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Western Balkans 2023: Assessment of Internal Challenges and External Threats

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The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not an official policy or position of the New Lines Institute.

COVER: A man holds Russian and Serbian flags during a protest against a plan that U.S. and E.U. officials presented as a way out of decades-long strife between Serbia and Kosovo. The demonstration was in front of the government building in Belgrade in March 2023. (Andrej Isakovic / AFP via Getty Images)

Our mission is to provoke principled and transformative leadership based on peace and security, global communities, character, stewardship, and development.

Our purpose is to shape U.S. foreign policy based on a deep understanding of regional geopolitics and the value systems of those regions.



Foreword

It has been 28 years since the Dayton Accords were signed, and the Western Balkans are inching closer than ever to a return to the political violence, ethnic cleansing, and mass migration that plagued the region following the dissolution of the Yugoslav Federation. Policymakers in Brussels and Washington, who once played a pivotal role in brokering and implementing peace deals in the Balkans, have had their attention diverted to new and looming crises, from Ukraine to Taiwan.

Clashes in Kosovo this summer left [dozens of NATO troops injured](#), while Serbia was rocked by the [largest mass protest movement](#) since the toppling of Slobodan Milošević in 2000. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serb leader Milorad Dodik has been actively [threatening secession](#) and [criticizing](#) the existing political structure as a “failed experiment.” Net migration out of the Western Balkans into the EU, which has already wreaked havoc on Balkans’ fragile economic situation for decades, is also poised to accelerate dramatically. The institutions that prevented a return to the bloody conflicts of the 1990s are failing, and it is time for a new initiative to identify solutions that will prevent new waves of mass migration, failing states on the EU’s doorstep, and power vacuums to be exploited by foreign adversaries.

For that reason, I am pleased to announce the launch of the New Lines Institute’s Western Balkans Observatory. The Observatory will draw on our expert roster of journalists, academics, and former policymakers to identify emerging crises in the Balkans and offer solutions for policymakers in Europe and the United States. Our first report features an all-star roster of analysts covering the Western Balkans from a variety of critical and understudied angles. We examine the troubling rise of the region’s far-right political parties, the simmering crisis between Kosovo and Serbia, and the influence of foreign actors seeking to exploit and magnify the region’s instability. We hope this report will spark a much-needed conversation about how to turn the post-Dayton political situation into an enduring peace while there is still time to avert worse crises. You can look forward to regular publications from the New Lines Institute’s Western Balkans Observatory, and we hope to be a valuable resource to policymakers, analysts, and anyone looking for nuanced, on-the-ground insights about new and emerging political challenges in the region.



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U.S. president Joe Biden appears on screen in Pristina, Kosovo, on Aug. 1, 2021, to accept an award from the president of Kosovo on behalf of his late son Beau Biden for his work to strengthen the country's justice system. (Armend Nimani / AFP via Getty Images)

U.S. Policy on the Balkans Under Biden: Accommodating Nationalist Hegemons for Managerial Simplicity

Kurt W. Bassuener

The Western Balkans – that is, the countries of the former Yugoslavia that remain outside the European Union, plus Albania – are as unsettled now as they were 22 years ago, when U.S. and EU joint efforts brought the final war in a decade of wars to a close in what is now North Macedonia. In some fundamentals, the region is considerably less stable and secure than it was then, given the tectonic shifts that have occurred since. People of the region demonstrate their lack of faith in their governments and a future in the countries of their

birth by [emigrating at an ever-accelerating pace](#). This is readily evident in the hinterlands of these countries and is palpable in their capitals and major cities.

More visible was the recent violence in northern Kosovo over the seating of elected mayors, in which [NATO troops were injured in violence](#) that appeared organized and coordinated, leading to suspicion of Belgrade's role. The U.S. and EU response, however, laid the blame squarely on Pristina rather than Belgrade. Meanwhile, in Belgrade, [two months](#)



[of popular demonstrations](#) were precipitated by outrage at a government that was too paranoid and self-absorbed to recognize a need for both a human and policy response to [a pair of mass shootings the likes of which Serbia had never before seen](#). As is often the case, demonstrators raised their sights from merely seeking a decent response from the government to calling for the end of President Aleksandar Vučić's regime altogether. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Bosnian Serb separatist leadership under the entity president, Milorad Dodik, has further escalated its [challenge to the state's very existence](#) soon after the U.S. had pressed for changes to electoral rules and structures to benefit the nationalist party backed fully by EU and NATO member Croatia.

Regionwide, those with unfulfilled nationalist agendas, be they separatist or hegemonic, have greater momentum and self-confidence than they have had since those same agendas were pursued with armed violence. Even worse, not only are some cloaking these irredentist actions in the language of democracy, but [those people in the region who want to live in societies based on the West's proclaimed liberal values see that their capitals and leadership are on the side of illiberals and autocrats](#).

The current dynamics playing out in the above-mentioned countries and in the rest of the Western Balkans (also including Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia) all have numerous drivers. But among them – often critically – has been the disposition of Washington. This demonstrates a depth of moral resignation and often outright cynicism that are utterly incongruent with the themes of restoring American leadership and upholding democratic values (seen as failing most glaringly in the two Summits for Democracy, capped off by the courting of India's illiberal prime minister, Narendra Modi) – oddly, in keeping with the transactionalism of the Trump administration, though now with the more values-forward marketing of the Biden administration. Paradoxically, this has become particularly evident since the start of Russia's full-scale attempt to subjugate Ukraine, which has precipitated the greatest transatlantic unity in the post-Cold War era, replete with Europe's recognition of the need for U.S. security guarantees and declarative commitments to democracy and human dignity. How did we get here?

Aborted Transfer and Malign Neglect

Throughout the more than 30 years since the first of five post-Yugoslav wars began in 1991, the United States' default setting has amounted to, "Europe should be able to handle this." Deviation from this posture began with America first brokering the Washington Agreement in 1994 to create a marriage of convenience between the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and BiH Croat military forces against the Serb forces, which led to it brokering the Dayton Accords, which ended the war in Bosnia in late 1995. American values-based engagement reached its apogee in the Clinton administration's second term, with and in the aftermath of NATO's 78-day bombing campaign of Serbia over its crackdown in Kosovo.

Altogether, the wars of the 1990s in the former Yugoslav space left approximately 130,000 dead. Together with the wars, genocides, and mass human rights crimes in the same decade in Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Timor-Leste, the policy failure experience in the Balkans constituted a steep learning curve. One result was the "responsibility to protect" (R2P) concept – that people whose governments could or would not protect them from gross violations of human rights nonetheless needed to be protected. Unfortunately, this was soon followed by 9/11 and the "global war on terror," which subordinated values but also cast a pall over U.S.-led military intervention more broadly.

The incoming George W. Bush administration took its time to directly engage in confronting the challenge of an insurgency in Macedonia. The U.S. and EU jointly brokered an end to that conflict – the Ohrid Framework Agreement – before it metastasized further. The U.S. strongly backed international High Representative Paddy Ashdown in his state-building efforts and his efforts to forge an accommodation that would obtain Serbia's acceptance of Kosovo's independence, as well as ultimately backing its declaration of independence in 2008 when those efforts, embodied in the Ahtisaari Plan, were rejected by Belgrade.

But the reflex remained strong to leave the political lead to the European Union, whose Common Foreign and Security Policy was heavily influenced by the Union's disunity and resulting ineffectuality in the 1990s. The door to EU and NATO membership opened



German Chancellor Olaf Scholz addresses journalists during a press conference following the EU Western Balkans Summit in Tirana on Dec. 6, 2022. European Union and Balkan leaders met in Tirana to discuss closer ties as Russia's invasion of Ukraine has reinvigorated the bloc's push for expansion. The summit included Albania, Bosnia, Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia. (Ludovic Marin / AFP via Getty Images)

in 1999, in the immediate aftermath of the Kosovo war. The successful EU 2004 enlargement (which coincided with NATO's enlargement) led to a widespread confidence that the "pull of Brussels" would impel the region to progress toward democratic norms and standards. The EU's self-confidence in its "[normative power](#)" was at a zenith. The prevailing mood regionally circa 2005 was optimism. This also coincided temporarily with transatlantic (and intra-EU) frictions over the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the growing draw on military resources in both Iraq and Afghanistan. The American will to cede leadership in the region to the EU dovetailed with the latter's desire to demonstrate

its capability to act. The result was the U.S. shifting regionwide to a supporting role to the EU's lead.

The cracks in the presumptions made at the time quickly made themselves felt regionwide. In Bosnia, the process of state strengthening came to an abrupt halt. The current Republika Srpska entity president, Milorad Dodik, soon after attaining office as prime minister in early 2006, [began to speak of holding a referendum](#) – letting the listener fill in the blank of the implication that it would be on independence. As a result, plans to close the Office of the High Representative were shifted from a target date to



[a set of criteria and conditions \(the “5+2”\)](#) in 2008. But the undergirding idea for the policy that was locked in at the height of optimism – that the EU enlargement process, which relies on self-propulsion by aspirant members, would incentivize organic and society-wide progress – remained unchanged. This was based on the presumption that leaders were representative and accountable – and genuinely wanted to join, true in the case of 2004 calls for Central and Eastern European countries that subsequently became headaches for EU members, like Hungary and Poland. To this day, the EU has yet to honestly assess the results, let alone adjust its approach. For most of the past two decades, U.S. policymakers and implementers have been fellow travelers on this path, sometimes gritting their teeth. This constitutes a bipartisan policy failure, spanning the Bush and Obama administrations.

Five years ago, the Trump administration [expressed openness to a policy hatched by Vučić and then-Kosovo Prime Minister Hashim Thaçi](#) to partition Kosovo along the Ibar River – variously termed “border correction,” “land swap,” or “moving the administrative line,” depending on one’s perspective. Then-EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini adopted the idea, generating vocal objection from German Chancellor Angela Merkel and deep misgivings on the part of many other less vocal member states. Partly in pursuit of a foreign policy accomplishment, without a doubt sweetened by the idea of confounding Merkel (against whom Trump’s instincts as a transatlanticist spoiler and misogynist melded), Trump’s then-ambassador to Germany, Richard Grenell, [embraced pursuit of a deal between Serbia and Kosovo](#).

The Trump administration, following the EU’s External Action Service, broke with a decade and a half of the boilerplate, standard Western practice of not countenancing questioning of the existing borders of the former Yugoslav republics. In the end, the result, two years down the line, was economic arrangements without the central element: partition. The rest of the region, to the relief of many, remained largely off the radar of Trump himself. Montenegro and North Macedonia joined the alliance in 2017 and 2020, respectively. However, the malleability of Western policy had been made clear, and the unsated appetites of regional elites returned to the fore.

Early Hopes for a Reset

President Joe Biden’s avowed reason for running for president was the damage that the Trump presidency was evidently doing to the country’s social fabric and the democratic institutions of government, as well as U.S. global relationships. This engendered hope in many policy critics, including this author, that a Biden administration would offer opportunity for a reset, beginning with a full-spectrum policy review undertaken in coordination with transatlantic partners. A policy recalibration in the Western Balkans in line with the incoming administration’s focus on reconstructing alliances, defending and reviving democracy, and fighting corruption seemed eminently possible. The coincidence of the 25th anniversary of the Dayton Accords in November 2020 [provided the opportunity](#) to attempt to inform such a policy.

Initial indications gave cause for hope. After being confirmed, [Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s opening speech](#) laid out the administration’s priorities. He invited citizens to “check our work – to see the links between what we’re doing around the world and the goals and values” according to the framework he presented.

The critique that follows constitutes precisely such a midterm report card on the Biden-Blinken foreign policy in a region where the U.S., the EU, and the wider democratic West have had a predominant influence and extraordinary levers of influence for almost a quarter century. It is not an edifying picture of defending values and interests. Worse yet, Blinken himself, in addition to a host of senior officials serving under him, have the professional pedigrees and experience to know better.

Foreswearing Progress for Pacification

A number of elements in the Biden-Blinken policy became evident early on, not all of them directly related to the region, which did not augur well for the cause of democratic progress in the Western Balkans. The overarching focal point for Biden’s baseline foreign policy seemed to be addressing the challenge posed by China, with other regions, threats, and opportunities – even those closely related to China – relegated to



the sidelines. The chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 reflected this mindset, [as did the June 2021 Geneva Summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin](#). Biden’s “America is back” slogan was undercut by the perception of many allies – [perhaps the United Kingdom most of all](#) – that they were not treated as allies and partners in the decision-making process precipitating the withdrawal. While none of these directly pertained to the Western Balkans, all these factors affected the regional dynamic – particularly the chaos and callousness of the scramble to leave before the 20th anniversary of the U.S. invasion.

The Biden-Blinken State Department’s policy toward Bosnia provided the first obvious evidence that the regional policy not only did not reflect a fundamental rethinking but demonstrated continuity with the Trump administration’s unabashedly transactional and amoral approach. At first jointly with the EU, [the U.S. pressed for a political deal to change the election law to accommodate demands by the local branch of the nationalist Croatian Democratic Union \(HDZ\) that governs in Croatia, which had boycotted the process of government formation in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina – the larger of the country’s two entities. The beta version of this arrangement was a deal concluded between the HDZ of Bosnia and Herzegovina \(HDZ BiH\) and the Bosniak nationalist Party for Democratic Action \(SDA\) in June 2020 on power allocation in Mostar](#), before the Biden administration took office.

When EU-U.S. talks with Bosnia’s political parties failed to achieve an agreement, the U.S. pushed international High Representative Christian Schmidt to amend the election law and the Federation’s constitution as soon as the polls closed for general elections on Oct. 2, 2022, to achieve the desired effect: to fulfill HDZ BiH demands that the rules magnify relative Croat (and, therefore, its own) power in the Houses of Peoples in the cantonal assemblies – and therefore transferring this amplified power to the Federation government and state-level governments. However, the applied changes boomeranged – actually giving the SDA the numbers to impede government formation in the manner that the HDZ had done during the previous term. In April, the High Representative imposed yet more changes to allow the Federation government, composed of the HDZ and the Trioka of the Social Democratic Party,

People and Justice (an SDA splinter party), and Our Party – which had governed Sarajevo Canton – to form. This constellation, with the addition of Dodik’s Independent Union of Social Democrats, formed the state-level coalition government.

