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SWP Comment

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Western Balkan Foreign and Security Ties with External Actors

An arena of geostrategic rivalry for the EU or a local power struggle?

Marina Vulović

Even though the six Western Balkan countries (WB6) have close political ties with the EU, their alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) has increasingly come into focus since the beginning of the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine. The EU should take a differentiated view of the WB6's political and security cooperation with external actors such as Russia, China and Turkey. Within the WB6, the two "outliers" of Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina's Republika Srpska use their foreign and security relations with Russia to achieve their own political goals. While Serbia seeks support for its Kosovo policy, Republika Srpska is trying to get backing for its separatist tendencies. The WB6 are not expected to end their cooperation with the aforementioned external actors in the near future. Nonetheless, in today's shifting geopolitical arena, the EU must set priorities that bind the WB6's outliers to the CFSP.

Although the six Western Balkan countries of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia (WB6) usually act in alignment with the EU's CFSP, some traditional competitors to the EU, such as Russia, China and Turkey, still continue to vie for influence in the region. Although the US is an EU partner, under President Trump, it showed that the pursuit of its own goals in the Balkans can sometimes take precedence over the aims of the EU. This became clear, for instance, with the so-called "Washington Agreement" (2020) through which Serbia and Kosovo committed to moving their embassies in Israel to Jerusalem, a step that runs counter to the EU's CFSP. The US's support of re-

forming Bosnia-Herzegovina's electoral law in 2022 was also not entirely in line with the EU's approach to the issue. The US supported changing the law as it was thought that it would weaken pro-Russia parties. The EU was unenthusiastic about this move as it would have allowed unilateral decisions by the High Representative for Bosnia-Herzegovina to undermine local reform efforts. Nonetheless, Brussels does not currently see the US as a competitor in the Western Balkans. The EU and US usually act in a complementary manner and are important partners in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. Moreover, the Biden administration has indicated that it wants to return to traditional US policy in the Balkans.



Russia's role in the Balkans is often defined as that of a spoiler power, that is, it pursues a strategy intending to destabilise the Western liberal order. Moscow cannot offer a significant economic or political alternative to the EU in the region, thus it primarily works to obstruct the further integration of the Western Balkan (WB) states into the EU just as it aims to halt NATO expansion. However, particularly in Serbia, Republika Srpska and Montenegro, Russia exercises a pronounced "soft power" due to its shared religious (Christian Orthodox), cultural and historical ties. China's activities, on the other hand, are mainly focused on the economic sector (e.g. investments in infrastructure and mining projects). Through such economic ties, China has gained foreign and security policy relevance in the Balkans. Particularly noteworthy is China's arms trade with the region and its role in Serbia's surveillance infrastructure. Finally, NATO member Turkey has a difficult time competing with the EU in the realm of security policy in the Balkans but it does exercise "soft power" in the region through a framework of cultural cooperation.

Foreign policy, diplomacy and cultural cooperation

The substance and severity of foreign policy cooperation between the WB6 and external actors is easily observable in the arena of international organisations. Of particular importance here is the UN Security Council (UNSC). As permanent members of the UNSC, China and Russia have, for instance, supported Serbia by refusing to recognise Kosovo. Exercising their vetoes, these two countries still block a new resolution that would officially define Kosovo's status. This obstruction is an important reason why Kosovo is still unrecognised by many states and why it has not yet become a member of the UN. Even within the EU, five member states (Spain, Greece, Cyprus, Romania and Slovakia) have also refused to recognise Kosovo out of fear of losing portions of

their territories where significant minorities could demand self-determination.

By closely coordinating its diplomatic efforts with Russia and others, Serbia was also able to prevent Kosovo from becoming a member of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and Interpol in 2015 and 2017 respectively. Without an international consensus on Kosovo statehood, the issue will always be a lever for Serbia's cooperation with Moscow and Beijing. Even Russia's invasion of Ukraine has not deterred collaboration: On the side-lines of the UN General Assembly on 23 September 2022, Serbia and Russia signed a consultation plan between their respective foreign ministries that will be in effect for the next two years, an act that the EU and US look extremely unfavourably upon. It should be noted here that Serbia recently signed a similar agreement with the US. Also, while it has voted in favour of some UN resolutions condemning Russia's invasion, Serbia's overall rate of alignment with relevant CFSP decisions dropped from 64 percent in 2021 to 45 percent in 2022, in large part due to its refusal to enact sanctions against Russia. The only other WB country with comparable limited alignment with the CFSP is Bosnia-Herzegovina because its constituent Republika Srpska advocates for a neutral stance vis-à-vis Russian aggression. The rest of the WB6 are in 100 percent harmony with the CFSP. While Kosovo's rate of alignment is not officially measured, its adherence to Russian sanctions would have no practical significance as it is not recognised by Moscow.

