state.<sup>41</sup> Social peace and cooperation are also negatively affected by the decisions of the international courts, as the different ethnicities still have biased views on past events and crimes.<sup>42</sup> In Kosovo, human security has been instrumentalised as ethnic security, and is being used for political goals, while it struggles with constructing social trust across ethnic communities. The ethnic fragmentation is preventing the reconstruction of social peace, as short-term security needs are being prioritised over long term peace.<sup>43</sup>

## Culture of Peace and Reconciliation

We can consider the culture of peace as a necessary precondition for reconciliation. It entails the creation of peaceful and non-violent behaviour, which can be achieved through intercultural dialogue and understanding.<sup>44</sup> Violence is generally the result of negative attitudes which groups have towards each other, and it can lead not only to violent behavior but also to such behavior becoming normalised. A good way to prevent this is by fostering a culture of empathy and understanding, which would humanise other groups.<sup>45</sup> A peaceful environment is one without structural violence, and which includes peaceful conflict resolution as a norm.<sup>46</sup> To achieve such a culture, it is necessary to have respect for and solidarity with all people,<sup>47</sup> while identity and group based conflict can be redressed through the deconstruction of myths and transforming the negative images of “the other”.<sup>48</sup> Peace can be built through everyday interaction between people which refuse the dominant narratives and ideologies that result in conflict.<sup>49</sup> The culture of conflict rests on the collective memory of conflict which includes distorted and biased narratives.<sup>50</sup>

Regrettably, the public narratives of leading regional politicians are contradictory and irreconcilable, continuing the atmosphere of mistrust and feelings of injustice.

The past in the region is still not confronted but is rather misrepresented to fit nationalistic narratives, and public remembrance in the region is used for stoking tension instead of promoting reconciliation.<sup>51</sup> Historical narratives are a major point of contention, as memory has been politicised and used ideologically to create negative emotions towards other groups.<sup>52</sup> In Kosovo the political identity is divided between the idea of a civic Kosovo, and the ethno-national one which includes reification of the myths of a heroic past struggle against Serbia, causing identity-based friction.<sup>53</sup>

At the same time, since the wars of the 1990s, a significant portion of Serbian society has transposed guilt onto the other national groups in the former country. This has led to attempts to white-wash war criminals and display them as heroes, including a revisionist approach to the second world war, and an overall narrative of Serb victimhood.<sup>54</sup> Even education is used to promote nationalism, creating conflicting collective memories, especially with Kosovo having a segregated education system,<sup>55</sup> like elsewhere in the region. The countries are stuck in public narratives of the past that are mutually exclusive, which shape public policy. This is dangerous as public narratives and collective memories that build ethnic identity also build enmity towards other groups and justify violence.<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusion

The results of this essay show that the region is still far from peaceful and secure, and that the problems it faces are deeply rooted. There is a lot of tension and mistrust, and nationalism is playing a negative role in the reconciliation process, preventing progress and leading to contradictions. A move away from aggressive and irredentist nationalism, which spills over across borders, and a move towards a common regional identity and solidarity, could prevent the national identification which still plays a large role in the region from causing conflicts. Another way to contribute to reconciliation is the fostering of a culture of peace and cooperation instead of the culture of national competition and conflict. By doing so, it is possible to make people in all regional societies feel more safe and secure, as they would know that their neighbours are not seeking to undermine them for the sake of their own society. Unless each society understands that the other societies have valid interests, and more importantly that peace and cooperation is in the interest of all the societies in the region rather than nationalistic competition, there will not be a movement towards greater overall security or reconciliation.

# New Page in the Historical Book: How did the Israeli-Hamas War and the Israeli Strategy Affected Geopolitical Reality of the Middle East?

## Introduction

Since Hamas's attacks on Israel on October 7<sup>th</sup> last year, concerns have constantly been raised about the stability and security situation in the entire Middle East. The fight against terrorism lies as one of the main agendas not only of the Israeli government, but also of the entire Western world that has been facing its actions and consequences since 2001. The current course of the conflict can be seen as going in favor of Israel, due to the lack of international intervention. If we look at the temporal progression of the war from October 7<sup>th</sup>, when Hamas stormed into Israeli territory, to today's IDF action in Lebanon against Hezbollah, the conflict has undergone an evolution, including the regional entry of Iran into direct action with missile attacks.