The rationale offered by U.S. officials was to “make the Federation work,” thereby enabling both progress toward EU membership and an expected showdown with Dodik. This mindset was first on display [well over a decade ago](#) in the phrase “one state, two vibrant entities, three constituent peoples”; it remained a default setting for the State Department, which had sought “Federation reform” for years, failing to see the fundamental flaw in Dayton being the asymmetric structure of the country.

Yet the intervening decade saw a dissipation of a wider belief in progress – not just in the Western Balkans but also globally, at least in part due to the shattering of democratic self-confidence in many countries in the West (in the U.S. most theatrically). While two Summits for Democracy, in late 2021 and early 2023, were initiated by the Biden administration, one could not help but deduce that a central driver in what remained in its second iteration an unrealized policy frame was not assisting those undertaking democratic struggles globally, but rather the alignment of existing democracies – including those on a downward slide, like India – to confront both internal and external direct challenges – particularly from China, but also Russia. There is a logic to the latter focus, but it reflects a very different set of priorities – and criteria for identifying partners – from the former.

A mentality shift seems to have occurred in the past decade that the best that can be done is to manage crises and challenges, rather than undertake the harder task of attempting to resolve them. This defeatism seems reflected in the direction policy has taken under the Biden-Blinken State Department toward the Western Balkans. While the biographies of those engaged on the region, both in Washington and regional capitals, reflects a strong experience base, the sense of the possible once reflected in their prior engagement has clearly evaporated. The prevailing actuarial, conservative mindset appears to be based on the conclusion that the region is inherently and irredeemably tribal. Therefore, the best that can be



done is to manage within that framework. There is no reckoning with – let alone evident comprehensive strategy to address – the political economy that continues to prop up and feed these dynamics.

The attendant corollary to this approach is that those who persistently pursue nationalist and hegemonic agendas in and toward the region must be accommodated in some fashion so as to deconflict relations – and reduce U.S. policy bandwidth expenditures. Who are the prime beneficiaries of this policy? They are the countries with greater power, which had hegemonic agendas in the 1990s wars. First and foremost is Vučić’s Serbia, with its [Srpski Svet \(Serbian World\)](#) de facto regional policy, an analog of [Russskiy Mir \(Russian World\)](#), which sees neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and of course Kosovo (which remains unrecognized by Belgrade) as areas of legitimate Serbian policy and ultimately dominance on account of ethnic Serb populations. But EU and NATO member Croatia also has hegemonic

designs on BiH – and has used its decade belonging to these clubs to pursue with increasing focus and energy its predatory ethnic agenda supporting HDZ BiH’s efforts to further “confederalize” the country.

Washington seems to increasingly treat BiH as a Croatian-Serbian condominium. This angers both those BiH citizens who do not form-fit themselves into the “constituent peoples” boxes as well as those who identify as Bosniaks – generating considerable common frustration. In addition, though in a more minor key, the increased deference toward Belgrade and Zagreb (including Vučić’s tendency to speak in terms of relations among peoples, not states, again reflecting the ideology of *Srpski Svet*), has whet the appetite of Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama to play the role of regional ethnic leader – a tendency that does not, however, seem to reflect a groundswell of irridentist ambition among his citizens. As a result, Albania is being affected by elite bad practice.



Police officers march in Sarajevo during a Jan. 9, 2023, ceremony marking the 31st anniversary of the foundation of *Republika Srpska*, the Bosnian Serb-dominated entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The creation of the entity, along with a referendum in favor of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s independence from Yugoslavia – supported by Bosnian Muslims and Croats – triggered Bosnia’s 1992-95 ethnic war that killed about 100,000 people. (Elvis Barukcic / AFP via Getty Images)



Cauterizing for Transfer: Showing the Europeans That Enlargement Is Not So Scary

U.S. officials questioned about the strategy of policy regularly deliver variations of a mantra of aspirations and destinations, not a strategy per se, as well as an argument that the policy is effectively unchanged from what had become a bipartisan standard since the close of the Kosovo war in 1999. These include the EU's integration of the region, NATO membership for those countries that want it (e.g., all but Serbia at the state level, but effectively BiH as well due to the Republika Srpska's ability to block), and ill-defined "regional reconciliation," as well as the rule of law – particularly the Biden administration's headline goal of the fight against corruption and promoting the investment climate. None of these in themselves is objectionable.

Yet the way, in particular, that "reconciliation" is being pursued demonstrates that something indeed has shifted since the mid-2000s. [Open Balkan, an initiative championed by Vučić and Rama, and presently including their countries plus North Macedonia](#), has been a contentious domestic political topic in both Montenegro and BiH – precisely because of Serbia's centrality in the plan. Kosovo, unrecognized by Serbia, is ostensibly invited. But absent the reciprocity in relations demanded by Kosovo's government, its entry seems highly unlikely. Open Balkan is also championed by the U.S. State Department (though not universally in its ranks or in the National Security Council) as potentially providing further economic connections and reduced trade frictions. But given Serbia's regional posture, it is perceived in [Podgorica, Pristina, and Sarajevo as the smiling economic face of the Srpski Svet agenda](#), itself a rebranding of the [1990s Greater Serbia vision](#). It is also often Exhibit A in what seems a Belgrade-centric regional policy. It also is seen in many European capitals – [including in the region](#) – as [contravening the already-existing Berlin Process](#). Further, by delinking democratic values from economic reforms, it is a purely economic proposition, which would give more financial ballast to unreformed governments. In July 2023, however, [Rama seems to have retreated from Open Balkan](#), emphasizing the Berlin Process instead. This also seems to have generated a gap between him and Vučić. So the future of Open Balkan remains to be seen.

More vividly, the frame of reconciliation envisaged by American officials seems to be embodied in what is called [the Ohrid Agreement](#) on normalization between Serbia and Kosovo, which was facilitated by the EU and individually agreed to by Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti and Vučić (with the EU, not each other) in March 2023. The arrangement has been fraught from its outset, focused on establishing the previously agreed-upon (in 2013) – but never defined – Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities. This remains nebulous in its geometry, though [numerous proposals](#) have been [put forward](#); Kosovo insists on an association without executive character; Serbia wants precisely the opposite. [Clashes erupted in northern Kosovo](#) in late May, when Kosovo special police escorted legally elected mayors to their posts in Serb-majority municipalities that had boycotted elections (after [Serb personnel resigned](#) from Kosovo government service jobs last year). Numerous NATO Kosovo Force troops sent to intervene were injured by organized Serbs, mixed with local protesters, who attacked them with a variety of weapons, including explosive devices. In response, the U.S. and EU have effectively sanctioned Kosovo for "initiating" the series of events.

In testimony on Capitol Hill earlier in May, State Department Counselor Derek Chollet and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Gabriel Escobar repeatedly avoided criticism of Vučić's government, despite Chollet's averring that a brutally [graphic New York Times Magazine article](#) was accurate in the portrayal of the regime's links to ultranationalist networks and organized crime. There has been no frontal public criticism of Srpski Svet by U.S. officials; as recently as June, U.S. Ambassador Christopher Hill referred to Vučić as a partner but questioned whether Kurti was. This was soon thereafter [clarified by Escobar](#). No American officials have addressed the [ongoing demonstrations in Serbia](#) against the Vučić government and the prevalent "culture of violence" precipitated by the official lack of response to two recent American-style mass shootings in early May.

It is hard to escape the conclusion that Belgrade is so pivotal in the calculus of Washington that it is unwilling to take risks – even regarding central themes of the Biden foreign policy, such as [corruption](#) and [democracy](#). While some proffer that Serbian arms for



Ukraine (purchased by the U.S.) provide the rationale, the policy orientation predates Feb. 24, 2022. Bizarrely, given Vučić's business model of geopolitical arbitrage, his government's position vis-à-vis the West seems stronger than it was in early 2022 – despite there not having been a fundamental change in Serbian policy toward Moscow or the region. The idea, as one Capitol Hill staff member put it to this author in December 2022, of “moving Serbia” geopolitically seems to remain the grand prize in Washington's regional policy, despite the lack of evidence that this has ever worked. Russia's attack on Ukraine was an accelerant to an already-decided policy trajectory.

That policy seems to be a determination to address unfinished business in the Western Balkans by settling them, at least on an interim basis, in favor of the stronger parties by leaning on the weaker parties – a dynamic particularly evident now in Kosovo but also visible in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, which is being pressed to make constitutional amendments after Bulgaria impeded the launch of EU membership talks. Many in Montenegro also see the U.S. (and EU) accommodation of pro-Belgrade political forces, and fear the “Bosnianization” of their country. The aim of this [pacification](#) policy would seem to be facilitating and accelerating the EU's enlargement process so the U.S. can finally direct its energies elsewhere. Or, as one U.S. official put it to this author two years ago, it is “to show Europe that enlargement's not so scary.” Such a policy focus appears utterly incongruent with the actual likelihood of the countries of the region joining the Union without considerable demonstrated progress in adopting EU standards, including actual democratic practice.

The Impact on the Ground, and the Message It Sends Globally

The logic that Europe should be able to handle the challenges posed to securing durable peace, the rule of law, democratic standards, and human dignity in a region whose collective population, officially, is roughly that of the Netherlands, seems reasonable on its face. And yet there are 20 years of accumulated evidence that this is not the case – and with [a vector pointing backward for much of the region](#). The EU's enlargement theology, entrenched with the 2004 “big

bang” induction of members, includes the premise that its own soft power should drive progress toward its norms and membership – and, correspondingly, that postwar enforcement tools (e.g., the Office of the High Representative and the NATO-underwritten EU deterrent force, EUFOR, in Bosnia) are not only superfluous but actually harmful. When combined with a U.S. posture, determined in the Pentagon (and not countered from the commanding heights of the Biden administration), that the EU undertook a deterrent mission so it should take the lead in its reinforcement, this has led to a paralysis that serves the retrograde unfulfilled agendas in the region.

[The people of the region have taken onboard the message](#) of who constitutes the West's real partners: the leaders of these countries, regardless of their transgressions against democratic norms. Citizens are either along for the ride or can choose to exit. There was never a great deal of faith in the EU as a policy actor as such, but rather as a deep-pockets donor and a desirable address. In contrast to the EU, which believes it has credibility because of what it is, residual American credibility has hitherto been considerable, because of what it has previously done – in the 1990s and the first half of the subsequent decade. Its muscle and willingness to employ it undergirded postwar progress.

American moral and political credibility is presently being eviscerated in a region where the U.S. had the most sway and the deepest reservoir of practical and moral leverage, including vis-à-vis the EU. What's more, the U.S. is fast catching up to the EU in the public perception of its haplessness, as well as becoming unmoored from its declared values – and with the velocity of the effort and its deviation from prior expectations, it may be outdoing the EU in the real-time, popular perception of its cravenness and hypocrisy. It is hard to see how the current U.S. posture in the Western Balkans disadvantages Russia (or China, for that matter), let alone bolsters a foreign policy officially predicated on furtherance of democracy and fighting corruption, inter alia.

An Urgent Reset Is Required

At the time of this writing (mid-July 2023), there remains time to review and recalibrate a policy that



is failing to achieve the U.S.'s headline goals, let alone ensuring that renewed conflict at worst – and further regression and depopulation at best – will be prevented. The Western Balkans host a number of worrying dynamics, but also retain the potential to move forward – in each country – under conducive conditions. The U.S. and wider West cannot control all the internal and regional dynamics, but they can radically change the current incentive structure and sense of the possible for both leaders and citizens. This was understood to be the case 20 years ago – a time of relative optimism and progress in the region.

Despite the serious tension and recent violence in Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina is the central conflict reactor in the Western Balkans. If citizens of the country felt secure and free from threats of return of violence, state dismemberment, or subjugation (by external or internal actors), then domestic and regional progress would once again be possible. The lack of will to credibly deter application of coercive force or defend the progress made in the state-building

period, primarily due to an EU-enlargement-defined approach, opened the door for internal destabilization and irridentist agendas in both Belgrade and Zagreb – and the former's appetite is not limited to BiH, as Montenegrins, Kosovars, and even North Macedonians can attest.

The first step in the regional reset must therefore be deployment of a sufficient deterrent force – preferably including U.S. forces, under NATO auspices – [beginning in Brčko, which is the circuit breaker of Republika Srpska's independence ambitions](#). The NATO summit in July 2023 not only failed to rise to the occasion, but a statement indicated [Croatia's continued ability to steer collective policy toward its nationalist aims in BiH](#).

Sooner or later, this trajectory will end in a bad place – in violence, with irreversible consequences. Washington continues to foreswear its leadership role in preventing such an eventuality.



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Cars in Belgrade pass a billboard with the Russian and Serbian flags and with Cyrillic writing, “Together!” in June 2022. (Andrej Isakovic / AFP via Getty Images)

Russia’s Influence in the Balkans

Ivana Stradner

As the war in Ukraine continues, Russia, with the help of its ally Serbia, is provoking chaos in the Balkans to distract the West. The Kremlin’s goal is to exacerbate the existing perilous ethnic tensions in the region into violence and thus to undermine NATO’s regional peacekeeping attempts and to reassert Russia’s dominance in the region. The ultimate question arises as to why Russia and Serbia would benefit from the crisis in the Balkans.

Vladimir Putin does not need to roll out tanks and jets in the Balkans, as he is successfully using hybrid warfare to undermine the West. While Brussels and

Washington have forgotten the Cold War, the Russian autocrat has not. Russia’s goal in the Balkans is to position itself as the region’s only reliable conflict negotiator. The game plan accomplishes two goals: strengthening Moscow’s standing in the region, and giving Putin leverage over Western powers that would lead to broad concessions and thus keep conflict in the region from escalating. Although Russia does not have a “grand strategy” for the Western Balkans, the region is part of Putin’s game, whereby Moscow has been exploiting the existing domestic vulnerabilities in Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan by weaponizing secessionist movements.



Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić's ultimate goal is to remain in power for as long as possible. By undermining pro-Western opposition in Serbia and strengthening far-right nationalists, Vučić has positioned himself as a moderate deal broker and a source of stability in the region. Vučić also benefits from Russian malign influence by escalating and then deescalating and using crises as a bargaining chip with the West.