Russia has also continuously obstructed the work of the Peace Implementation Council (PIC), which oversees the work of the Office of the High Representative for Bosnia-Herzegovina. In the five years between 2017 and 2022 alone, Moscow vetoed the appointment of the current High Representative Christian Schmidt in the UNSC, opposed the PIC's declaration that Republika Srpska had no right to secede and questioned the legitimacy of rulings from the International Criminal Tribunal for the for-

mer Yugoslavia. Russia aims to abolish the Office of the High Representative and to reduce Western influence over Bosnia-Herzegovina's institutions. This strategy shows Moscow's role as a spoiler, which only benefits strongmen like Milorad Dodik, the president of Republika Srpska.

Nearly all Western Balkan countries share close cultural ties with Turkey. Ankara is heavily involved in preserving the Ottoman cultural heritage in the Balkans and – through the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency – finances the renovation of monuments and mosques or the construction of new places of worship in those parts of the region that have a Muslim-majority population. This can be observed in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Sandžak (spanning south-western Serbia and north-eastern Montenegro), western North Macedonia, and in Albania and Kosovo. Turkey also funds cultural centres and Turkish language courses throughout the region. Middle Eastern countries, especially Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), also invest in the construction of mosques in Bosnia-Herzegovina as well as in real estate and tourist facilities in the Western Balkans. Iliđža, a popular holiday destination near Sarajevo, is even colloquially referred to as “Kuwait City” due to its distinct Arab character. Bosnia-Herzegovina maintains good relations with many Muslim-majority states beyond the Middle East such as Malaysia.

Cultural cooperation between China and the region is primarily observed in institutions such as the Confucius Institute, which exists at universities in each of the WB countries except Kosovo. Many EU countries have closed Confucius Institutes in recent years as they claim them to be instruments of propaganda used by the Chinese Communist Party. In Serbia, a new Chinese cultural institute is currently being built on the site where NATO bombs fell on the Chinese Embassy in 1999. It will be the largest of its kind in Europe. Serbia has particularly good cultural and foreign relations with China, partly because of Beijing's support

for Serbia's Kosovo policy and partly because of the two countries' strategic partnership that has existed since 2009.

Belgrade continues to adhere to its policy of balancing the East and West, building on the idea of the four pillars of Serbian foreign policy, namely the maintenance of good relations with Russia, China, the US and EU. However, this policy is unsustainable in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. According to a 2020 study by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, respondents living in Serbia view China as the second most important foreign policy partner after Russia. According to the same study, 90 percent of respondents regarded China's influence in the country positively; and 75 percent believed that China was Serbia's biggest supporter in the fight against Covid-19 even though the EU was in fact the largest donor, a reality only 3 percent of respondents recognised. Such figures show that China's Covid-diplomacy was very effective in Serbia, and one should keep in mind that through this aid and vaccine donations and purchases from Russia, China, and also the US, Serbia was able to position itself as a regional power by passing the vaccine on to its neighbouring countries that lacked national stocks.

In terms of political cooperation between external actors on the one hand and domestic parties and individual political figures on the other, North Macedonia, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro stand out. North Macedonia's largest opposition party Levica openly sided with Russia following the invasion of Ukraine. The country's former ruling party VMRO-DPMNE – under its former leader (and prime minister) Nikola Gruevski – also maintains good political relations with Russia and Vladimir Putin. Since 2018, the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has had a cooperation agreement with Russia's United Russia (ER) party, which is more or less led by Putin. In September 2022, US intelligence agencies presented a report claiming that the Democratic Front of Montenegro (DF), which supported the government between 2020 and 2022, and the president of Republika Srpska Milo-

rad Dodik are secretly funded by Russia. It should be emphasised that the DF and Dodik cooperate very closely with the SNS, which exerts influence over the political landscape in both Montenegro and Republika Srpska. The SNS under Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić also uses its ties with Russia to pursue its own goals in the region.

As far as media presence and media cooperation are concerned, Russia is most notably represented throughout the region by way of its Sputnik channel, which has been operating from Serbia since 2015 and whose content is reproduced by local media in almost all WB countries. In November 2022, Russia Today (now sanctioned by the EU) launched a website in Serbia. China has a media cooperation agreement with Serbia and Chinese media presence is also maintained in Bosnia-Herzegovina by way of the online portal China Today (kina-danas.com). The Turkish public broadcaster TRT launched TRT Balkans in 2022, which broadcasts in all regional languages.

