

**FOSTERING RESILIENCE IN  
THE WESTERN BALKANS:  
OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES**

by Ivan Nikolovski, Jelica Minić, and Alba Cela  
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# Fostering Resilience in the Western Balkans: Opportunities and Challenges

Ivan Nikolovski, Jelica Minić, and Alba Cela

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# Introduction



After 44 years of relative stability, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, paradoxically marked a new era of instability for the Balkans. The violent dissolution of Yugoslavia, the revival of the 'Macedonian Question', and the Albanian civil unrest in the 1990s meant all but the 'end of history' and 'return to Europe' for the citizens of the now 'renamed' region of Western Balkans. The 'dark legacies' of the recent past, still haunting the region, were additionally exacerbated with the onset of the 2022 War in Ukraine.

Simultaneously facing frozen conflicts and unresolved bilateral issues, failed state-building, economic underperformance, environmental and social degradation, and eroded security infrastructure, subject to malign influences and hybrid attacks, the Western Balkan countries once again found it extremely difficult to cope with the dramatic and dynamic changes of the European and international order, itself shaken

by Russia's aggression and the still unfinished health and economic crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. To successfully navigate the unfortunate state of affairs, Western Balkans need to urgently address their vulnerability, by increasing and sustaining their resilience.

Inspired by the ever-more urgent need to respond, this paper analyses the drivers of fragility and resilience<sup>1</sup> against the backdrop of the region's European and Euro-Atlantic integration. The latter is of immense importance as efforts to speed up Western Balkans' EU and NATO membership prospects gained momentum in the last few years. However, as we shall see, these efforts were anything but flawless, facing formidable hurdles arising simultaneously from the complex regional scene and especially the EU's inconsistent and often ambiguous stance on the Western Balkan enlargement. Therefore, the

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<sup>1</sup> Resilience is loosely defined as the capacity to cope with, adapt to, and recover from various external and internal challenges, see David Chandler, *Resilience: The Governance of Complexity* (Routledge, 2014); By contrast, the EU defines resilience more concretely and more dynamically, as the "ability of states and societies to reform thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises. See European External Action Service, "A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy," December 15, 2019, 23, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/global-strategy-european-unions-foreign-and-security-policy\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/global-strategy-european-unions-foreign-and-security-policy_en).

question guiding this paper is what opportunities and challenges exist for regional resilience.

Understood as both a process and an outcome, resilience is inevitably a multifaceted, internally, and externally driven phenomenon across fields of social action. Grasping its complex nature goes beyond this paper's scope and it has been thoroughly addressed elsewhere. Therefore, here we only focus on what we believe to be the most pressing drivers of fragility and resilience,

closely looking at *the EU and NATO enlargement, rival powers' influence, and regional cooperation*. After analyzing the latter drivers, the paper posits a series of recommendations that the EU and local actors may consider in the attempt of building more resilient states and societies. In doing so, special focus is put on Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia, whose experiences will be compared to that of the other Western Balkan countries – namely Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Montenegro.



# The EU and NATO enlargement in the Western Balkans: Opportunities and Challenges for Building Resilient Democracies and Market Economies

Being almost unanimously shared foreign policy goals, the accessions to the EU and NATO have provided many opportunities for boosting Western Balkans' resilience. These opportunities can be grouped into at least four major categories: 1) political opportunities aimed at boosting the region's democratic consolidation; 2) economic opportunities aimed at enhancing the development of Western Balkans' economies and investing in their energy security; 3) social opportunities aimed at assisting the Western Balkan countries' fight against disinformation, extremism,

and polarization; and 4) security opportunities aimed at increasing the deterrence and defense capacities of the Western Balkans, including against cyber attacks and hybrid warfare.<sup>2</sup> As mentioned before, we only closely focus on the so-called political and economic opportunities in this paper.

Despite the West-assisted democratization of the region by the late 2000s,<sup>3</sup> the 2010s saw rising trends of autocratization, often coupled with cronyism and societal tensions.<sup>4</sup> Even today, Freedom

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<sup>2</sup> Based on the overview of Corina Stratulat, "Democratisation via EU Integration: Fragile Resilience and Resilient Fragility," in *Resilience in the Western Balkans*, ed. Sabina Lange, Zoran Nechev, and Florian Trauner (EU Institute for Security Studies, 2017), 11–16; Rosa Balfour, "Enlargement: What Role for Resilience?," in *Resilience in the Western Balkans*, ed. Sabina Lange, Zoran Nechev, and Florian Trauner (EU Institute for Security Studies, 2017), 17–22; Sandro Knezović, "The Impact of NATO," in *Resilience in the Western Balkans*, ed. Sabina Lange, Zoran Nechev, and Florian Trauner (EU Institute for Security Studies, 2017), 23–30; and Jasmin Hasić, "A Relay Race for Peace: The Approaches of the EU and the US to Bringing Stability and Democracy to the Western Balkans Region," in *Peace and Security in the Western Balkans: A Local Perspective*, ed. Nemanja Džuverović and Věra Stojarová (Taylor & Francis, 2022), 215–33.