The U.S. and the EU have long been ambivalent about defining their interests in the Western Balkans. Russia has capitalized on these years of neglect and leveraged a power vacuum in the former Yugoslavia to gain economic and political influence. Russian influence in the Balkans is not new, but since Russia's full aggression began in Ukraine in February 2022, the West has been paying more attention to Moscow's games in the region. It is past time for the West to turn the tables on Russia's games and put Moscow and Belgrade on the defensive.

Information warfare plays an important role in Russia's national security. Russia's military [considers](#) information as a weapon, as stated by Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu. In 2021 Russia [published](#) its new National Security Strategy, which devoted special attention to "information security." Russian understanding of information security differs from the West. Instead of the term "cybersecurity" (кибербезопасность), the National Security Strategy speaks of "information security" (информационная безопасность). According to Russian military doctrine, information security falls into two complementary categories: One component is on the technical side. These activities involve operations like shutting down pipelines, stealing data, and surveilling personal devices. Most Americans know this as "cybersecurity." The other element of information security is much more subtle and downright stealthy. Rather than infrastructure and networks, this psychological side of Russian operations targets the cognitive processes of the adversary's leaders and population. It focuses on psychological manipulation.

The Russian Ministry of Defense [defines](#) "information war" as the confrontation "between two or more States in the information space with the goal of inflicting damage to information systems, processes, and

resources, as well as to critically important structures; undermining political, economic, and social systems; carrying out mass psychological campaigns ... in order to destabilize society and the government."

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was using "active measures," and it was spreading disinformation campaigns to undermine the United States. Today, Russia's methods are very similar, and, with social media and the internet, Moscow's information operations campaigns can reach people faster and more effectively.

The Kremlin has a long history of influence in the Western Balkans. In North Macedonia, Russia spread disinformation prior to the name-change referendum that finally enabled North Macedonia to join NATO. It also established hundreds of North Macedonia-based "troll factories," from which Russia pedaled fake news against the 2016 U.S. elections. Moscow has also been investing in Bosnia and Herzegovina via sowing ethnic and religious discord, while promoting the secession of Republika Srpska.

In Montenegro, Russia [backed](#) a failed coup attempt in 2016. The Kremlin has long utilized the Russian and Serbian Orthodox Church as a tool of statecraft to achieve its political objectives in Montenegro using the same strategy the Kremlin employed in Ukraine. For instance, during the Russian annexation of Ukraine, Kremlin-affiliated Orthodox churches supported Russian election interference on behalf of the Pro-Russian opposition in the 2020 local elections, and they had the clergy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate openly campaign for the pro-Russian opposition while running on separatism in Ukraine. Similarly, Russia [leveraged](#) both its own Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro to destabilize the Balkans, help elect Montenegro's pro-Russian prime minister, and organize mass protests in major Montenegrin cities in the early 2020s.

The Kremlin has worked for years to position Russia as leading the defense of "traditional" cultural values against the liberal West. Putin's National Security Concept of 2000 first introduced the connection between national security and spiritual-moral values. On March 31, 2020, Putin signed a decree



Protesters gather with their vehicles in the streets of Nis, Serbia, to show their support of Russia on April 30, 2022. (Sasa Djordjevic / Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

adopting Russia's new foreign policy [concept](#) that lists "strengthening traditional Russian spiritual and moral values and preserving the cultural and historical heritage of the multinational people of Russia" as key national security interests.

In 2022, Putin claimed that the West has "sought to destroy our traditional values and force on us their false values that would erode us, our people from within." The Russian Orthodox Church plays a vital role in Putin's goal to legitimize and expand the role of spiritual values in national security. Both Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church [have](#) the shared vision of preserving the "Russian World," where the Kremlin is "the defender of Russia's Christian civilization."

This narrative has been widely shared in the Western Balkans. The Serbian media have [accused](#) the West of trying to destroy the Russian Orthodox Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church, and the Serbian director of intelligence has been supporting the [creation](#) of the "Serbian World" – a Balkan equivalent to Putin's

"Russian world" – which is designed to unite all Serbs under a common Serbian cultural framework.

However, the Balkans' most explosive tinderboxes are Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although Kosovo's population is more than 90% ethnic Albanian, Serbs see the country as an ancestral homeland that contains some of the Serbian Orthodox Church's holiest sites. Just as a civil war exploded out of tensions between different religious and ethnic groups in the early 1990s, the Kremlin is now using the Orthodox Church to destabilize the country and the broader region.

In May 2023, ethnic Serbs in northern Kosovo clashed with Kosovar police in reaction to the authorities' arrest of a suspected Serbian protest leader. Two weeks ago, after municipal election results were received for all ethnically Albanian mayors, Serbian demonstrators resumed their violent protests. This time, they directed their violence toward NATO's regional peacekeeping troops, KFOR, injuring 30 servicemen.



This escalation of ethnic conflict is part of a familiar pattern. Last year, Serbs living along the disputed Kosovo-Serbia border launched widespread protests over a requirement for vehicles with Serbian license plates in Kosovo to change to Kosovar plates; these protests resulted in a massive road blockade along the border and a show of aerial force on Serbia's territory and required the deployment of Kosovo's police special forces.

These recurring ethnic conflicts stem from long-standing tensions between Kosovo and Serbia. When Kosovo unilaterally declared its independence from Serbia in 2008, the Serbian government refused to recognize its independence.

In Kosovo, the Serbian Orthodox Church plays an important role. Russia's Orthodox Church has escalated recurring disputes over religious sites, most recently expressing concern for the "destiny of Christian shrines in Kosovo" after tensions flared between Kosovo and Serbia.

Rather than reprimanding Serbia's provocations, the U.S. government accused that nation's government of creating "this crisis atmosphere in the north" and praised Serbia for being a constructive partner. This strange shift in American policy is rooted in U.S. President Joe Biden's risk-averse strategy. In particular, the United States is concerned that if Serbia becomes dissatisfied with U.S. foreign policy, it may fully align with Russia, enabling Putin to escalate violence in Kosovo and destabilize the region. However, the Biden administration should understand that displays of weakness embolden the Kremlin's aggression in the region.

As Serbia acts as a key player in the Kremlin's bid for the Balkans, the two countries have recognized their mutual aims for dominant influence in the Balkans and have accordingly worked to cement their cooperative relationship. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov emphasized that Moscow "absolutely unconditionally supports Serbia." Vučić also has personal interests in Russia's meddling; as Vučić grapples for regional influence, regional conflict will allow him to frame himself as the West's only reliable actor to enforce peace in the Balkans, a parallel approach with Putin's strategy in the Balkans. As a result, the West's

"balancing" strategy of appeasement has been a dream come true for Belgrade and Moscow.

The Kremlin, in turn, sees Kosovo's independence as a precedent for annexation — and a way to call out the West for hypocrisy. In January, Russian U.N. Permanent Representative Vasily Nebenzya referred to Kosovo to justify Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territories. He [referred](#) to Kosovo's "right to self-determination" and said residents of occupied Ukrainian territories are merely exercising that right. Russia is wrong to see Kosovo as a precedent for various reasons, not least because the International Court of Justice considers Kosovo a sui generis case, meaning that it has its own unique set of circumstances and cannot be a model for other cases. Moscow has also made it clear that the U.N.'s ability to diplomatically recognize Kosovo's independence will be impossible without Russia's approval. Putin often cites Kosovo to justify Russia's annexation of Crimea, arguing that Western countries' recognition of the country's secession from Serbia created a precedent that legitimizes other territories' unilateral declarations of independence.

The Kremlin has already employed information operations to portray the crisis in Kosovo as one of inevitable escalation that forces Serbia to take a more offensive posture. In May 2023, as a sign of deepening Kremlin support for Serbian actions in the region, Serbian Director of Intelligence Agency Aleksandar Vulin met Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev and discussed Russian-Serbian relations.

Meanwhile, Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has stated that the situation in Kosovo is moving toward an armed conflict. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has called the outbreak of violence "worrisome" and has indirectly blamed the West, [stating](#) how "a big 'explosion' is brewing in the center of Europe, in the very place where, in 1999, NATO carried out aggression against Yugoslavia." The Russian ambassador to Serbia, Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko, has called the situation in Kosovo a "hybrid war"; he has also [emphasized](#) that the West is pushing Serbia to recognize Kosovo. A few days after the Serbian president ominously claimed that sister intelligence services from the East [warned](#) him about a color revolution attempt in Serbia, the Russian Ambassador



EU foreign policy head Josep Borrell (4th from L) is received by the presidency council of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo, on March 16, 2022. (Elman Omic / Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

claimed that President Vučić’s [opponents](#) want to do “a Maidan-style coup.” Russia’s and Serbia’s paranoia related to color revolutions resulted in a meeting in 2021, at which Patrushev and Vulin [pledged](#) to work together to combat mass protests and “color revolutions” coming from the West.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the continuing implementation of the [Dayton peace agreement](#) that ended the war in 1995 is facing a crisis. The country continues to be driven by divisions between its Bosniak, Serb, and Croat communities, and Russia has exploited these divisions to its advantage. The Serb member of Bosnia’s tripartite presidency, Milorad Dodik, has been threatening that Republika Srpska, one of the two entities that make up the country, will secede. In 2021 the Republika Srpska National Assembly voted in favor of starting a procedure for Bosnian Serbs to withdraw from state-level institutions – including the Bosnian army, security services, tax system, and judiciary. After Milorad Dodik met with Vladimir Putin and Nikolai Patrushev in May, a month later, lawmakers in Republika Srpska voted to suspend rulings by Bosnia’s constitutional court, which is the beginning of a “legal secession.” This was a dream come true for the Kremlin, which has been trying to destabilize the country and [threatened](#) retaliation in 2021 if the country joins NATO. Dodik has long been Serbia’s proxy in the Balkans, always ready to escalate

the crisis so Vučić could position himself as a force of stability in the region and negotiate with the West. In addition to Republika Srpska, the Kremlin has been supporting Bosnian Croats to push for the creation of another entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The destabilization of the Western Balkans would not be possible without the assistance of Belgrade. In addition to utilizing soft power tools, such as exploiting the countries’ shared religious and cultural ties, Russia has also become a major weapons provider and a lead investor in critical infrastructure, such as natural gas, to exercise influence on governments in the region. For example, Russia sent an S-400 missile system to Serbia in 2019 for a military drill, upping the ante in 2021 when Serbia procured Pantsir S1M air defense systems. The country also hosts the Russian-run “[Humanitarian Center](#),” which is conspicuously close to Camp Bondsteel – NATO’s main base in Kosovo.

Despite all this, many in the West think that Serbia is cutting its ties with Russia – in part, because Serbia [allows](#) ammunition shipments to Ukraine. Moreover, the Serbian president also made a strong statement [in support of Ukraine](#). “We said from the beginning that we cannot support Russia’s invasion of Ukraine,” he said, adding that “for us, Crimea is Ukraine, Donbas is Ukraine – it will remain so.” Serbia [voted](#) last March in favor of the U.N. resolution to condemn Russia’s aggression, with Serbian U.N. Permanent Representative Nemanja Stevanovic [emphasizing](#) that his country was “committed to observing the principles of territorial integrity and political independence of states.” Serbia’s U.N. vote was part of Vučić’s pragmatic balancing act. Since the resolution did not mention sanctions and was thus only symbolic, Serbia’s vote represented a low-stakes opportunity to give it a slight boost in the eyes of Western leaders without jeopardizing Belgrade’s relations with Moscow in any substantial way.

Moscow has also made it clear that the U.N.’s ability to diplomatically recognize Kosovo’s independence will be impossible without Russia’s approval. Putin often cites Kosovo to justify Russia’s annexation of Crimea, arguing that Western countries’ recognition of the country’s secession from Serbia created a precedent that legitimizes other territories’ unilateral declarations of independence.



In Serbia, Russian influence operations do not only operate via trolls and bots but also via media platforms such as Sputnik and RT Balkans. A famous Russian Telegram channel, called Cyber Front Z, has been used to spread propaganda online. This information operations project has close ties to Belgrade and has organized several events in via the Information Center Orlovi.

Serbian local media often mirror Russian narratives. In February 2022, Serbian propaganda Informer [stated](#) that Ukraine attacked Russia. Belgrade did not miss an opportunity to accuse the U.S. of not only operating biolabs in [Ukraine](#) but also in [Serbia](#).

The Russian government has used its influence in politics, the media, digital, cultural, and education to advance its influence on youth groups globally. As a part of its global influence campaign, the Kremlin has utilized Russian web brigades to reach young people around the world using internet forums and popular online platforms. Using the same strategy, Russia organized [paramilitary](#) youth [camps](#) in Serbia.

The West should turn the script back on Serbian and Russian games and use the information space to put them on the defensive. Given the rise in nationalism and the far-right groups in the Balkans, selling them the wonders of democracy will not resonate with pro-Russian population. Instead, Western information operations should target the far-right groups and

portray Moscow as an unreliable partner by reminding the Serbs of Russia's failure to aid its ally, Armenia, a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, during last year's clashes in Nagorno Karabakh.

Russia continues to destabilize Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina and Moscow has promised its support to Serbia. However, far-right Serbs may not believe that Russia's military capability is now limited. Instead, effective information operations should remind the Serbs that Russia had previously joined the NATO-led peacekeeping mission to Kosovo but abandoned it in 2003. The West should exploit the episode as a case study of the Russian government throwing its Slavic brothers under the bus, thereby emphasizing to Serbian nationalists, "Where was Russia in 1999 to protect its Slavic brothers from NATO?"

The West should also invest more resources in free media in the Balkans and especially in vulnerable places for Russia's information operations in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro. And the West should send hybrid warfare teams to Montenegro, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina and strengthen their resilience against Russian and Serbian propaganda. It is high time that the Western powers wake up to the threat the Balkans pose to their interests in peacemaking in Europe and to recognize that Putin's agenda of chaos spreads further than Ukraine's borders.



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Serbian police stand in front of far-right groups protesting the Mirdita-Dobar Dan festival on Oct. 22, 2020. The event, organized by liberal groups from Serbia and Kosovo, was in Belgrade, Serbia. Police prevented the protesters from disrupting the opening of the event. (Andrej Isakovic / AFP via Getty Images)

The Far-Right Landscape in the Western Balkans

Hikmet Karčić

New and unexpected alliances have been slowly developing between the global far right and far-right movements in Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). To what extent they continue to develop and manifest is contingent on a range of factors, including the outcome of the war in Ukraine, the EU migration crisis (with its close links to rates of Islamophobia), the inflation crisis, and even climate change.