Security policy cooperation

When looking at security cooperation between the Western Balkans and external actors, it stands out that all WB6 countries except Kosovo are members of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and three of them are members of NATO (Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia). Kosovo is a special case, because even though it is a member of neither organisation, it still hosts an OSCE mission and the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR), both of which were established after the end of the Kosovo war in 1999. The US is a close ally of Kosovo and it is strongly involved in its security policy, supporting Kosovo's efforts to establish its own army despite NATO's recommendations. Pristina-Washington ties have been close since the Kosovo war in 1999, and the US has unconditionally supported Kosovo in preserving its sovereignty (including in the area of security) ever since.

The other two non-NATO members, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia, have different reasons for abstaining from membership in the alliance. Bosnia-Herzegovina's Council of Ministers recently ratified the Reform Programme, the signing of which is an important step towards becoming a NATO member. However, Republika Srpska, which aligns itself with Belgrade's positions, has been blocking the country's NATO accession for years. Serbia has been a militarily neutral country since 2007 and only 11 percent of its population support Serbia becoming a member of NATO, while 77 percent are completely against it. This is mainly due to NATO's bombing of the country during the Kosovo war. The West and NATO are also often blamed for Kosovo's secession from Serbia. It is this anti-NATO and anti-Western attitude that largely explains Belgrade's pro-Russian policy. Serbia is also an observer in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a military alliance led by Russia. Although its observer status does not require it to fulfil the obligations of full members, Serbia still has its military personnel regularly participate in CSTO military trainings. Serbia also regularly participates in the so-called "Slavic Brotherhood" exercise, a trilateral military initiative with participants from the Serbian, Russian and Belarusian armed forces, which has been held once a year since 2015, including in Serbia in 2016 and 2019. A Serbian-Russian strategic partnership has also been in effect since 2013.

As far as arms trade is concerned, it is worth highlighting that within the Western Balkans, Russia exports arms only to Serbia. Serbia is the only WB country that buys arms from Russia and China. It is also the only WB country that exports arms to the UAE. All WB6 countries except North Macedonia buy arms from the US, however, in September 2022, North Macedonia (along with Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and Kosovo) did receive arms donations from the US that were set aside for countries deemed to be threatened by Russia. Turkey exports its weapons to almost all WB countries. However, the WB6 also import many

arms from the EU: Albania, for example, imports them from Italy, Germany and France; Montenegro from Austria; North Macedonia from Ireland; and Serbia from Germany and France.

The WB6 states also organise their security by way of bilateral treaties. Turkey has a military cooperation agreement with Albania, an agreement on military-financial cooperation with North Macedonia and a defence industry cooperation agreement with Montenegro. Turkey has also donated technical equipment to Kosovo and concluded a military framework agreement with Serbia. Serbia is the only WB country to have signed military cooperation agreements with Russia and China, both of which are more substantial than the other countries' agreements with Turkey, which mostly relate to arms trade, logistical support and mutual emergency assistance. Among other things, these agreements have Serbia participate in joint military exercises and share strategic information with Russia. Republika Srpska also uses its relations with Moscow to pursue its separatist goals. It has opened a training centre for its police whose programme is led by Russian special forces.

China's security engagement in Serbia cannot be ignored either. Particularly noteworthy are China's presence in Serbia's surveillance infrastructure, Chinese-Serbian joint police patrols in Serbian cities and increasingly intensive military cooperation between the two, the most visible yield of which was Serbia's recent purchase of China's FK-3 air defence system. EU candidate Serbia is a good test subject for China's potential entry into the European defence market. In this context, China's influence within the realm of Serbian surveillance infrastructure should be assessed as most critical from a security policy perspective. As part of the so-called Safe City project, for which Serbia signed a contract with the Chinese technology company Huawei in 2011, 1,000 surveillance cameras were installed at 800 secret locations throughout Belgrade. Equipped with high-end facial and license plate recognition

software, such cameras open a technological backdoor for China to penetrate local infrastructure, extract confidential data and, in the worst-case scenario, cripple critical infrastructure.