<sup>3</sup> Lucan A. Way and Steven Levitsky, "Linkage, Leverage, and Democratization in Eastern Europe," in *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*, ed. Lucan A. Way and Steven Levitsky, Problems of International Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 87–129.

<sup>4</sup> Florian David Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*, New Perspectives on South-East Europe (Palgrave Pivot, 2020).

House, for instance, ranks all Western Balkan countries as partly free ones.<sup>5</sup> But the region is not the only one to blame for this regression. The EU itself has often been a partner in crime. Namely, instead of being consistently faithful to the implementation of the Copenhagen criteria, many times, the bloc has legitimized the authoritarian tendencies in exchange for maintaining 'stability' in what came to be perceived as a war-torn, backward, and thus not-really 'European' region,<sup>6</sup> leading to the establishment of the so-called stabilitocratic regimes.<sup>7</sup>

Not everything is doom and gloom, nonetheless. The Euro-Atlantic integration still provides opportunities for boosting the Western Balkans' resilience, especially political and economic ones. Namely, following Russia's aggression in Ukraine, public opinion within the EU dramatically changed in favor of

future enlargement. Not only are two-thirds of Europeans supportive of Ukraine's EU bid but 71% of them also appear to be in favor of Western Balkans' membership.<sup>8</sup>

Besides public support, after many years of make-believe pledges, the EU member states and institutions finally seem to be making tangible steps toward speeding up the enlargement process. For instance, in 2022 alone, the EU finally start the accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia.<sup>9</sup> It also granted a candidate status not only to Moldova and Ukraine<sup>10</sup> but also to Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>11</sup> What is more, in October 2022, the European Parliament called the European Council and the European Commission to "advance the EU's enlargement policy as the single most effective EU instrument for securing peace, prosperity and fundamental values on the European continent".<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Sarah Repucci and Amy Slipowitz, "Freedom in the World 2022: The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule" (Freedom House, February 2022), 18, [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/FIW\\_2022\\_PDF\\_Booklet\\_Digital\\_Final\\_Web.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/FIW_2022_PDF_Booklet_Digital_Final_Web.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Florian Bieber, "The Rise (and Fall) of Balkan Stabilitocracies," *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, no. 10 (2018): 176–85.

<sup>8</sup> Isabell Hoffmann and Catherine E. de Vries, "Under Pressure - The War in Ukraine and European Public Opinion," eupinions.eu, accessed April 21, 2023, <https://eupinions.eu/de/text/under-pressure>.

<sup>9</sup> Council of the European Union, "Council Conclusions on North Macedonia and Albania," July 18, 2022, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11440-2022-INIT/en/pdf#:~:text=1,deliver%20tangible%20and%20sustained%20result>.

<sup>10</sup> European Council, "European Council Conclusions on Ukraine, the Membership Applications of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia, Western Balkans and External Relations," June 23, 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/06/23/european-council-conclusions-on-ukraine-the-membership-applications-of-ukraine-the-republic-of-moldova-and-georgia-western-balkans-and-external-relations-23-june-2022/>.

<sup>11</sup> European Council, "European Council Meeting Conclusions," December 15, 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/60872/2022-12-15-euco-conclusions-en.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> European Parliament, "Report on a European Parliament Recommendation to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Concerning the New EU Strategy for Enlargement," October 17, 2022, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2022-0251\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2022-0251_EN.html).