A positive outcome for Ukraine — marked by the easing of inflation, reduced migration, and slowing climate change (as this is one of the factors driving both

migration and inflation) — would most likely result in a decline in far-right sentiment. Given that the war in Ukraine rages on and the other enumerated problems show little chance of reversal, it can be said with confidence that the existing links between far-right nationalists in both the Balkans and abroad are likely to develop further. The more serious the problems become, the more rapid this integration will be. This is especially true in Serbia.

What would be the potential consequences? At the local level, the convergence of the local far right with the global far right would have disastrous



consequences for Bosnian and Kosovar Muslims, as well as other minorities in the Western Balkans. This prediction is supported by the firsthand experience of the 1990s, which laid bare what Serbian nationalism (which shares much in common with the global far right) was able to “accomplish” in Srebrenica (BiH), Vukovar (Croatia), and Račak (Kosovo). Likewise, Croatian nationalism, which led to war crimes against Bosnians and Bosnian Serbs, also continues to pose a major threat in BiH.

In terms of the influence of local far-right ideology on the global far right, there are two incidents wherein Serbian nationalism had a demonstrable impact on far-right figures outside the Balkans — namely, the 2011 Utoya massacre, carried out by Anders Breivik; and the 2019 Christchurch Mosque shootings. In both cases, the attackers drew direct inspiration from Serbian nationalism. If these links continue to grow, it is likely that the crimes of Serbian nationalists will continue to inspire other far-right individuals and organizations around the world.

This paper begins by introducing the basic terminology used as the framework for this discussion. It then provides a brief analysis of the relationships between the global far right (GFR) and both Croatian and Serbian nationalists. Finally, it highlights the geopolitical significance of these developments.

One final note for consideration is that BiH is home to sizable Serb (Bosnian Serb) and Croat (Bosnian Croat) communities, accounting [for 30% and 15% of BiH's population, respectively](#). A substantial percentage, although certainly not all, of these Bosnian Serbs and Croats identify with Serbia and Croatia more so than they do with BiH. Politically and ideologically, they are aligned with Serbian and Croatian nationalisms, which is very apparent in areas where they are in the majority, namely, the Bosnian Serb entity of Republika Srpska (a regional entity within BiH), as well as certain regions in central and southern BiH. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, discussion of Croatian and Serbian far-right nationalism and its links to the global far right include both Serb and Bosnian Serb politics and groups, as well as both Croatian and Bosnian Croat politics and groups.

Terminology and Concepts

The Global Far Right

Our understanding of the term “far right” is often shaped by analysis and discourse originating in the United States, and there is good reason for this. As noted by Sian Norris recently in the Guardian, [“due to the networked nature of the modern far right, trends that start stateside don't remain there.”](#) In the American context, the [Anti-Defamation League](#) defines the far right, or what it prefers to call the “extreme right,” as encompassing a spectrum of groups and ideologies, including the white supremacist movement, which consists of various sub-movements, such as neo-Nazis, racist skinheads, and the alt-right. On another part of the spectrum are antigovernment extremist movements, militia movements, and sovereign citizens. Additionally, there are several “single-issue” movements, which all tend to represent the extreme wing of the more mainstream conservative movement. These include anti-abortion extremists, anti-immigration extremists, and anti-Muslim extremists, among others.

The European perception of the far right shares many similarities with that of the U.S., but there are also nuanced differences. According to Bettina Rodríguez-Aguilera, [the EU far right is](#) best defined by “chauvinistic and ethnic exaltation of the nation; anti-immigrant xenophobia; and ‘anti-politician,’ anti-establishment populism.” The EU far right offers its followers an exclusive identity, singles out the culprits (the establishment), and advocates simple and expedient solutions (e.g., expelling foreigners and overthrowing the “political class”).

Rodríguez-Aguilera goes on to highlight the ideological obsession of the far right with the idea of the sacrosanct nation, and thus with the myth of the ethnic purity of “our people.” This increasingly leads to a rejection of the EU itself. Xenophobia is one of the factors that provides the greatest dividends to the far right, as it is notorious for demagogically emphasizing the alleged “dangers” of immigration and, in particular, of Muslim immigrants, who are depicted as incapable of integration and as obstinate opponents of “Christian and Western civilization.” In this context, immigrants are blamed for “freeloading” off the welfare state,



rising crime rates (including terrorism), and even reintroducing diseases that were previously eradicated in Europe. The ultimate charge, however, is that they are guilty of attempting a “Great Replacement,” a notion that refers to a Jewish-engineered plot to import Muslims into Europe and thereby bring about the collapse of Christendom. This idea is increasingly popular in American far-right circles as well.

In summary, running through both American and EU far-right ideologies are nationalist fixations on race and nation, racist “fears” of a “great replacement” (by either Jews or Muslims), and a rejection of democracy. These elements justify the usage of the term “global far right” (GFR). This is supported by a [recent theoretical contribution](#) by Andrea Pirro, which establishes this designation as a generic umbrella term that encompasses all the above points. Pirro also acknowledges the increasingly mutable borders and growing links between populist radical-right *political parties*, on one hand, and extreme-right *movements and groups*, on the other hand. The GFR is thus taken to mean a collective of far-right political parties, organizations, groups, and individuals, which is found primarily in North America, Europe, Russia, Ukraine, Belorussia, Australia, and New Zealand, mostly among white populations, who collectively adhere to the basic tenets outlined above.

The Balkan Far Right

As discussed [in previous research](#), the framework for defining the Balkan far right is based upon the [2019 “Helpdesk Report”](#) sponsored by the U.K. government. According to this report, the nationalist movements in the Western Balkans are largely characterized by the following:

1. Advocating ethnically based politics
2. Continual reference to the 1990s wars
3. Glorification of war criminals and ethnic cleansing (and genocide) from the 1990s
4. A belief in victimization
5. A desire to redraw boundaries on ethnic lines
6. Hatred or the “securitization” of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) groups
7. The use of violence



Protesters rally against the Mirdita-Dobar Dan festival in Belgrade. The festival was created to boost reconciliation and better understanding between Serbia and Kosovo. (Andrej Isakovic / AFP via Getty Images)

8. Anti-NATO and anti-EU politics
9. Pro-Russian attitudes and ties
10. Connections to organized crime

To this list, we have added the following key elements that were not included in the aforementioned report:

11. Islamophobia (perhaps better understood as anti-Muslim sentiment)
12. Genocide denial

A final consideration is underscored by Luke Kelly, the author of the “Helpdesk Report,” who notes that “most right-wing groups [in the Western Balkans] advocate some form of border change based on ethnicity.” Although the definition given above speaks of Western Balkan *nationalisms*, it is evident from previous clarifications and definitions that these



nationalisms certainly overlap with European and American far-right ideologies. When this paper refers to Serbian nationalists and Croatian nationalists, we confidently assert the many similarities between local nationalists and the GFR, many of which are elaborated upon below.

The Far Right and the Western Balkans

Serbia

As the war in Ukraine moves into a critical phase with the Ukrainian Armed Forces' highly anticipated 2023 Summer Offensive, one of the anti-Russian alliance's key concerns remains the positioning of the Serbian government led by Alexander Vučić. Since Serbia embarked on its disastrous, nationalism-fueled course toward independence during the breakup of Yugoslavia, marked by the commission of war crimes and crimes against humanity in Croatia and Kosovo along with genocide in BiH, Serbia's political leadership has maintained a somewhat schizophrenic relationship with its neighboring powers. On one hand, Serbia craves the economic stability, living standards, respect, and success of its European counterparts. On the other hand, it rejects any notion of democratic checks and balances, as well as many European values.

To balance the influence of Europe and of an America that it largely resents, the Serbian political elite has revamped its relationship with Russia, which had long been confined primarily to the religious and cultural spheres. The Serbian political elite seeks the power and wealth amassed by its Russian cousins, but it is also aware that their populace would reject the idea of adopting standard Russian living conditions.

Under Putin, Russia has been only too happy to accept Belgrade's advances, viewing a relationship with Serbia as an opportunity to vex, distract, and disrupt both Europe and America. Russian nationalists, such as Alexander Dugin, see in Serbia a fellow Orthodox Church bulwark against the heathen West and another kind of *antemurale christianitatis*.

Thus, in the Western Balkans, Vučić's Serbia is perceived as a valuable political partner and thus is being courted by different sides. More recently, this has taken the form of appeasement by the West,

allowing Vučić (and his proxy in BiH, Milorad Dodik) to accumulate vast wealth and consolidate their power uncontested. Russian courtship has been even more profitable for Vučić and Dodik, with the added element of moral legitimacy in the eyes of the Serbian Orthodox Church. In recent years, relations between these countries have also flourished in the security sector, including [arms sales](#) and [joint military exercises](#).

While these factors testify to the criminality and political pragmatism underpinning the motivations of the Serbian political elite, the influence of nationalist ideology should not be underestimated. Serbian President Alexander Vučić is well known for his associations with hardline nationalist politicians such as his political mentor Vojislav Šešelj, who is the founder and president of the far-right Serbian Radical Party and also a convicted war criminal. Furthermore, Vučić is backed by longtime colleague Alexander Vulin, the former minister for and now director of the Serbian security services, who has openly called for the establishment of the "Serbian World." The concept of the Serbian World would resonate with members of the GFR, as it entails the creation of a Greater Serbian state by annexing parts of neighboring countries and ethnically cleansing them of non-Serbs. Effectively, Vulin is calling for the continuation of the most recent war, stating that it is the "[task of the current political generation ... to create that Serbian World which would unify all Serbs, no matter where they live.](#)"

Vučić, Vulin, and their associates are drawing from a reservoir of nationalism that has deep historical and ideological roots and underlies much of the national, social, and political identity of both Serb politicians and the general public. This nationalism, which is found in Serbia and Serb-dominated areas of BiH, does not have a clear far-right heritage, taking no direct inspiration from Nazism and fascism. Rather, it is best defined by its anti-Croat/Catholic, anti-Muslim, anti-Western, pro-Orthodox-nationalist, and pro-Russian principles.

Another central pillar of this ideology is the fixation on the issue of Kosovo, a territory over which many Serbs believe they have a spiritual and ancestral claim. Similarly, the belief that areas of BiH (and, to a certain extent, Croatia) also belong to Serbia is another prominent ideological fixation. With Muslim populations in both Kosovo and BiH, anti-Muslim



Bosnian citizens living in Izmir, Turkey, held a commemoration ceremony on the 28th anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre on July 11, 2023. The killings of more than 8,000 Bosniak people is considered a genocide by the International Court of Justice. (Yusuf Belek / SOPA Images / LightRocket via Getty Images)

sentiment is a key ingredient of Serbian far-right ideology. This animosity draws upon long-standing resentments against the Ottoman Empire for its historical occupation of the region.

This anti-Muslim sentiment has been manifested intermittently throughout Serbian history and is evident in old poetry and songs that have remained popular over time. More modern examples can be found in the conduct of Serb nationalist guerrilla units, known as Chetniks, that committed large-scale massacres of Bosniaks living in Montenegro, southern Serbia, and eastern Bosnia during World War II. These atrocities were repeated in the most recent war, culminating in the genocide in Srebrenica. The symbology of this hatred – which can be seen in graffiti, murals, songs,

literature, and academic and political discourse – has been consistently present ever since.

Since the start of the Russian war against Ukraine, popular support for Russia has surged, sustained by a diet of relentless propaganda. Headlines and social media platforms have reverberated with endorsements of Putin and diatribes against the despised West. The various Serbian far-right groups (e.g., the popular, so-called People’s Patrol, Obraz, Liberation Movement, Serbian-Russian Bridge, Night Wolves, and Ravna Gora Chetnik Movement) have proudly and publicly declared their support for Russia. In return, the Russian far right [has shown](#) its appreciation for its Serbian counterpart, which is predominantly centered on support for Serbia’s steadfast claim to Kosovo. As Pirro observed,



the boundaries between the nationalist, far-right groups and political parties in Serbia are becoming increasingly blurred.

There has been a conscious effort of late by far-right local groups to draw closer to the GFR. During Donald Trump's presidency, which fostered a permissive atmosphere for the GFR, tentative alliances began to form between the American far right and some Serbian far-right groups that shared similar views on race and identity. The investigative outlet Bellingcat [noted that](#) American far-right leaders visited Belgrade, seeking to make connections with local far-right groups. Similarly, the news outlet Balkan Insight [reported on](#) collaboration between British and Russian far-right groups and Serbian nationalist groups in Kosovo in efforts to provide the latter with weaponry. The same outlet [also revealed](#) how the British far right offered "info-war" training to the Serbian far right. [Reportage by the Resonant Voices project](#) also found evidence of cooperation, albeit not always successful, between the EU far right and Serbian nationalists. Further evidence of this growing affinity can be found in the disturbing fact that one of the murderers responsible for the recent mass shootings in Serbia was wearing a T-shirt adorned with far-right insignia [when he was arrested](#).

Another crucial aspect to consider is the inspiration that the GFR finds in Serbian nationalist exploits. On July 22, 2011, Anders Breivik, a self-identified neo-Nazi, killed 77 of his fellow Norwegians in a terrorist attack. In his pre-attack manifesto, Breivik detailed the extent to which he had been inspired by Serb nationalism, as well as the supposed "demographic threat" posed by Albanians and Bosniaks. Likewise, when Brenton Tarrant murdered 49 people in a terror attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, he drew inspiration from Serb nationalism, playing a Serbian nationalist song as he drove to the mosques and [writing the names of](#) historical Serbian nationalist figures on his firearm.

The song played by Tarrant on his way to the massacre is another example of how Serb nationalist symbols and ideas are being adopted by the GFR. In 1993, a Serbian soldier named [Željko Grmuša penned a song to lift the spirits of fellow Serb soldiers, titled](#) "Karadžiću, vodi Srbe svoje" ("Karadžić, lead your Serbs"). The music video of this song, which is

known as "God Is a Serb and He Will Protect Us," features Grmuša, Novislav Đajić, and Nenad Tintor, all soldiers in the Bosnian Serb Army. The song's lyrics, which were standard fare at the time, glorify now-convicted genocidist Radovan Karadžić, leader of the Bosnian Serbs, and make genocidal threats toward the Bosniaks and Croats standing in their way.¹ Over the years, the song, now often called "Serbia Strong" or "Remove Kebab" (a codified way of saying "remove Muslims"), has grown in popularity in far-right chatrooms and message boards. A recent report by the Center for the Analysis of the Radical Right highlighted incidents of the song being sung in China, the Slovak Republic, and Poland, which serves [as evidence](#) of its wide appeal.