Despite some of the predictions of Israel emerging as the winner, given the recent victory of Donald Trump in the presidential elections and the ceasefire in Lebanon, its war strategy will inevitably reach a debacle. Therefore, in the context of this war, both terms, *victory* and *fiasco*, can be used as complementary to each other. Israel's strategy has undergone a transformation in terms of war goals and the goal of the war itself. Has the goal remained the annihilation of Hamas and Hezbollah, or has the ethnic cleansing of Gaza become the new inevitable goal? Can the IDF, through conventional and physical conflict with Hamas, defeat and eradicate terrorism even if the United States has failed to do so? Israel's war strategy can also be questioned in terms of its impact on the psychological and cultural state of Palestinian civilians who are at the center of the war. Mass killings and rocket attacks on the Rafah camps, the denial of humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip, and the health catastrophe that has led to further tragic cases among the population, are leading to further radicalization and the younger generation turning to terrorist activities as their only form of freedom. Israel's actions in the region may lead to new spiralling events leading to more critical and tense relations with its neighbours.

The goal of this text will be to determine and analyse Israel's strategy in the fight against Hamas and Hezbollah. The role of Iran, its internal policy and support to paramilitary formations will be found within the analysis of the strategy itself and the course of the war in the Middle East. The actors in focus will be, in addition to Israel, Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran and the United States of America (later in the text referred to as USA) led by the new president Donald Trump. The analysis will begin with a review of Israel's war strategy and its fight against terrorism. Just defining terrorism and its genesis in the Middle East as



a repression of Western values will play a crucial role in exposing the mistakes in Israel's strategy for establishing peace on its borders. Mentioning Iran as the main "sponsor" of Hamas and Hezbollah in the wider regional context contributes to the understanding of its role in financing terrorism, but also the conflict with Israel as a long-term mistake and a setback towards finding peace. Finally, the text will include an analysis of Donald Trump's coming to power in the USA as a chance for a clear victory for Israel in this war, as well as changes in Benjamin Netanyahu's cabinet.

## The War on Terrorism?

When we observe the Israel-Hamas war through the lens of the Israeli army, we can admit that the enemy on the other side, that is, in Gaza, looks almost invisible. One of the reasons (aside from the military, economic and political imbalance in power) for this perception lies in the fact that the IDF is waging a continuous, decade-long battle against a terrorist organization (later in the text referred to as TO), whose operations are based on unconventional, guerrilla attacks and responses. Bearing in mind that modern warfare has ceased to require a direct confrontation between two armies at the front, the conflict between Israel and Hamas can be taken as a kind of hybrid conflict. What makes it stand out as specific, *hybrid*, is unconventional, that is, conventional warfare against terrorism, which, at its core, does not follow either one or the other type of warfare in order to satisfy its interests. The very roots of terrorism in the Middle East lie with the birth of movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The very notion of Islamist terrorism is based on a response to the creation of first Jewish state back in 1948. The PLO was founded in the 1960s as an organized group that used guerrilla warfare to deal with their ideological enemy. To this date, the world community has not been able to find a consensus for the exact definition of terrorism. However, what can be taken as constant is that the decades-long fight against TO such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS has not succeeded in eradicating their tendency to virally spread throughout the rest of the world. When we look exclusively at the Israel-Hamas conflict, the flaw in the IDF's strategy lies in the fact that their actions lead to the deepening of an anti-Western, anti-secularist ideology, providing justifications for Hamas's existence.

## War on the Financier?

The fight against terrorism requires understanding the goals of its main financier, and finding ways to cut off those resources. Israel's reversal of focus on Iran, parallel with the Hamas and Hezbollah conflict, acts as a tactic to exhaust the "enemy" on multiple fronts. Iran's direct participation can result in dispersal of funding of paramilitary formations in Lebanon, Gaza and Yemen, but also limiting the support to its proxies in the event of a