This message was later reiterated by EU and Western Balkan heads of state and governments in the so-called Tirana Declaration from December 2022, during the first EU-Western Balkans Summit to take place in the region.<sup>13</sup> But 2022 also saw critical reports by EU institutions on the state of play in the region. For example, in October 2022, the European Commission issued one of the most negative assessments of the Western Balkan countries' EU accession processes. Lack of implementation and backsliding in democratization were among the key findings and factors charged with slowing down or preventing the opening of new clusters/chapters in the membership talks.<sup>14</sup> Lastly, in March and April 2023, the European Council and Parliament respectively finally granted Kosovo visa liberalization.<sup>15</sup>

The EU has also helped the Western Balkans overcome the economic challenges, following the Russian aggression in Ukraine. Namely, in December 2022, the Commission approved significant grants to help

the countries in the region mitigate the rising energy costs.<sup>16</sup> Even more importantly, Brussels' 2020 *Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans* provides a major almost systemic intervention opportunity that can transform the regional economies by mobilizing €9 billion and seeking to attract an additional €20 billion from investors and international financial institutions for investment in the areas of transport, energy, green and digital transition, aimed at creating sustainable growth and jobs.<sup>17</sup>

Given the renewed EUphoric momentum, the political elites in the Western Balkans, in cooperation with their EU partners, can employ at least two strategies to reverse the democratic decline and boost their economic growth in line with the Copenhagen membership criteria. In other words, the countries of the region can practice both onset resilience (i.e. the ability to resist episodes of autocratization before they take place) and breakdown resilience (i.e. the potential of an already flawed

<sup>13</sup> European Council, "EU-Western Balkans Summit: Tirana Declaration," December 6, 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/60568/tirana-declaration-en.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> European Commission, "2022 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy," October 12, 2022, [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/2022-communication-eu-enlargement-policy\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/2022-communication-eu-enlargement-policy_en).

<sup>15</sup> European Council, "Kosovo\*: Council Gives Green Light to Visa Free Travel," March 9, 2023, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/03/09/kosovo-council-gives-green-light-to-visa-free-travel/>; European Parliament, "MEPs Approve Visa Liberalisation with Kosovo," April 18, 2023, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20230414IPR80117/meps-approve-visa-liberalisation-with-kosovo>.

<sup>16</sup> Western Balkans Investment Framework, "€1 Billion Energy Support Package for the Western Balkans," December 6, 2022, <https://www.wbif.eu/news-details/1-billion-energy-support-package-western-balkans-approved-5-december>.

<sup>17</sup> European Commission, "An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans," October 6, 2020, [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-10/communication\\_on\\_wb\\_economic\\_and\\_investment\\_plan\\_october\\_2020\\_en.pdf](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-10/communication_on_wb_economic_and_investment_plan_october_2020_en.pdf).

democracy to resist a breakdown into autocracy).<sup>18</sup> One of the key tools to achieve this is the new methodology of accession negotiations, presented in 2020.<sup>19</sup> Increasingly focused on the so-called Fundamentals,<sup>20</sup> the new methodology provides a solid framework to strengthen the democratic institutions and market economy in the region, including judicial oversight, and public procurement.

Apart from the European integration process, NATO enlargement has also provided opportunities for increased resilience, especially after the onset of Russia's war in Ukraine. Montenegro and North Macedonia's accession to NATO in 2017 and 2020 respectively increased their defensive capacities and the region's general security.<sup>21</sup> Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo have likewise considered membership

or expressed willingness to join the Alliance. However, Sarajevo still lacks a unified position on NATO membership given Republika Srpska's opposition. By contrast, Prishtina, despite having a consensus on the matter, lacks international recognition, including by four NATO member states (Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain). The latter seems only achievable if the Kosovar authorities manage to broker a deal on mutual recognition with their Serbian counterparts. In this respect, it is worth mentioning that 'neutral' Serbia (and, by extension, Republika Srpska), having traditionally close relations with the Kremlin and being opposed to NATO membership, has often been regarded as a proxy for Russia's influence in the region. Be it as it may, for the time being, the NATO-led KFOR mission in Kosovo provides enough security guarantees for the Balkan country.

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<sup>18</sup> Wolfgang Merkel and Anna Lührmann, "Resilience of Democracies: Responses to Illiberal and Authoritarian Challenges," *Democratization* 28, no. 5 (July 4, 2021): 873.

<sup>19</sup> European Commission, "Enhancing the Accession Process - A Credible EU Perspective for the Western Balkans," February 5, 2020, [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-02/enlargement-methodology\\_en.pdf](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-02/enlargement-methodology_en.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Membership conditions formerly assembled in Chapters 5 (public procurement), 18 (statistics), 23 (judiciary and fundamental rights), 24 (justice, freedom, and security), and 32 (financial control).

<sup>21</sup> Ivan Stefanovski, "A Bottom-up Perspective on Peace and Security in North Macedonia: Turbulent Violent Past versus Uncertain Future?," in *Peace and Security in the Western Balkans: A Local Perspective*, ed. Nemanja Džuverović and Věra Stojarová (Taylor & Francis, 2022), 81.