Serbian nationalism poses by far the greatest danger to the region's Muslims. With regard to Serbian far-right nationalism, policymakers must have a clear understanding of the following:

1. The Serbian far right draws upon a genocidal ideology.
2. This ideology is robust and thriving.
3. There is growing interconnectedness between this ideology and the GFR.
4. Most importantly, when Serbian far-right nationalism is emboldened, the Balkans are destabilized, and innocent people are killed.

Croatia

The Croatian/Bosnian-Croat far right is relatively simpler to explain. Generally, it belongs to the broader European "far-right ecosystem" and is less ideologically complex than Serbian nationalism. Inspired directly by traditional right-wing (Nazi) ideologies, this brand of nationalism has its roots in the Croatian Nazi-allied Ustaša movement that dominated much of present-day Croatia, BiH, and parts of Serbia during World War II. The authorities that ruled Yugoslavia after the war failed to adequately address the atrocities committed by this regime. As a result, resentment persisted locally, erupting during the conflict that tore apart the region in the 1990s.

As Yugoslavia collapsed, Croatian nationalists revived the symbols, language, and much of the ideology



used by the Ustaša. Within Croatia's armed forces, entire units reveled in this historical legacy. There was, for example, a unit named after Jure Francetić, an Ustaša leader responsible for the massacres of Serbs and Jews in BiH during World War II. Again, they directed much of their violence against the Serbs who remained in Croatia and the Bosniaks who remained in BiH. The danger posed to BiH by contemporary Croatian nationalism has precedents in the massacres committed and concentration camps set up by the Bosnian Croat army under Zagreb's control.

With the end of the war, Croatia began its path toward joining European institutions, at times seeming to make genuine efforts to confront the past. Nevertheless, the popularity of the far right and its symbolism have not faded away completely. Abundant evidence of this can be found in the widespread presence of Nazi/Ustaša graffiti across the whole of Croatia and in parts of Bosnia, in chants at football matches, in the popularity of nationalist singers and songs, and in the rhetoric of some of the more extreme politicians.

In comparison with Serbia, the Croatian far right does not have the same range of publicly visible and powerful groups. Furthermore, Croatia is not dominated by a single political figure, like Vučić in Belgrade. Politically, however, far-right sentiments tend to dominate the center of the Croatian political space. Liberal and leftist parties do exist, but rarely hold significant power. The dominance of the Croatian far right, embodied in Croatia's most powerful political party, the Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*, or HDZ) and in its sister party in BiH, creates a politically conducive environment for far-right sentiment to flourish.

During the wars in the 1990s, the Croatian state, led by the HDZ, aimed to carve out large sections of BiH for Croatia. Although they were partially prevented from achieving this by American diplomacy and the spirited resistance of the Bosnian Army, the Dayton Peace Agreement granted Bosnian Croats a power disproportionate to the size of their population, allowing them to politically dominate several cantons in BiH. The long-held desire to claim parts of BiH away never receded, and it is now increasingly obvious

that Zagreb is intensifying its efforts to meet its wartime objectives. Croatian politicians have often sought to demonize Bosniaks to the rest of Europe as fundamentalist Islamic warriors, and they frequently cooperate with Bosnian Serbs in engineering BiH's gradual collapse.

Underpinning this project is an aggressive hatred of local Muslims, and a desire to live in an ethnically homogeneous Greater Croatia. These ideas align with those prevalent among the GFR. Generally speaking, the key elements of Croatian nationalism can be summarized as follows:

1. Anti-Semitism
2. Hatred of Serbs (including the glorification of their slaughter at the hands of the Ustaša in World War II)
3. More recently, a very aggressive Islamophobia.
4. Hatred of Roma
5. Hatred of immigrants
6. Homophobia

Based on the evidence given thus far in this paper, the Croatian far right is connected to the broader European far right and shares natural similarities with neighboring countries such as the Slovak Republic and Hungary (which is also a key supporter of Serbia). There is little evidence of interaction with the American far right, and there is certainly no visible desire to cooperate with the Serbian far right. Notably, while members of the Serbian far right went to Ukraine to fight alongside the Russians, members of the Croatian far right went to fight alongside the neo-Nazi Azov battalion.

Regarding Croatian far-right nationalism, it is crucial that policymakers have a clear understanding of the following:

1. The Croatian far right, like its Serbian cousin, also draws from a genocidal ideology
2. This ideology is robust and thriving
3. This ideology drives Zagreb's attempts to destabilize and break up BiH.



Other Far-Right Groups in the Western Balkans

Far-right sentiment is not confined to Serb and Croat nationalists but can also be found, albeit to a much lesser degree, among small segments of the Kosovar and Bosniak populations. It is important to reiterate that Bosniak nationalism and Kosovar nationalism are far less pervasive and share little in common with the ideology of the broader far right.

Generally, nationalism in Kosovo bears little resemblance to the ideological platform of the GFR, or even that of its Serbian and Croatian counterparts. According to a recent [EU Commission report](#), what is considered right-wing extremist discourse in Kosovo is largely characterized by “Kosovo independence sentiments” and is regionally connected with ethnic Albanians in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Notably, the report states: “While the idea of uniting ‘Albanian territories’ has emotional appeal, it is fringe and does not enjoy a wide popular support. The RWE [right-wing extremist] organizations that advocate for Greater Albania are marginal.” It is also important to highlight the role that Serbian nationalism plays in reifying Kosovar Albanian nationalism, as the latter is contingent upon the former.

Bosniak far-right sentiment is also far less prevalent than its Croatian and Serbian counterparts, remaining marginal and politically irrelevant. While it is similar to Kosovar nationalism in this respect, Bosniak far-right nationalism differs from Kosovar nationalism in that some of its beliefs, ideas, and claims are demonstrably

similar to those of the GFR. Currently limited to a few internet-based groups, the Bosnian far right espouses an ideology that is based loosely upon Nazim and includes these tenets:

1. Bosnia is primarily for Bosniaks, to be ruled by Bosniaks for the benefit of Bosniaks (Bosniak identity is viewed primarily as ethnic/racial, rather than as religious).
2. Bosniak society should be guided by the principles of national socialism (Nazism).
3. Immigrants are unwelcome.
4. Zionism and global Jewish domination should be resisted, as should communism, multiculturalism, and liberalism.
5. Only traditional Bosniak values, which are seen as compatible with Nazism, are permitted.

The groups that promulgate these beliefs are mainly confined to social media platforms, and to Facebook in particular, with their other activities in the past decade having been limited to one or two poster campaigns.

When compared with Serbia and Croatia, neither the Kosovar nor the Bosniak far right can be reasonably equated; nor do they have any significant connections to the GFR. In fact, the GFR would be likely be disinclined to collaborate with either, primarily because of their perceived religious identities – that is, their association with Islam. As such, these groups hold little social or political relevance.



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Endnote

¹ Incidentally, the accordion player Novislav Đajić was sentenced to 5 years in prison for killing and torturing 14 people (there were accounts on 27) who were victims in two villages in BiH during the war. Now known as “Dat Face Soldier,” his meme-ified face is now ubiquitous in far-right chat rooms.



Turkish Army soldiers stand guard around Zubin Potok municipality in Northern Kosovo upon the request of NATO Kosovo Force on June 15, 2023. (Erkin Keci / Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

Limitations of Turkey's Western Balkans Policy Since Erdoğan's Reelection

Reuf Bajrović

To generations of foreign policy observers, pre-Erdoğan Turkish policy did not venture out of its immediate surroundings, concerning itself with border states such as Greece and co-nationals in Northern Cyprus while serving as a strategic power projection base for the United States. Such policy direction could hardly be viewed as having anything to do with the current Turkish foreign policy approach, which some Turkish and foreign observers have branded the neo-Ottoman approach. Before Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's two-decade-long rule, Turkish foreign policy paid little attention to matters beyond its immediate borders, forfeiting its wider regional policy to major foreign actors.

Critical Absence

The post-Cold War breakup of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia and the ensuing wars during the 1990s went almost unnoticed by Turkish foreign policy. Turkish ties to Balkan Muslims remained [symbolic](#) for more than a century; the Balkans region was at times almost completely forgotten by Turkey, despite having ruled the region for half a millennium in its previous incarnation as the Ottoman Empire. Such policy direction could hardly be viewed as having anything to do with the Ottoman legacy, which was perhaps a conscious effort on behalf of the former secular ruling elite, which largely ignored the



devastating wars in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s. The war in Bosnia culminated in genocide against Bosnian Muslims, who were referred to as “Turks” by the Serb forces committing genocide. Such atrocities attracted attention from faraway state actors such as the United States.

However, Turkey remained largely absent from the conflict in this region close to its borders that was fought along both religious and historical lines. Even at the conflict’s end — during the brokering of the United States-backed Dayton Agreement between Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Croatia — Turkish involvement was [relegated](#) to serving as a U.S. liaison without any meaningful policy input of its own. Simply put, the projection of political, financial, and especially military power potential in the Balkans was visibly lacking during the region’s most dramatic period.

The Change Within

Turkey’s century-long avoidance of greater regional issues was perhaps not so much grounded in disinterest or ideological avoidance as it was lacking basic power projection tools due to its decades-long weak economy. Its newfound economic growth in the early 2000s began to change all this at an impressive pace. Its rising economy made it more ambitious, self-confident, and assertive. Its cultural outlook was also changing fast, with the religious, conservative current of Turkish society replacing the secularist nationalists then in power. The success of conservative elements was attributed to their successful fusion with modern Turkish nationalism, a cultural shift that had been a century in the making. Perhaps first set off by the [1974 Cyprus conflict](#), the secular national elite co-opted the conservative religious Turkish community for a greater national struggle against its neighbor and rival, Greece. The Cyprus conflict unavoidably led to religious framings of the centuries-long rivalry, as most Turks saw themselves not only as members of a nation but also as members of a single faith that would trace its identity beyond the modern republic and to its Ottoman-Islamic past.

Neo-Ottomans Rise

The rise of this new, conservative Turkey was personified by the arrival of Erdoğan in 2002 at

the head of the Turkish political scene. Erdoğan’s policies started a slow shift of the old paradigms concerning both internal and foreign policy by returning an old but never-forgotten political tradition of Ottoman imperialism, which foreign observers dubbed [“neo-Ottomanism.”](#) This term was almost an accusation when used abroad, but inside Turkey, it meant refocusing Turkey’s role in the Islamic world, given that the Ottomans were the last bearers of the khalifate, giving Turkey religious [legitimacy](#) in the broader Islamic world. The premise of the term “neo-Ottoman policy” alludes to the restoration of modern-day Turkey’s political influence in the former provinces of the long-gone Ottoman Empire. The memory and notion of empire within wider Turkish culture have been persistent elements of historic nostalgic identity. Its reemergence as a dominant political force caused a profound shift in both the national consciousness and leadership of Turkey and ushered in a new era of Turkish foreign policy, which aimed to return to its influence in the former Ottoman space as a meaningful if not decisive actor.

The Shift

Turkey’s foreign policy shift from focusing exclusively on its immediate neighbors to focusing on broader regions of the Balkans, Caucasus, the Levant, and North Africa came as a surprise to many foreign actors and observers. Erdoğan’s first decade of rule was marked by the reintroduction of the Ottoman legacy to Turkish society, even as Turkey’s foreign policy goals remained [focused](#) on EU integration.

Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu’s initial foreign policy platform of [“zero problems with neighbors”](#) was partly implemented in practice, paving a constructive path to the resolution of the Cyprus issue via the Annan Plan as well as attempts to mediate between Turkey’s ally Azerbaijan and neighboring Armenia. In the shadows, however, speculations about a more ambitious Turkey were starting to emerge during Davutoğlu’s time as Erdoğan’s key foreign policy adviser. Davutoğlu, mostly known for his book [“Strategic Depth,”](#) envisioned a new foreign policy course: a Turkey that was assertive well beyond its borders to encompass the former space of the once-vast Ottoman Empire. Davutoğlu was Turkey’s foreign minister from 2009 to 2014, overseeing



Turkey Retreats

For a time, it seemed imminent and game-changing that Turkey, through political influence, could help install friendly and ideologically close political allies in Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and Egypt. The Turkish government under Erdoğan had struck at the opportunity and almost succeeded in restoring the modern equivalent of the Ottoman Empire by supporting friendly and democratically legitimate governments in place of Western-friendly but democratically illegitimate regimes. Turkey, by chance, almost became a world power overnight, subverting [Western-friendly dictatorships](#), despite Turkey's membership in NATO and decades of close policy ties with the West vis-à-vis the Middle East. Perhaps Erdoğan had little sympathy for Western-friendly military dictatorships because he had to overcome Turkey's very own military dictatorship at the ballot box. However, the consequences for Turkish and Western relations, particularly with the United States, had shifted fundamentally. The U.S. administration, then under President Barack Obama, decided it could no longer see Turkey as a dependable ally; its secular elites with military backing were gone. Turkey was now a competitor to the West, and competitors naturally need to be contained.

Turkey's ambitious foreign policy play almost completely unraveled due to the overestimation of its own political resources, its political experience, and its lack of military projection. U.S.-led efforts gradually reversed political gains made by Turkish-supported, [democratically elected](#) Islamist or Muslim Brotherhood parties through measures such as supporting the Egyptian military coup led by Abdel Fatah El-Sisi via billions of dollars in military aid [assistance](#), as well as the latest heavy [IMF financial support](#) package for Tunisian dictator Kais Saied to insulate his dictatorship from economic collapse. The Assad regime in Syria managed to hold onto power due to Russian military intervention, whereas Syrian Kurds received support from Western governments, which prompted the Turkish-supported Syrian opposition to retreat to the northern confines of Syria close to the Turkish border.

Libya remains the only [success](#) story for Turkish policy, albeit a partial one. Turkey continues to back the only remaining democratically elected government that

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (C) gestures upon his arrival to address a press conference after attending the closing session of the G20 summit in New Delhi on Sept. 10, 2023. (Money Sharma / AFP via Getty Images)

the first breakthrough of Turkish foreign policy in almost a century.