potential greater security threat to Iran's internal system. The potential weakening of Iran in its financial and military sectors could produce internal unrest through civil protests on a wider scale, as well as a change of heart of the Iranian government towards writing the settlement agreement. However, the direct conflict between two states calls into question the further expansion of the conflict into the entire territory of the Middle East. What is certain is the presence of Iran as *one of the two major* regional powers in Middle East. The other mentioned important state in the region represents the "enemy" of Iran on the religious/ethnic line, who is no stranger to the financing of wars in the Middle East in the past couple of decades. In its "Middle East Cold War", Saudi Arabia (SA in the following text) indirectly participated in devastating civil wars in countries like Syria and Yemen, supporting militant and terrorist groups. With the end of the war in Yemen, but also with the change in the policy of King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, SA turned to internal social and economic changes, creating projects of technological significance favourable for foreign investments, the so-called "Vision 2030"<sup>57</sup>. With the modernization of Saudi society in the direction of secularization, "*westernization*", foreign policy is less involved in financing militant organizations and undermining the sovereignty of neighbouring states. One of the solutions to cut off Iranian funding (as an alternative to military conflict with Israel) can be taken from the SA example: the reform of the economic and social system, the opening of borders to the world market, and the signing of multiple bilateral agreements with regional states would lead to the reduction of aspirations for the spread of ideological politics through extreme, militant means.<sup>58</sup>

## International Intervention?

Following the election of Donald Trump as the 47th president of the USA, the international community ushered into a spiral process of geopolitical changes. Two key hotspots (war in Ukraine and Israeli-Hamas war) in the world expect their shutdowns in the near future, with the mediation of the new president. The end of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is more certain with the victory of Israel, bearing in mind the strong support of the evangelical church for Trump, but also his sympathies for the Israeli government. What is important to emphasize is that the US's decades-long practice of negotiating in peace processes tended to accept the situation on the ground as a basis for starting negotiations. One of the less expected, but not excluded, offers that can be put on the table is a two-state solution. In mid-September, the leaders of Hamas declared that they were ready to accept the ceasefire proposal, with the condition of returning the situation to the "old borders", which can be taken as a success of American diplomacy, but at the expense of Israeli progress.<sup>59</sup> In the past year, we have witnessed a change in the policy and goal of the Israeli war, whose process of execution of members of Hamas is not parallel to the process of reintegration of Palestinian society in the Gaza Strip. Senior minister Ben-Gvir said that the Gaza Strip should be "voluntarily settled by Israelis"<sup>60</sup>, arguing that Gaza belongs to Israel. Considering this attitude of one of the

members of the Israeli government, as well as the condition of the leader of Hamas to return to the old borders, the following question arises: can there be a settlement? Israel's war strategy also led to internal reforms in the government itself. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, by dismissing Defense Minister Yoav Gallant<sup>61</sup>, created a spiral of spontaneous protests whose demands for the release of the hostages and an immediate ceasefire have not yet been met. The decline in morale among citizens, as well as the expression of deep dissatisfaction with Israel's wide-range war in the region, can be an indicator of the weakening of the Israeli government's influence on the opinion of its people, as well as the slow cracking of the political agenda at the seams.<sup>62</sup> Whether Donald Trump will succeed in "picking up" the fruits of the policy of the previous American cabinet and offering a solution, that will not endanger Israel's warfare, is highly anticipated. How much will this create a deepening of ethnic intolerance and the possibility of creating a new wave of repressive responses, is yet to be seen.

## Conclusion

Israel's strategy of the Israel-Hamas war can be taken as defeatist, taking into account the international and Arab response to the destructive measures caused by the conflict. Despite the fact that its prospects at the very beginning saw somewhat of "successful" outcomes when it comes to the fight against terrorism, that is, Hamas, the events that took off later in months showed more aggressive approaches in tackling a serious phenomenon such as terrorism. Bombing of Lebanon and refugee camps in Gaza, not allowing the entry of humanitarian aid into Gaza, but also the cancellation of cooperation with the UN peacekeeping mission (UNRWA), the mark of the unjustification of the war is placed on the entire Israeli government, as well as the Israeli people. The events in the Middle East, which have been going on for a year, were caused by the intrusion of Hamas members into the territory of Israel and the taking of civilians as hostages. However, the core of the conflict lies in colonisation, and far-reaching disagreements that, as proven for decades, are impossible to resolve through military action. One of the consequences that Israeli "violence" and "discrimination" of the Palestinian population achieves is the creation of continued animosity towards the entire Israeli population. This leads to the creation of fertile ground for national and religious extremism in the circles of the Palestinian population, which has been active since the creation of Israel in 1948. If we take it as a hypothesis that Israel, guided by the continuation of military action, succeeds in destroying its original threat Hamas and Hezbollah, the political and cultural intolerance towards Israel on the part of the Arab world will continue to live, through the same terrorist or more extreme actions. With the arrival of Donald Trump, but also with the sudden dismissal of the members of Netanyahu's cabinet, we can expect the finalization of this episode of the conflict in favor of Israel, but also with uncertainty about the start of a new one.

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