# Rival Powers' Influence: Opportunities and Challenges for the Regional Resilience

Being stuck in the EU's "eternal waiting room",<sup>22</sup> the Western Balkans have become easy prey to rival powers' influence.<sup>23</sup> Russia, China, Turkey, and the Gulf States are just some of the global actors that made their political and economic influence in the region felt, oftentimes at odds with the latter's Euro-Atlantic integration. By exploiting Western Balkans' politico-economic instability, unresolved disputes, and authoritarian political sentiments, the influence of the rival powers manifested in forms as diverse as investments in large-scale infrastructure projects, political endorsement for governments

and political parties, and media engagement.<sup>24</sup>

For instance, the rival powers would often step in to compensate for the lack of Western support as the Covid-19 pandemic showed. China was particularly active with its mask and vaccine diplomacy, assuring the Western Balkans that they were maybe let down by Brussels or Washington but certainly not by Beijing, at least in the global health crisis' early stage.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the cheap loans for large infrastructure projects awarded as part of the now 14+1 initiative,<sup>26</sup> as well as the dependence on broadband

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<sup>22</sup> Srdjan Cvijic, "Macron and the EU Enlargement Make-Believe," [www.euractiv.com](http://www.euractiv.com), May 24, 2019, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/opinion/macron-and-the-eu-enlargement-make-believe/>.

<sup>23</sup> Florian Bieber and Nikolaos Tzifakis, "Introduction: The Influence of External Actors in the Western Balkans," in *The Western Balkans in the World*, ed. Florian Bieber and Nikolaos Tzifakis (Routledge, 2020), 2.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>25</sup> Reid Standish, "China's Strategic Vaccine Diplomacy Gains A Foothold In The Balkans," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, February 16, 2021, sec. China In Eurasia, <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-strategic-vaccine-diplomacy-gains-a-foothold-in-the-balkans/31106320.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Founded in 2012, the *Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries* initiative brought together China and 16 former communist countries in Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe, including Albania, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Greece also joined in 2019. In 2021, Lithuania withdrew its membership. The next year, Estonia and Latvia followed suit.

cellular network technologies, has left the Western Balkans at risk of a debt trap and corrupted 5G security.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, Russia would often do whatever it takes to undermine the region's Euro-Atlantic integration – be it by (ab)using bilateral quarrels, such as the disputed independence of Kosovo, or heating up the ethnopolitical tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and North Macedonia.<sup>28</sup> The Kremlin would also play the religion card, positioning itself as a self-proclaimed protector of the pan-Slavic Orthodox brotherhood against the decadent West.<sup>29</sup> So did Turkey and the Gulf States, whose politico-religious activities are *inter alia* meant to promote anti-liberal and/or anti-secular views among the region's Muslim community.<sup>30</sup> Rival powers' penetration into regional affairs has of course not been possible without local support. NATO member-states

like Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia are no exceptions.

In fact, after the onset of Moscow's full-scale invasion, the Western Balkans saw an unprecedented rise in disinformation campaigns. In fact, the war has started an entirely new front of disinformation with destructive objectives aimed at undermining the Euro-Atlantic unity and weaponizing the instability of the region through ethnic tensions and hate speech, often weaved in historical references and analogies that supposedly showcase the West's double standards of military engagement in the Yugoslav Wars, primarily the 1998-1999 Kosovo War.<sup>31</sup> State actors such as Russia and local non-state actors alike take an active part in spreading disinformation along these lines.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, public opinion on the legitimacy of

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<sup>27</sup> Marius Ghincea, Clara Volintiru, and Ivan Nikolovski, "Who Summons the Dragon? China's Demand-Driven Influence in Central-Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans" (Global Focus, April 17, 2021), 19–26, <https://www.global-focus.eu/2021/04/who-summons-the-dragon-chinas-demand-driven-influence-in-central-eastern-europe-and-the-western-balkans/>.

<sup>28</sup> Dimitar Bechev, "Russia: Playing a Weak Hand Well," in *The Western Balkans in the World*, ed. Florian Bieber and Nikolaos Tzifakis (Routledge, 2020), 187–204.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>30</sup> Erdi Ahmet Öztürk and Samim Akgönül, "Turkey: Forced Marriage or Marriage of Convenience with the Western Balkans?," in *The Western Balkans in the World*, ed. Florian Bieber and Nikolaos Tzifakis (Routledge, 2020), 225–40; Will Bartlett and Tena Prelec, "UAE: Sultanism Meets Illiberal Democracy," in *The Western Balkans in the World*, ed. Florian Bieber and Nikolaos Tzifakis (Routledge, 2020), 241–59.