The first real opening was certainly opportunistic, coming on the heels of the 2010 surprise emergence of the Arab Spring revolts against established secular dictatorships. The Arab Spring created power vacuums in the former historical Ottoman provinces of Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and Egypt due to demands for the democratization of the state by their populace. These power vacuums gave the new Turkish leadership an [opening](#) and opportunity that they were perhaps waiting for but were inexperienced and unprepared to fully exploit. Erdoğan openly adopted the policy of supporting political parties and organizations that were termed by Western observers "Islamist" or were derivative of or successors to the [Muslim Brotherhood](#). These Islamist parties have long had a large following but were unable to come to power due to established military dictatorships financially supported by Western nations, particularly the United States, as well as Gulf Arab nations such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which themselves feared being overthrown by a popular uprising.



emerged from the Arab Spring, propping it up with military and financial aid. However, the power of the Turkish-backed government only encompasses [half](#) the Libyan state, while the rest is controlled by French- and Russian-backed military dictatorships. The sum of Turkish foreign policy during the Arab Spring events is a clear net minus, in terms of both its accomplished goals and its relationship with Western states. Davutoğlu's failed ambitious policy led to his falling out with Erdoğan and his eventual dismissal as minister of foreign affairs in 2014.

Enter Containment

The legacy of Davutoğlu's policy has shifted Turkish relations with the West toward regional strategic competition instead of cooperation. This has led to a policy of containment by Western states shifting to further political engagement. For example, the U.S. and Germany are [refusing](#) to continue the policy of military hardware sales to Turkey, signaling a further decoupling between the Turkey and the West.

Turkey, in turn, has attempted to offset containment by committing to [military hardware purchases](#) from Russia and China as well as heavily investing in its own domestic defense industry, which has been showing dividends, particularly during the [Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict](#) over Nagorno-Karabakh province. Economic ties have also seen deterioration, including Turkey accusing the United States and other Western nations of purposely devaluing the Turkish lira to force regime change and the U.S. accusing Turkey of circumventing Western sanctions on Russia and stalling NATO's enlargement.

Where Is the New "Empire" Heading?

In comparison to Turkey's ambitious breakout as a power player in the Middle East, its policy in the Balkans has been timid and lackluster. The Balkan region theoretically should be one of the main focuses of neo-Ottoman foreign policy; however, Turkey has had the weakest presence and a mostly incoherent political allegiance. Furthermore, ties between Turkey and the Balkan states today are mostly economic and cultural, with only a symbolic political presence. In contrast, Turkish activity in Muslim-majority countries of the Middle East and Caucasus is clearly illustrated

by Turkey's willingness to engage politically and militarily in major regional political events such as the Arab Spring and support Azerbaijan in its [military conflict](#) with Armenia.

Turkey has also had an active role in the Persian Gulf region, [establishing military bases in Qatar](#) and even in the Red Sea region in [Sudan](#), by helping government forces in Ethiopia [fight off](#) a rebel advance and face down PMC Wagner troops in Libya. The lack of political engagement by Turkey and its neo-Ottoman policies can at least be partially explained by the fact that most Balkan states have not had majority Muslim populations since the inception of neo-Ottomanism. It could be that Christian-majority countries are not considered to have "neo-Ottoman" strategic depth in the new Turkish worldview and are therefore of no strategic interest other than for economic cooperation.

However, this does not explain why Turkey is so visibly absent from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Albania, which do have Muslim-majority populations and have historically been considered as equally "Ottoman" as the Turks themselves. The Turkish economic and political presence has increased in these states since Erdoğan came to power. These ties have mostly been symbolic in terms of political support, with Erdoğan backing political parties that share ideological ties with his AK Party in Turkey. Turkish state investments have mostly focused on reconstructing the [Ottoman cultural heritage](#), which was especially [welcomed by the region's Muslim communities](#); however, meaningful infrastructural or government investments were mostly declaratory and were rarely realized. Private investment from Turkey did not appear to have state backing or direction to invest in Muslim-majority Balkan states; quite the opposite occurred, as Turkish private investment mostly flowed to [Christian-majority states such as North Macedonia and Serbia](#). These were perhaps the first steps Turkey was taking to engage itself in a region it had dominated for centuries in preparation for more meaningful engagement in the near future; however, meaningful strategic and security involvement was visibly missing.



President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's chief adviser Akif Cagatay Kilic (3rd R) meets with U.S. Ambassador to Turkey Jeffrey Flake (2nd L) and U.S. Special Presidential Coordinator for Global Infrastructure Amos J. Hochstein (out of view) at the Presidential Complex in Ankara on Aug. 29, 2023. (Rasit Aydogan / Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

The Balkan Chessboard

Given that U.S. policy in the Middle East during the Obama era was mostly reactive to Turkish advances, U.S./EU-led Western containment policy toward Turkey was not extended to the Balkans region until recently. The U.S. has proactively and visibly engaged in preemptive moves toward Erdoğan's Turkey in the Balkan and Aegean regions since the [Biden administration](#) took office, expanding on containment policies toward Turkey enacted by the Obama administration.

Recently, the U.S. [announced](#) the construction of a military base in the Greek Aegean coastal town of Alexandroupolis, 40 kilometers from the Turkish border and the Bosphorus Strait. France, too, announced a security cooperation agreement with Greece against Turkish ambitions in the Eastern Mediterranean region, in a disagreement over the extent of the [Turkish and Libyan Exclusive Economic Zones \(EEZ\)](#) at the expense of Greece's, and therefore the EU's, EEZ.

The U.S. also has aggressively entered political theaters in all the Western Balkan countries, with activities mostly at odds with those that consider Turkey and Erdoğan allies. It is impossible, therefore, not to look at any meaningful entry of Turkish foreign

policy into the Balkan area without the contextual backdrop of Turkish containment policy by the U.S./EU alliance, a policy that may continue at least until a more favorable regime comes to power after the 2028 elections in Turkey.

Turkey Lacks Meaningful Presence in the Balkans

Erdoğan's neo-Ottoman approach is seemingly centered on focusing, finding, and building alliances with conservative or Muslim elements in former Ottoman provinces that are now independent states in their own right. The Turkish strategy is to offer these states a level of protection and economic cooperation that would in turn give Turkey decisive influence. Only three such states qualify in the Balkans today: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Albania. Turkey has managed to make contacts with both conservative and leftist parties in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Albania. The largest Bosnian party — the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), whose founder is known for having Muslim Brotherhood ideological sympathies — has nurtured close [political ties](#) with the AK Party; they consider each other to be sister parties with common ideological roots. Erdoğan has many times personally visited or been hosted by the SDA's head in the Bosnian capital to publicly display these political ties.



Despite these close ties and other contacts, one cannot escape the conclusion that Turkey currently [lacks the strength](#) for a major political engagement in the Western Balkans. This lack of a meaningful presence can be best exemplified by events during the tumultuous period after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which prompted the U.S./EU alliance's heavy involvement in the internal politics of the Western Balkan states, especially Bosnia and Kosovo. Insofar as Muslim-majority states in the Western Balkans are concerned, a clear policy of containment was established toward preempting Turkish influence in the region.

The West's Preemptive Political Strike

U.S./EU policy in the Balkans became glaringly apparent in May 2023, when the SDA was pushed out of government via decrees imposed by the Office of the High Representative — a mechanism controlled by the U.S. and EU. The intention was clear: a push to [secure](#) EU member Croatia's political role to implement, at least temporarily, minority rule through its proxy co-national Croat minority in Bosnia. The decree imposed has been labeled by the majority-Muslim community as "[apartheid](#) minority rule" over a Muslim-majority country. Despite this de facto coup, Turkish officials have only quietly protested and have visibly left Bosnian politics outside demands set by Turkey in order to allow for further NATO enlargement.

What happened next in the nearby Republic of Kosovo confirmed the policy of preemptive containment of Turkey. Kosovo — in order to gain leverage over Serbia's encroachment of Kosovo's sovereignty in its northern, Serb-majority areas — recently purchased [Bayraktar drones](#) from Turkey, which has given its prime minister, Albin Kurti, more room to maneuver in his push to extend government [control](#) over the separatist Serb-majority areas in the north of the country, which is supported if not led by neighboring Serbia.

However, the newfound confidence and independent action of Kosovo's government has not sat well with U.S./EU officials, culminating in the U.S. ambassador to Kosovo publicly threatening Pristina's status to be relegated to that of Palestine at worst and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus at best, a glaring

reference to Kosovo's Muslim-majority country status and ties to Turkey.

The third Muslim-majority country in the Western Balkans is Albania, whose political leadership has proven its own loyalties to the U.S./EU led alliance in the Western Balkans so thoroughly that Albania's (non-Muslim) prime minister, Edi Rama, [broke ranks](#) for the first time ever with Kurti, joining U.S. and EU diplomats in denouncing Kurti's attempts to take control of the secessionist northern Kosovo region.

The Ball Is in Turkey's Court

The U.S. and EU are acting to prevent Turkish foreign policy influence in Muslim-majority states surrounded by the EU's member state borders. Brazen minority rule and apartheid principles established in Bosnia and threats of "Palestinization" to Kosovo show if not a determination to act decisively to prevent an adversarial Turkey from involving itself with states that are positioned deep within the European continent and the Western world in general. Simply put, Turkey has been beaten to the punch.

One possible limitation is geography. Both Bosnia and Kosovo lack coastal access. It should be noted that in Bosnia's case, a small strip of sovereign coastline does indeed exist; however, the state does not fully control the tiny strip, as evidenced in 2014, when a Turkish naval vessel was [denied access](#) by the Croat minority, which de facto controls the country's only strip of coastline. No further attempts to dock were made by the Turkish navy. Kosovo, on the other hand, could compensate for its lack of coastline via Albania, which at least for now is firmly in the U.S./EU camp.

It remains to be seen what Turkey's reaction will be, if any. One possible option is for Ankara to financially and politically support parties in Bosnia that compete for the support of the Muslim majority, including any other allies that have been disenfranchised by the latest U.S./EU policies in Bosnia. In Kosovo, Turkey can stand behind Kurti by securing more advanced weaponry to heavily leverage his position by giving Kosovo self-reliance for its territorial defense, a burden carried by U.S./EU states via the Kosovo Force mission. Kurti, in turn, would have a lot more room to [maneuver](#) if defense of the country did not depend on the U.S./



EU commitment. In Albania, Turkey could also throw resources behind the opposition Rama in order to bring Albania's and Kosovo's security policies closer together in the spirit of Albanian cooperation. In all cases, Turkey can use national and religious grievances to gain more influence.

Perhaps more strategically, Turkey can also foster alliances with non-Muslim-majority states such as North Macedonia and Montenegro, which fell victim to

the latest round of U.S./EU [policies](#) that seek a regional détente with adversarial Russia and find themselves without a backer. Turkey, in this regard, has options. Both North Macedonia and Montenegro are declared and potential political allies. However, Turkey needs to decide if it wants to enter the Balkan fray at all. The U.S./EU alliance has made sure to make it an uphill battle from the start. Now the ball is clearly in Turkey's court, and Erdoğan must decide on the play.



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Hungarian President Katalin Novak (R) and her Croatian counterpart Zoran Milanovic give a joint press conference at the presidential Sandor Palace in Budapest on Jan. 20, 2023. (Attila Kisbenedek / AFP via Getty Images)

Croatia and Hungary as Malign Actors in the Western Balkans

Jasmin Mujanović

Much has been made in recent years concerning the prospects of renewed “[great power competition](#)” in the Western Balkans. Russia, China, Turkey, and even the Gulf Arab states have variously, and collectively, been portrayed as threats to the primacy the U.S. and EU have established in the region since the end of the Yugoslav Wars (1991-2001). And Russia and China especially have, over the past decade, developed a robust political and economic footprint across the region. In recent months, for instance, U.S. and EU accommodation of the near-autocratic Vučić regime in Serbia, even in the face of renewed violence in Kosovo

orchestrated by Aleksandar Vučić’s government, has [largely been seen](#) by regional analysts as a reflection of the American and European desire to keep Belgrade from sinking deeper into the Kremlin’s orbit.

Whatever one’s assessment of this [dubious strategy](#), this idea of the Western Balkans as a site for geopolitical competition has clearly had a deep impact among many, including policymakers in the West concerned with the region. Even if one accepts that this analytical and policy framework is rooted in fact — that Russia and China and other regional actors have sought to contest, politically and economically,



the interests of the U.S. and EU in the region — the question remains: Are they the most significant adversaries and/or architects of instability and conflict in the region?

There are an infinite number of possible answers to this query, but a particularly salient one that has received little attention both in Washington and Brussels concerns the potential for spoiler elements within the Euro-Atlantic community itself. That is, these are states that are EU and NATO members but nevertheless demonstrate a propensity for explicitly or subtly undermining the strategic interests of both in the Western Balkans.

Two such states stand out in particular: Croatia and Hungary. In both the Croatian and Hungarian examples, it is Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the site of the deadliest of the Yugoslav conflicts, that has been the primary target of their malign activities. And despite Zagreb and Budapest's Bosnian forays (in)directly aligning with and aiding the interests of the West's chief geopolitical adversaries, both have suffered limited — if any — rebuke from their allies for the same. And this is the case even as BiH continues to host the EU's largest ongoing peacekeeping force in the world, the approximately 1,100 strong EUFOR.

Croatia's Colonial Aspirations

During the period of so-called de-Tuđmanization in the lead-up to Croatia's accession to the EU in 2013, officials in Zagreb made modest steps toward accepting responsibility for the then-Croatian government's policies of collaboration with Serbia in the repeatedly attempted partition of BiH between the two sides between 1992 and 1995.¹ But when Andrej Plenković took over the leadership of the long-dominant HDZ (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica) and then became prime minister in 2016, Croatia radically reversed course. Today, the country has virtually no foreign policy interests aside from its continuous and systematic interference in BiH's domestic affairs, exclusively on behalf of the hardline sectarian HDZ BiH, the sister party of Plenković's HDZ, and the primary vehicle for the Franjo Tuđman-era aggression against BiH by Croatia.

The solitary aim of Plenković's government since 2016 has been winning international support for introducing still further sectarian provisions within BiH's electoral and constitutional regime — already the most deeply ethnically divided political regime in the world — and to cement the grips of its clients in the HDZ BiH on all possible levers of power in the country. Indeed, much as it was during the 1990s, the HDZ BiH has ceased to be an autonomous actor at all; it is today no more than a proxy vehicle for the political and ideological machinations of Plenković and the right-wing nationalist clique that constitutes his cabinet. It is a posture and relationship a former high-ranking German official in BiH has characterized as "[colonialism](#)."