<sup>31</sup> Matteo Mastracci, "Hate Speech and Disinformation Fuel Digital Rights Abuses in Balkans," Balkan Insight, March 30, 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/03/30/hate-speech-and-disinformation-fuel-digital-rights-abuses-in-balkans/>; Aleksandar Ivković, "Rooting for Russia, Then Blaming the West: Evolution of Serbian Tabloids' Reporting on the War in Ukraine," European Western Balkans, March 23, 2022, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/03/23/rooting-for-russia-then-blaming-the-west-evolution-of-serbian-tabloids-reporting-on-the-war-in-ukraine/>.

<sup>32</sup> Serbian pro-government tabloids were particularly active, see Ivković, "Rooting for Russia, Then Blaming the West: Evolution of Serbian Tabloids' Reporting on the War in Ukraine," European Western Balkans, March 23, 2022, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/03/23/rooting-for-russia-then-blaming-the-west-evolution-of-serbian-tabloids-reporting-on-the-war-in-ukraine/>.

the Russian aggression remains divided, at least in some countries in the region like North Macedonia and Serbia.<sup>33</sup> When combined with the low media literacy<sup>34</sup> and growing Euroscepticism, especially in the latter countries,<sup>35</sup> these disinformation campaigns' long-term impact on the negative perception of the EU and/or NATO membership in the region seems inevitable.

At the same time, the region faced several serious cyber-attacks in 2022. Albania was particularly hit hard when an alleged hacker consortium organized and led by Iranian intelligence attacked twice, stealing and publishing a vast amount of confidential data, as well as

disrupting the government platform *e-Albania*, which provides crucial and vital services to citizens.<sup>36</sup> Similar though smaller attacks, as well as repeated yet fake bomb threats, were reported elsewhere in the region.<sup>37</sup> Having an underskilled workforce, poor cyber resilience, and incoherent hybrid warfare strategies, the Western Balkans remain extremely exposed to cyber threats by the rival powers.

However, the war in Ukraine 'brought' the West back to the Western Balkans. Getting the region firmly associated or integrated into the EU and NATO structures, as a reliable partner or member (even if through symbolic platforms, such as the European Political Community) or

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<sup>33</sup> Anamarija Velinovska and Ana Sofeska, "Europe in Crisis. The Impact on the Public Opinion in North Macedonia" (Skopje: Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis," March 1, 2023), 19, 21, <https://idscs.org.mk/en/2023/03/01/europe-in-crisis-the-impact-on-the-public-opinion-in-north-macedonia/>; Iva Gajić, "Građani Srbije politički okrenuti Rusiji, ekonomski prema EU," Radio Slobodna Evropa, April 11, 2023, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-gradjani-rusija-eu-politika-ekonomija/32357459.html>.

<sup>34</sup> The Balkan Forum, "Media Literacy - Western Balkans Countries Failing the Media Literacy Test," accessed April 12, 2023, <https://thebalkanforum.org/en/media-literacy-western-balkans-countries-failing-the-media-literacy-test>.

<sup>35</sup> Ivan Damjanovski, "Analysis of Public Opinion On North Macedonia's Accession to the European Union (2014-2022)" (Skopje: Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis," March 1, 2023), 5, 13, <https://idscs.org.mk/en/2023/03/01/analysis-of-public-opinion-on-north-macedonias-accession-to-the-european-union-2014-2022/>; Gajić, "Građani Srbije politički okrenuti Rusiji, ekonomski prema EU".

<sup>36</sup> Elona Elezi and Niloofar Gholami, "Albania Blames Iran for Cyberattacks – DW – 09/16/2022," Deutsche Welle, accessed April 12, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/albania-once-again-the-target-of-cyberattacks-after-cutting-diplomatic-ties-with-iran-and-expelling-diplomats/a-63146285>.

<sup>37</sup> Kristo Kote, "Kosovo, N.Macedonia and Montenegro Targeted by Hackers," Albania Daily News, September 10, 2022, <https://albaniadailynews.com/news/kosovo-n-macedonia-and-montenegro-targeted-by-hackers>; Samir Kajosevic, "Montenegro Govt Remains Offline Amid Continued Cyber Safety Fears," Balkan Insight, September 16, 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/09/16/montenegro-govt-remains-offline-amid-continued-cyber-safety-fears/>; Samir Kajosevic et al., "Hoax Bomb Threats Leave Balkan Region Frustrated, Unnerved," Balkan Insight, December 30, 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/12/30/hoax-bomb-threats-leave-balkan-region-frustrated-unnerved/>.

leaving it vulnerable amid an ongoing global war of values became the most pressing choice to be made. In this respect, two briefings prepared for the European Parliament, in 2022, show special concern of the EU regarding the growing influence of third countries in the region: *Russia's influence in the Western Balkans*<sup>38</sup> and *China's strategic interests in the Western Balkans*.<sup>39</sup> The bloc's unease has also been voiced in

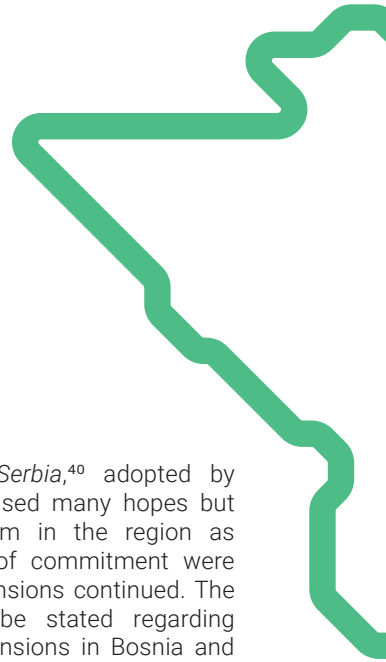
the EC communication on the EU Enlargement Policy in the last few years, and so were in adjacent EP resolutions and European Council's conclusions. As discussed in chapter one, there is a renewed impetus for intensified integration of the region into the Euro-Atlantic structure, but this requires a consistent and unanimous, but also proactive enlargement policy, beyond raising concerns.

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<sup>38</sup> Stanicek Branislav, "Russia's Influence in the Western Balkans" (European Parliamentary Research Service, June 2022), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/733523/EPRS\\_ATA\(2022\)733523\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/733523/EPRS_ATA(2022)733523_EN.pdf).

<sup>39</sup> Branislav Stanicek and Simona Tarpova, "China's Strategic Interests in the Western Balkans" (European Parliamentary Research Service, June 2022).

# Regional Cooperation: An Opportunity and/or a Challenge for Resilience



Notwithstanding the opportunities for increased resilience provided by the Euro-Atlantic integration as discussed in chapter one, the regional scene remains complex and unstable. For instance, the poor if not tense ethnopolitical relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Kosovo-Serbia recognition dispute are just some of the reasons that hinder the region's Euro-Atlantic prospects but also affect citizens' confidence in a peaceful and prosperous future. Such a state of affairs has led to the weaponization of nationalism for short-term gains of the political class, at the expense of wider regional rapprochement and thus greater resilience.

*The 2023 EU Proposal - Agreement on the path to normalisation between*

*Kosovo and Serbia,*<sup>40</sup> adopted by both sides, raised many hopes but also skepticism in the region as visible signs of commitment were absent and tensions continued. The same could be stated regarding institutional tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina where threats of state disintegration have become key elements of the political folklore.

Furthermore, such an environment has encouraged brain drain among youth – making the region a 'world leader' "with estimations to lose a quarter to half of its skilled and educated young citizens in the forthcoming decades."<sup>41</sup> This puts the democratic and economic progress of the Western Balkans at risk, and thus the region's EU membership prospects.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> European External Action Service, "Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue: EU Proposal - Agreement on the Path to Normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia," February 27, 2023, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-eu-proposal-agreement-path-normalisation-between-kosovo-and-serbia\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-eu-proposal-agreement-path-normalisation-between-kosovo-and-serbia_en).

<sup>41</sup> Marjan Icoski, "Toward a New Youth Brain-Drain Paradigm in the Western Balkans," GMF, August 31, 2022, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/toward-new-youth-brain-drain-paradigm-western-balkans>.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*

Yet, paradoxically, regional cooperation has also provided a window of hope. Namely, 76% of Western Balkans' citizens support regional cooperation, even more than EU integration, with a significantly lower yet still high approval of 60%.<sup>43</sup> The reinforced Berlin Process – recognized as a driver of regional resilience in an absence of full-fledged EU membership,<sup>44</sup> has been the key leverage in articulating and mainstreaming regional policies, with the assistance of a number of regional organisations for the last eight years.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, the Process' Connectivity, Digital, and Green Agendas also became a part of the EU's neighborhood policy portfolio. The Innovation Agenda has also been generated mostly under the Berlin Process umbrella being finalized under EU auspices. Furthermore, the 2022 Berlin Western Balkans Summit,<sup>46</sup> in the context of the Berlin Process, saw the signing of three important agreements,<sup>47</sup> aimed at removing the remaining barriers to the free movement of people in the region.<sup>48</sup> A substantial energy support

package of EU grants amounting to €1 billion was also launched to help the region address the immediate consequences of the energy crisis and build resilience in the short and medium term.