To wit, the symbiotic relationship between the two blocs is best evidenced in the person of a Željana Zovko, a BiH-born former Bosnian diplomat and HDZ BiH cadre. Previously, Zovko was a senior figure within the Bosnian foreign policy establishment, serving in successive stints as the country's ambassador to France and Spain, and then as chief adviser to the country's then prime minister, Vjekoslav Bevanda, likewise a senior HDZ BiH figure. In 2014, however, Zovko ran for election as a member of the European Parliament (MEP) from Croatia on the HDZ's party list. She failed in her bid, and despite having run as a candidate in a foreign country's election, she was then reappointed as BiH's ambassador to Italy by the HDZ BiH's leader, Dragan Čović, who was then also serving as the Croat member of the BiH presidency. After a government reshuffling in Croatia in 2016, though, she was [nominated by Plenković to fill a vacant seat](#) and serve as one of the country's legislators in Brussels after all.

Zovko resigned her ambassadorship in the Bosnian diplomatic corps and, overnight, became a Croatian MEP. In 2019 she actually won election to the post, and has since worked her way into a senior position within the European People's Party (EPP), largely owing to her close relationship with David McAllister, a German MEP and senior figure in that country's Christian Democratic Union (CDU), and Plenković's benefaction. In her increasingly prominent role in Brussels, Zovko appears to have no other policy interests — despite occasional foreign elections observation missions — other than concern with BiH's election laws and other related domestic affairs in the country.



Croatian president Zoran Milanović (L) and prime minister Andrej Plenković attend a press briefing after their meeting at the Presidential Office in Zagreb, Croatia, in July 2020. (Dalibor Urukalic / Pixsell via Xinhua via Getty Images)

The brazen nature of Zovko's entry into the European Parliament was the subject of media outrage in BiH but had no discernible effects on her stature in Brussels. In May 2022, for instance, Zovko gleefully shared an article on her official Twitter account from a Croatian newspaper that recorded how her associate, David McAllister, had boasted at a roundtable organized by Zovko on the topic of electoral reform in BiH, whose participants were exclusively individuals with close ties to the two HDZs, and that he had seen [Plenković "draw a map and in fifteen minutes explain the problem in BiH."](#) For much of the Bosnian public, the reference to "drawing a map" by a prominent Croatian leader was an intentional call-back to repeated instances in which Tuđman was known to have drawn crude sketches of BiH for foreign dignitaries and journalists to explain his schemes for [the country's partition with](#)

[Serbia](#). While Zovko subsequently deleted a video from the same event that showed McAllister making the comment, she never removed the newspaper clipping and she remains, as of this writing, the most prominent advocate for further sectarian fragmentation in BiH.

For his part, Plenković has routinely cited Tuđman as Croatia's greatest ever statesmen, and, preposterously, one of [the 20th century's greatest on the whole](#). Plenković has also characterized [Tuđman's](#) well-documented collaboration with the regime in Belgrade to partition BiH, a policy for which he [continued to advocate even after the war](#), and widespread war crimes and crimes against humanity committed against Bosniak civilians during the Bosnian War by Croat nationalist forces – in which [Tuđman himself was implicated](#) – as a "struggle for the equality of Croats in BiH."



Croatia's president, Zoran Milanović, ostensibly a fierce critic of Plenković, is even more avowedly committed to supporting his rival's sister party in BiH, despite having been the former head of the HDZ's chief rival, the Croatian Social Democratic Party. Milanović has not only repeatedly glorified Croat nationalist militias in BiH involved in large-scale atrocities during the war, but he has also struck up a close relationship with secessionist strongman Milorad Dodik, the longtime chief of the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska (RS) entity created through the genocidal extermination and expulsion of the region's non-Serbs during the Bosnian War, [even referring](#) to him as "Croatia's partner in BiH." Milanović has also made [thinly veiled racist comments](#) about the Bosniak community, and has repeatedly questioned the facts of the Srebrenica genocide, with the former Bosniak member of the BiH state presidency, Šefik Džaferović, [having accused him](#) of explicitly denying the genocide at a regional summit in Slovenia in 2022. Milanović has denied any wrongdoing, but his comments were cited in the 2022 edition of [the Srebrenica Genocide Denial Report](#), which was published by the Srebrenica Memorial Center, as examples of genocide denial and relativization.

In April 2022, Milanović made international headlines when he insisted that Croatia should not allow Finland and Sweden to join NATO until BiH — an EU and NATO nonmember — was forced to amend its election laws in line with the demands of Zagreb. Plenković distanced himself from Milanović's ultimatum; but at a [January 2023 hearing](#) in front of the U.K. Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, Kurt Bassuener, a prominent American expert on the region, speculated that "what was going on below the waterline was that those who did have that power — the [Croatian] Government — were pursuing that [policy] less visibly." While Bassuener's theory remains impossible to prove conclusively, the publicly available record is damning and gets to the center of Croatia's contemporary assault on BiH's sovereignty.

On Oct. 2, 2022, High Representative Christian Schmidt — a former German parliamentarian from the CDU's sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), who had [received state honors from the Croatian government](#) only months before his name was publicly leaked as the incoming candidate for the post — unilaterally amended the election code

and constitution of the Federation entity only minutes after the polls had closed in BiH's general elections. The specificities of what Schmidt did and why he did it are [exceedingly complex](#) and require a significant degree of explication as this incident concerns the minutiae of BiH's Byzantine election laws. But the conclusion is glaringly simple: the government of Croatia orchestrated a major perversion of a significant portion of BiH's election regime, using the Office of the High Representative's executive Bonn Powers to artificially cement its clients in the HDZ BiH in power in the Federation entity and thus (in)directly also at the state level.

In any other context, Schmidt's actions — changing (a portion of) a country's election laws minutes after the polls had closed to secure the position of a political party whose [partisan loyalties were clearly to a foreign government](#) and to whom he had troublingly proximate links — would have been considered a coup. In BiH, however, it became only the most recent episode in a decades-long effort to dismantle the country's sovereign institutions by neighboring Croatia, through (in)direct complicity with key Western officials, all under the guise of "electoral reform."

Helpfully, Croatia's prime minister made the same point obvious a few weeks after the October decision, when, speaking to the Croatian parliament, he [boasted that his government](#) had "advocated for the rights of Croats in BiH, constantly, continuously. ... We did not just remember to do so, but [we did so] for years. And we succeeded. ... We imposed it as a topic ... in the [EU's] Strategic Compass, raised the topic at the European Council. [We] engaged European and American diplomacy, engaged the highest level of the European Council, the president, to deal with the issue of Bosnia and Herzegovina. And when all that failed, because it was not wanted by the political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina, we ensured that the Croats were given a hand in terms of their rights, and the High Representative was the only one who could and did help. None of this is by accident." In April 2023, speaking to one of largest daily newspapers in Croatia, the prime minister was even more explicit in his descriptions of what Schmidt had done, [stating bluntly](#) that "Schmidt prepared and implemented solutions to the benefit of Croats," by which he obviously meant the sectarian base of the HDZ BiH.



The Hungarian Variant

Hungary's growing clout in BiH has complemented Croatia's interests in the country; but whereas Zagreb has largely focused its efforts on the HDZ BiH, Budapest has become, along with Belgrade and Moscow, one of the leading patrons of Dodik's secessionist authorities in the RS entity. During a December 2021 press conference, for instance, at the height of yet another secession-themed political crisis orchestrated in BiH by Dodik, Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orban, [explained](#) that "I am doing my best to convince Europe's great leaders that the Balkans may be further away from them than from Hungary, but how we manage the security of a state in which 2 million Muslims live is a key issue for their security too." Orban was not only casting the mere existence of a predominantly Muslim people in Europe as an inherent security threat; he was also simultaneously materially supporting the secessionist efforts of the Dodik regime in Banja Luka, pledging as much as €100 million to make up any financial losses the government of the RS entity might suffer as a result of EU sanctions, which [Budapest likewise pledged to explicitly block](#).

In service of their sponsorship of Dodik's regime, Hungary has also directly co-opted EU institutions. In 2019, Oliver Varhelyi, Budapest's former ambassador to the EU, was appointed the Union's enlargement commissioner. In effect, Orban seized control of the EU's entire Western Balkans policy. The consequences of this folly soon became clear. In December 2021, Bosnian media reported on a cache of leaked documents showing that Varhelyi and the local EU staff in Sarajevo had coordinated with Dodik's secessionist authorities concerning the conduct and timing of a session of the RS entity assembly, during which Dodik's ruling bloc sought to unilaterally transfer a host of state competencies to their own entity government. Varhelyi denied any wrongdoing, but the leaked documents and his activities in BiH resulted in a call by the EU Parliament for a [formal inquiry](#) into his activities.

To date, nothing has come of that appeal, and Hungary's activities on behalf of Dodik have thus been a categorical success. Dodik remains free of any meaningful EU rebukes, and sanctions by the EU are

not even on the table. In March 2023 Hungary's foreign minister [stated bluntly](#) that "[as] long as we are in power in Hungary, ... Dodik will not be on any sanctions list." In fact, quite the contrary has occurred.

Dodik's regime continues to (in)directly benefit from a host of EU funds for the entity's development and economic modernization; albeit, most of these are framed as being for the whole of BiH. In practice, however, Dodik continues to engage in systematic obstruction of both BiH's Dayton Peace Accords — embedded in which is the country's constitution — and its EU and NATO integration aspirations, while still receiving billions in aid from Brussels and now also direct cash transfers from Budapest. In December 2022, he received a [ten-year \\$117 million loan](#) from the Hungarian state-owned Export-Import Bank. In May 2023, Hungary provided the RS entity with [another €17 million](#), as part of a separate €35 million loan tranche, in exchange for which the RS government appears to be selling Hungary large segments of its energy infrastructure with little in the way of public oversight.

The Hungarians also have robust financial ties to Croatia, which aligns with their shared interest in BiH, and likewise involves a significant Russian dimension. To wit, Hungarian firms have been directly implicated in two of the largest financial scandals in Croatia's postwar history. The first one was via their stake in the Croatian state-owned oil conglomerate INA, which last year was embroiled in an eight-figure embezzlement scandal discovered by local anticorruption police. That was on top of [a 2019 verdict](#), which found that Zsolt Hernadi, the chief executive and chairman of MOL, the energy concern that owns 49% of INA, was "guilty of bribing former Croatian Prime Minister Ivo Sanader in 2008 to allow MOL to become the key decision-maker in Croatian energy firm INA."

Then, on the eve of the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, Croatia desperately sought to deal with Russia's "[largest European asset](#)": the Kremlin's €1 billion stake (or 42.5%) in the beleaguered Croatian retail giant Fortenova. In short order, the Russians made a deal to sell their stake to group with close ties to Orban, which the Croatian authorities likewise appeared eager to approve. The deal fell through, however, when Moscow formally (re)invaded Ukraine, and British regulators — not Croatian — made clear



their intention to scuttle the deal, viewing it as de facto sanctions busting. Attempts by Zagreb to pass off the Russian ownership stake to more reputable owners have been fruitless, and in May the government was accused of having [inappropriately pressured](#) the German insurance giant Allianz, after “a local pension fund it controls pulled out of a deal that involved a €500 [million] payment to Kremlin-controlled Sberbank.” Indeed, the only actors that appear to have interest in Fortenova continue be the Hungarians and various mystery buyers, all of which are suspected of being linked to Moscow.

Conclusions

Western officials continue to express concern and alarm about the deteriorating political and security conditions in the Western Balkans, especially since recent episodes of unrest orchestrated by the Serbian government. How limited their actual desire (or

perhaps even capacities) for a comprehensive reset of their regional posture remains, however, is shown clearly in the example of Croatia and Hungary’s rogue machinations in BiH. Far from having opposed their activities, both the U.S. and EU have been complicit in Zagreb’s and Budapest’s increasingly malign meddling in a country where 100,000 people were killed in a war not yet three decades past.

If the leading states of the Atlantic community, the Quint, ever truly decide to reexamine their compounding errors in the region, they should begin not with an assessment of Russian or Chinese machinations in the Western Balkans. They should begin from within, from inside their own alliance, and take stock of the dangerous and self-serving adventurism in which their own allies are engaging. If the U.S. and EU cannot rein in Croatia and Hungary in BiH, they have no hope of ever meeting the Russian or Chinese challenge in the coming decade.



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Endnote

1 Portions of this discussion were extracted from my forthcoming book “The Bosniaks: Nationhood After Genocide” (Hurst Publishers), which at time of writing is available for preorder.



Pro-Serbian demonstrators in Strasbourg, France, display a banner reading “Kosovo is Serbia” to protest the independence of Kosovo in February 2008. (Olivier Morin / AFP via Getty Images)

The Kosovo–Serbia Conundrum Reaches a Breaking Point: Kosovo’s North Emerges as Europe’s Most Vulnerable Spot Outside Ukraine

Agon Maliqi

On May 29, 2023, many observers of world affairs seemed surprised by the dramatic [footage](#) coming out of Kosovo. NATO peacekeepers were being [brutally attacked](#) by a mob of violent Serb protesters in the northern Serbian-majority town of Zveçan.

Fulfilling their security mandate as a responder of last resort, the peacekeepers found themselves sandwiched between the violent protesters — many of whom were part of informal security structures tied to the Serbian government — and Kosovo’s Special Police Units, consisting of Albanians, which had surrounded the town hall.

Two days earlier, the Special Police had escorted four newly elected Albanian mayors into their office buildings in Serbian-majority municipalities. The Serbs, who boycotted the elections [under instructions](#) from the Serbian government, contested the legitimacy of mayors who won with a symbolic turnout of 3% but who had been formally recognized as legal by the international community.

Then on June 15, three Kosovo border policemen [ended up in the custody](#) of Serbia’s Special Police unit as they were patrolling smuggling routes. Kosovo’s government claims they were abducted within Kosovo’s territory, which is formally under the



protection of the NATO mission. Serbia says they had crossed into Serbia. NATO [said](#) it could not verify, but the U.S. demanded their immediate release, which eventually happened on June 26. These two major escalation episodes occurred only a few months after Kosovo's government and police were involved in another battle with Kosovo Serbs in the north over the use of Serbian-issued car license plates and identification cards.