One must also not forget older initiatives, such as the Common Regional Market (CRM) agreed upon at the 2020 Berlin Process Summit in Sofia. CRM aims to turn the region into an area of free movement of people, goods, services, and capital, following the EU's example. It is expected to unlock the region's economic potential and make it a more attractive investment destination, closely tied to the bloc.

Apart from these top-down initiatives, locally-owned ones also took a grip. For instance, the Open Balkans initiative gathering Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia was launched in 2019, in Novi Sad, under the name Mini Schengen. Similarly to CRM, the Open Balkans pushed for a greater regional integration against the

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<sup>43</sup> Regional Cooperation Council, "Balkan Barometer 2022," accessed April 21, 2023, <https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/home>.

<sup>44</sup> Flessenkemper, "The Berlin Process: Resilience in the EU Waiting Room."

<sup>45</sup> The most important are Regional Cooperation Council, CEFTA, Transport Community, Energy Community.

<sup>46</sup> Western Balkans Summit Berlin 2022, "Chair's Conclusions," accessed April 21, 2023, <https://t4.oecd.org/south-east-europe/programme/berlin-summit-chairs-conclusions-02nov22.pdf>.

<sup>47</sup> The Agreement on Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications in the Western Balkans, the Agreement on Recognition of Professional Qualifications for Doctors of Medicine, Dentists, and Architects, and the Agreement on Freedom of Movement with ID Cards in the Western Balkans as key milestones of the Common Regional Market.

<sup>48</sup> While ratified in Albania and Kosovo, these agreements are still pending ratification in the other countries of the region.



backdrop of the ‘four freedoms’, as stipulated in its founding declaration.<sup>49</sup> Receiving swift support from the US administration (both Trump’s and Biden’s), the Open Balkans was nevertheless met with mixed messages from the EU and its member states. Moreover, a competitive attitude was established between those who support the Open Balkans and those who created the Common

Regional Market. Lastly, despite the dozen of Open Balkans agreements and memoranda being signed, many remain unratified, for instance in Serbia, and their implementation remains yet to be seen.<sup>50</sup> Be it as it may, one can only speak about full-fledged regional cooperation once all recognition disputes are resolved and state disintegration threats are removed from political discourse and fade into oblivion.

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<sup>49</sup> Novi Sad Declaration, October 11, 2019, [https://en-api.pks.rs/storage/assets/Novi\\_Sad\\_Declaration.pdf](https://en-api.pks.rs/storage/assets/Novi_Sad_Declaration.pdf).

<sup>50</sup> Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia, “A Path Leading to Four Freedoms,” accessed April 21, 2023, <https://en.pks.rs/open-balkan>.

# Conclusion and recommendations

Given the complex and fragmented regional scene in the Western Balkans mired in conflicts, bilateral disputes, fraileed state-building, security, economic, environmental, and social degradation, malign influences and hybrid attacks, simultaneously taking place against the background of Russia's war in Ukraine and the politics of the post-pandemics, in this paper we asked *what opportunities and challenges are there for regional resilience*.

Focusing on the most pressing issues, namely *the EU and NATO enlargement, rival powers' influence, and regional cooperation*, we came to conclude that all these matters represent both drivers of fragility and resilience. We assert this conclusion based on the analysis of the recent developments in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia, closely compared with those elsewhere in the region. As the latter pressing issues can foster and undermine resilience, we found it necessary to put forward recommendations that would help

EU and local actors navigate resilience in the right direction. Thus, we recommend that the EU and local actors:

- Speak in one voice regarding the region's European and Euro-Atlantic future by avoiding mixed messages, declarative commitments without political substance, and taking the geopolitical context for granted;
- Invest more in strengthening democratic institutions by monitoring both the adoption and implementation of the EU acquis, in close cooperation with the media, civil society, and youth organizations;
- Stand in an unequivocal defense of democratic norms and standards by creating 'early warning' mechanisms that would identify and respond resolutely to the recurring autocratization turns in the region;
- Improve their strategic communication in terms of promoting 'European' values that would counterbalance the rival strategies put forward by the

other regional players. In doing so, it is especially important that the EU and other Western actors but also local elites make sure that the way they are communicating the benefits of the European and Euro-Atlantic integration is context-sensitive, that is, it resonates with the wider population. In other words, carefully designed strategic *communications* should be developed to respond adequately to the diverse issues of poor resilience – be it economic development and dependence, secular and multicultural liberal democracy, democratic and responsible media environments, and effective mechanisms to combat high-level political corruption.