The burning question that has emerged from these episodes is: Who controls the north of Kosovo? The answer to this question may hold the key to the resolution of the long-lasting dispute between Kosovo and Serbia – and Balkan security in general.

Kosovo's four northern municipalities are territorially connected to Serbia through hilly terrain that is difficult to control by the central government in Prishtina and is conducive to smuggling, [including that of weapons](#). They have an overwhelming Serbian-majority hostile to Kosovo's independence and its institutions.

In 1999, as the defeated Yugoslav army withdrew from Kosovo along with many fleeing Serbian civilians, NATO set up a roadblock at the bridge separating the northern city of Mitrovica from the other part of Kosovo, creating something of a *cordon sanitaire* for the Serbs in the north.

For almost two decades, even after Kosovo gained independence in 2008 and Serbs living in other parts of Kosovo gradually integrated within its institutional structures, the north remained a world of its own. Kosovo was protected by NATO but operated fully under Serbian state structures. Then, around 2015, a gradual process of [formal integration](#) began through the EU-facilitated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia.

For example, in 2017 Serbia's parallel structures for the judiciary and police were [integrated](#) into Kosovo's system. Northern Kosovo Serbs accepted this grudgingly, pressured by the government in Belgrade, which at the time was pursuing EU accession and was eager to please the West. To implement its will, Belgrade asserted full control over Kosovo Serb politics and created the Serbian List – a party under its control that eliminated any dissenting voices among Kosovo Serbs. One such voice, Oliver Ivanovic, was infamously [assassinated](#) in 2018.

The north has for many years been [described by international organizations](#) as a hotspot of organized crime – a “local fiefdom of a few individuals” with ties to the government in Belgrade. Its leaders last year [were sanctioned](#) by the U.S. and the U.K. For many years, despite occasional tensions, the Serbian List played the role of Belgrade's enforcer of either stability or secessionism.

Things finally went downhill in November 2022. Kosovo Serbs in the north – again under Belgrade's direction, but this time much more willingly – went in the other direction and [abandoned all Kosovo's institutions](#), including the police and courts. This has left Albanian police officers as the only ones responsible for the rule of law. They also resigned from mayoral posts, which created a crisis of mayoral legitimacy.

This reversal of the integration trend is also being associated with the weakening of the power of the Serbian List, whose leaders are not necessarily seen as credible by local Serbs. With tensions still high, some of the protesting crowds were also observed cursing President Aleksandar Vučić and [even physically attacking](#) the leaders of the Serbian List.

The answer to the question of who controls the north so far seems to be: nobody and everybody at the same time. Hence the chaos and the violence, as sides poke the limits and weapons seem to be plentifully available. The north has reached the point where there is a high likelihood of someone getting shot and killed, which risks a dangerous escalation spiral. This is exactly what Russian information warfare is predicting will happen and what Russia would like to see happen, hoping to distract the West from Ukraine.

Russia's Aggression Against Ukraine Opened a Balkan Can of Worms

The main reason tensions have escalated is in fact a major Western [diplomatic effort](#) aiming to make things better. Only a few months ago, Kosovo and Serbia reached agreements in [Brussels](#) and [Ohrid](#) that were supposed to lead to the full normalization of relations. Yet as the recent escalations show, this is now an effort on the brink of failure, like several of its predecessors. And this is the case for the very same



Security forces increase measures after violence escalates in Zvečan, Kosovo on May 30, 2023. At least 30 soldiers of the NATO-led international peacekeeping mission in Kosovo were injured in clashes with Serb protesters trying to prevent the newly elected mayor from taking the oath of office. (Erkin Keci / Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

reasons, most of which have to do with Western policy toward the region.

Ever since the end of the bloody dissolution of Yugoslavia – with Kosovo’s declaration of independence in 2008 being its last chapter – the West’s approach to pacifying the Balkans was to replicate the path that Western Europe took after World War II.

A key pillar of this approach centers on the countries’ road to joining the EU, which was meant to create codependency, protect ethnic minority rights, and ultimately make state borders like those between Kosovo and Serbia less important. In 2011, the EU-facilitated normalization dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia started under the premise that the EU had critical leverage on both sides through its policy of conditionality. This effectively meant that Serbia would one day have to recognize Kosovo’s independence in order to join the EU.

The EU dialogue was able to produce two agreements [in 2013](#) and [2015](#) that, among other things, [brought the northern parallel institutions into Kosovo’s fold](#) and were a major step toward full normalization. The agreements also foresaw an additional layer of

autonomy for Kosovo Serbs through the Association of Serbian-Majority Municipalities (ASMM).

It was at about this time that the EU put its enlargement to the Western Balkans indefinitely on hold. The irreversible damage and the toxic dynamics that this historic decision unleashed throughout the region are hard to overstate.

This decision radically changed the incentives of local political elites by removing an external anchor of peace-building and democratic reforms. It fueled authoritarian leaderships, stifled economic growth, and invited capital from authoritarian countries to fill financing needs. Perhaps most importantly, it undermined the West’s leverage and opened the door for external actors like Russia to create headaches for the West.

In response, EU policy toward the region has for most of the past decade been on an autopilot that may only be described as “containment.” The EU and its associated Brussels-bubble commentariat continued to pay lip service to enlargement and fuel illusions while failing to push any of the countries substantially toward joining the EU.

It is within this context of a questionable EU perspective that the question of ethnic borders in the region regained prominence and that security concerns grew, especially for NATO. Successive U.S. administrations were more clear-eyed on the vulnerabilities being created. This explains why NATO membership in the region progressed (e.g., North Macedonia and Montenegro joined NATO) while EU accession stalled.

The U.S. has for a very long time seen the Kosovo-Serbia dispute as [a key regional bottleneck](#). The current state of affairs enables Russia to serve as the protector of Serbia’s interests and to dictate its geopolitical orientation; it prevents both countries’ Euro-Atlantic path; and it creates a security vulnerability to be exploited, as the last weeks showed. These are some of the reasons why Russia [has actively sought](#) to undermine Western-led normalization efforts between Kosovo and Serbia.

In 2018, with support from the Trump administration and some corners of Europe, the leaders of Kosovo



and Serbia even toyed with the idea of a land swap between Kosovo and Serbia as a potential solution. This would see parts of Kosovo north join Serbia in exchange for parts of Albanian-inhabited regions in southern Serbia. The effort failed, largely due to fears of domino effects on the region; to resistance from a few European countries, primarily Germany; and to its unpopularity in Kosovo.

Then, in 2022 came Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Russia's strategic blunder both created an opening and highlighted the urgency of settling the Kosovo-Serbia dispute. And this produced the initiative that led to the Basic Agreement reached in February of that year.

The central premise of the recent deal is not to achieve the final goal of mutual recognition, but an intermediary step that would allow Kosovo to join multilateral institutions without formally recognizing Serbia, similarly to how West Germany and East Germany agreed to coexist in the international arena. In exchange, Kosovo would fulfill its previous commitments on Serbs' rights within its constitutional framework. The escalation in the north showed that what may have seemed a reasonable plan to some in the West failed in its first major encounter with reality.

A Poor Negotiating Framework Meets a Perfectly Complicated Reality

For the Basic Agreement to work, there needed to be a clear and agreed-on sequence of events on who does what and by when. There also needed to be a minimum level of trust between the sides; clear incentives for adherence to the deal; and a mediator with credibility and leverage. None of these preconditions were in place — which explains why the agreement is already falling apart.

A sequenced implementation plan was attempted in April in Ohrid but failed. That sequencing would have settled, for example, the issue of elections in the north, which led to recent escalations. Instead, the implementation plan ended up being anything but a plan. It was [a very vague text](#) — more of a face-saving measure for the mediators, which only delayed proceedings until the next crisis.

The incentives for the sides to adhere to the deal may not be seen by them as incentives. By accepting that

the agreement would be unsigned ([upon Serbia's request](#)) but making it [a binding condition](#) for Serbia's EU accession, the EU continues to operate under the illusion that the EU accession perspective still drives behavior.

This neglects the fact that Serbia has become unacceptable as an EU membership candidate for other reasons, like [deterioration in democracy and the rule of law](#). Vučić — who has actively fueled anti-Western narratives — has signaled he doesn't care about EU membership. Kosovo, on the other hand, cannot move toward joining the EU because Kosovo is not recognized by five EU members. The mediators [can't guarantee](#) that these five will recognize Kosovo, even if the deal with Serbia is implemented.

Even if the sides were to be motivated to pursue an EU accession path, the credibility of the EU that it can deliver on its end is in tatters due to its unanimity rules. North Macedonia went through a painful name change in its historic agreement with Greece and is still stuck facing obstacles due [to a veto](#) by Bulgaria on issues related to history and identity.

The EU's credibility has been particularly shattered in Kosovo. The EU has for many years now adopted an asymmetric approach to the two sides. Although 22 EU members recognize Kosovo, the bloc has effectively allowed the five nonrecognizers to dictate a status-neutral position, which becomes evident in official EU statements.

In earlier days, the EU's status neutrality used to be balanced by Washington's involvement as a staunch Kosovo supporter. But now the U.S. also prioritizes relations with Serbia for transactional reasons, like [the shipment of weapons to Ukraine](#), and its general efforts to drive a wedge between Russia and its allies.

Yet nothing undermines the process like the toxic mistrust between the two leaders. Both seem to [truly think](#) that [the other one wants](#) to start a war and is engaged in a game of chicken, trying to trap the other into a confrontation course with NATO in the north.

Vučić, whose power in Serbia has been waning and who faces weekly protests, has a clear interest in avoiding any decision on Kosovo and seeing the agreement fail — so long as he doesn't get full blame



for it in the West. The recent tensions in the north [suit Vučić well](#). A security crisis is helping to quell the domestic protests and creates an obstacle to the continuation of the dialogue.

Vučić has been able to preserve his maneuvering space between Russia and the West, which is a key source of his power. To achieve this goal, he has found the perfect weapon: Kosovo's almost existential fear of the ASMM — the elephant in the room in this entire drama.

The irony is that no one in Serbia, or among Kosovo Serbs, seems to particularly want this body — especially one without executive powers that would [effectively repackage](#) the existing rights Serbs obtained in 2008. The real goal for Serbia remains either a status-quo or ethnic partition, which is why Serbs abandoned institutions only in the north and not in the south, where most Serbs live.

Yet Vučić has justified his escalations with Kosovo's failure to commit to its side of the bargain and provide a draft of the statute of the ASMM, setting it as a precondition for any of his concessions. He has found support for that line of reasoning even among Kosovo's [staunchest supporters](#) in the West.

Which raises the question of why Kurti is not calling Vučić's bluff and hasn't provided a draft statute of the ASMM, even though he has effectively committed to it, especially after the U.S. [guarantees](#) that it would be to Kosovo's liking.

Instead, while that draft was being expected, Kurti sent the Special Police to escort the mayors to the north against NATO advice, aware of the security risks it would produce and how it would complicate the larger political game in the dialogue.

The Hidden Cost of Trauma

Kurti's strategy of antagonizing Kosovo's friends and allies at a critical moment has left many puzzled. Does he not believe in any of the Western guarantees? Is he prioritizing domestic politics, where the ASMM is highly unpopular and police actions in the north are good for approval ratings? Does he really believe that he can change the reality on the ground in the north through force? Does he have another, longer game in mind?



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (R) meets with President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić (4th L) at Carmelite Monastery in Budapest, Hungary on August 20, 2023. (Mustafa Kamaci / Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

All the above may be true. In any case, his strategy has set Kosovo on a course of isolation from the West and of sharing the blame with Vučić, which won't bring any good. In fact, it may, [as the U.S. ambassador to Kosovo warned](#), turn it "into a Palestine at worst and a Cyprus at best" — with the north as a NATO protectorate.

It is hard to predict what will happen next. More episodes of controlled violence are likely. What is clear is that the current status-quo in the north, where no one is in full control, can no longer hold.

While Kurti has emerged as another problem to be managed for the West, alongside the "known devil" Vučić, this episode has once again showcased the central impotence of Western policy toward the region, which it is now trying to hide through threats of sanctions. It also shows that in solving complex conflicts involving identity and past trauma, counting on countries to pursue rational courses of action is not a safe bet.



The core premise of replicating how Western Europe achieved its peace will remain extraordinarily unlikely – and not just because the Western Balkans do not have a credible EU membership perspective. It remains elusive because the region is missing another component of Europe’s successful history of peace. World War II ended with a clear winner, which was able to impose at gunpoint a process for dealing with the past, for which its main culprit, Germany, embraced its responsibility.

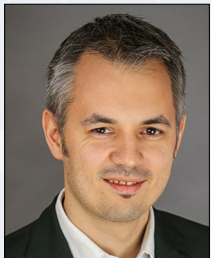
In the most recent Balkan wars, the fighting ended not with the final defeat of Milošević’s hegemonic Serbia but with peace agreements that left frozen conflicts in Kosovo’s north and a fragile peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The process of dealing with the past, which focused on punitive measures through the Hague Tribunals, failed to produce societal effects.

There was no Willy Brandt moment that would put Serbia’s neighbors at ease. In fact, [war crime denials](#) and historical revisionism about Serbia’s genocidal past are at an all-time high. The West’s current Serbia-centric policy fails to account for the costs of this fact.

Accommodating Serbia may make some sense from the perspective of realpolitik or momentary transactional needs like arming Ukraine. Since the Balkans do need a Serbia anchored to the West, it may also make sense to engage in some “trauma management” – namely, signaling to the anxious anti-Western Serbian society that, [in the context](#) of Russia’s collapse, Serbs will be protected and safe under the Western framework.




Yet this will be an elusive goal as long as the shapeshifting and unrepentant nationalist Vučić is in power in Serbia. The trauma and irrational behavior will simply be exported to the victims of Serbia’s aggression in the 1990s. The exploitation of this trauma – through the use of [“reflexive control”](#) as a hybrid warfare tool – has in fact become Vučić’s secret weapon in provoking irrational responses and fears in Kosovo, like the one about the ASMM.


The result of the West’s attempt to turn Serbia westward through Vučić has been to, in effect, slowly turn the entire region against the West. It is time to treat the root causes and not the symptoms.




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