- Support fact-checking projects and initiatives, focusing on both the traditional (public broadcasters and private media with public concession) and new media (especially news portals). Specific focus should

be put on emerging AI-generated disinformation. Responsible information-making and sharing are crucial for resilient democracy.

- Adopt sound and coherent cyber security and hybrid warfare strategies, followed by increasing the capacities of the relevant institutions in line with the EU and NATO's best and up-to-date practices
- Support Western Balkans' resilience not only financially but also, if not primarily, through knowledge-sharing by strengthening media literacy, building systems that withstand cyberattacks, are routinely updated, and maintained, as well as through raising awareness among the wider society about the dangers these threats pose.
- Support the growth of regional structures and networks yet prevent their overlapping by preferring quality and synergy over quantity and fragmentation

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# Information about the International Visegrad Fund

The Visegrad Fund is an international donor organization, established in 2000 by the governments of the Visegrad Group countries—Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia to promote regional cooperation in the Visegrad region (V4) as well as between the V4 region and other countries, especially in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership regions. The Fund does so by awarding €8 million through grants, scholarships and artist residencies provided annually by equal

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# Information about THINK BALKANS

The 'Enhancing Think Balkans – knowledgehub for Western Balkans EU integration and regional cooperation' project is financially supported by the International Visegrad Fund and builds upon the previously established cooperation between the members of the Southeast European Think Net Network (SEE Think Net) and Think Visegrad as part of the 'Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans: The Berlin Process and Visegrad Group in comparison project' and the project "Cooperation Instrument for the Western Balkans Think Tanks – THINK BALKANS" supported by the International Visegrad Fund.

Following the successful past cooperation, the **Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" – Skopje (IDSCS)** will remain project coordinator, which, in collaboration with the **European Movement in Serbia (EMINS)**, **Balkan Research Institute** from Kosovo\*, **Politikon Network** from Montenegro, **Albanian Institute for International Studies (AIIS)** from Albania, **Humanity in Action** from Bosnia and Herzegovina, **Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW)** from Poland, **Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade (IFAT)** from Hungary, the **Research Centre of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (RC SFPA)** from Slovakia, and

**EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy (EUROPEUM)** from the Czech Republic, will work in achieving the project's goals.

The project duration is 12 months, that is, from October 2022 to October 2023.

Based on the lessons learned, this project proposal aims to promote active participation in policy-making and foster democratic debate based on relevant data and information by further: 1) promoting cooperation among think tanks, CSOs and experts in the WB as a successful regional model; 2) strengthening the cooperation with the WB MFAs through the establish network of contact point and include their opinions and ideas in specifying the details of the topics chosen to be analyzed through this project; 3) providing V4 expertise on security, resilience and EU enlargement in general in light of the Russian invasion on Ukraine and the expressed interest of the Associate trio countries to join the EU; 4) using the potential with the establishment of Think Balkans to strengthening people-to-people links between the WB and V4; 5) cultivating interregional cooperation between V4 and WB6 on issues of common strategic interest.

## About the authors:

**Ivan Nikolovski** is a Ph.D. candidate and researcher at Central European University's Doctoral School of Political Science, Public Policy, and International Relations in Vienna. He has an academic upbringing in Political Science and a professional background in EU and Western Balkan affairs, with a special focus on the EU's enlargement and conditionality policy, as well as the regional cooperation and rival powers' competition in the Western Balkans. Throughout his academic and professional career, he authored or co-authored more than 20 academic and non-academic publications in the above-mentioned fields.

**Jelica Minić** is the President of the European Movement in Serbia. She has more than 30 years experience in a research and policymaking for European integration and regional

cooperation, having held top level positions in state administration, at NGOs and in academia. Dr Minić has published over 150 articles, essays and book chapters, around 50 conference papers, and is editor of several books and reviews.

**Alba Cela** is an Executive Director and Head of the European Program at the Albanian Institute for International Studies. She holds a B.A in Political Science/ International relations from the American University in Bulgaria as well as an M.A in Nationalism Studies from the Central European University. She has been a recipient of the prestigious John Gunn scholarship at the University of Washington and Lee in Virginia. Alba's main areas of research are: democratization, political parties, national identity and European integration.

# Link

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