Concerns about hybrid security threats should not be ignored in light of the war in Ukraine. Broadcasters like Sputnik spread disinformation that is reproduced by local Russophile media that predominantly report on events in Ukraine from a Russian perspective. At the beginning of the war, far-right organisations in the Balkans held numerous pro-Russia rallies, for example in Belgrade, Banja Luka and Podgorica. In early October 2022, billboards with Putin's face popped up around Belgrade wishing the Russian president a happy birthday – a gift from the conservative nationalist "Naši" movement – complete with the letter "Z" on the posters. Putin has a large following in Serbia and Republika Srpska, where many conservative and far-right groups share close ties with Russia.

Serbia also hosts some questionable and suspicious organisations. For example, the "Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center" near Niš, about 250 kilometres from the NATO military base Camp Bondsteel in Kosovo, is seen by some Western military analysts as a Kremlin spy outpost. Furthermore, in October 2020, Serbia and Russia agreed that the Russian Defence Ministry would be allowed to open an office in Serbia, an act that would potentially run counter to the military neutrality to which the Serbian parliament committed itself in 2007. In addition, there have been reports of Russian interference in the internal affairs of North Macedonia and Montenegro, presumably with the aim of dissuading the two countries from pursuing NATO membership. According to such reports, Russia has been trying to create political discord in Macedonia since 2008 and was behind the alleged coup attempt in Montenegro in 2016, one year before the country became a NATO member. Russia is also backing the separatist aspirations of Republika Srpska and Serbia's policy in northern Kosovo. Its activities certainly have the

potential to destabilise these regions and endanger security there.

Nonetheless, the influence of Russia and China within these policy domains should not be overestimated as the WB6 are firmly integrated into European and (to a lesser extent) Euro-Atlantic structures. All WB6 countries are either EU candidates or potential candidates and have signed stabilisation and association agreements with the EU. The bottom line is that there are specific forces in the Western Balkans that instrumentalise relations with Russia and China to achieve their political aims.

Recommendations for the EU

The WB6 will not stop cooperating with the aforementioned external actors so long as they continue to sit in the EU's "waiting room". However, cooperation with Russia has taken on new meanings since the start of the war in Ukraine. Therefore, the question arises: What can the EU do to overcome or at least reduce differences between it and the WB6 in the areas of foreign and security policy that are exploited by external actors, often thanks to opportunities provided by certain local actors? The paths pursued by some of the WB6 have been opened in large part due to the absence of any realistic perspective of joining the EU and a resultant lack of commitment to reforms in the region. The EU should therefore focus on:

1. *Increasing the EU's credibility in the Western Balkans through reform and fulfilment of promises.* The EU is losing credibility in the Western Balkans, mainly because of the current state of its enlargement policy. Hardly any country in the region today believes that it has a real chance of accession, despite the oft-repeated platitudes that the future of the Western Balkans lies in Europe. The WB6 will not wait at the EU's doorstep forever, and they definitely will not refuse beneficial cooperation with external actors in the meanwhile. Naturally, they will hedge their bets. WB foreign and security policy can only be tied more tightly

to that of the EU through the concrete prospect of EU accession, not least because the fulfilment of Chapter 31 (CFSP) of the accession negotiations is a precondition for membership.

Conditionality in the accession process has not worked favourably when it comes to North Macedonia and Albania because by refusing to open negotiations with the two countries, Brussels has sent the wrong signals to the region. It has shown them that reforms are inconsequential so long as there is an EU member state that is able to block the enlargement process – in this case, Bulgaria. The accession process needs to be reformed, not only to make the EU more credible in the Western Balkans again, but also to ensure the long-term functionality of the EU after a possible new enlargement. The introduction of qualified majority voting in the Council of the EU on enlargement issues or staged EU accession could be possible solutions.

2. *Engaging in strategic communication with the Western Balkans.* It is crucial that the EU communicates with one voice in the Western Balkans – not only to maintain its own credibility, but also to minimise the influence of external actors who can shape public discourse through disinformation about the EU. The imperative of strategic communication refers both to the discourse about the EU in the Western Balkans and to the discourse about the Western Balkans in the EU. The EU should provide more resources to promoting democratically oriented civil society organisations and independent media in the region, and it should ensure that communication between the different EU institutions in the region is better coordinated.

3. *Strengthening EU efforts to reach a comprehensive normalisation agreement between Serbia and Kosovo (in cooperation with the US).* Escalation is always possible as long as Serbia and Kosovo do not have a comprehensive normalisation agreement in place. Such was observed in northern Kosovo in November 2022 due to a dispute over vehicle licence plates. The government in Pristina had initially decided to sanction

Serbs in Kosovo who continued to use Serbian-issued license plates for cities in Kosovo. As a result, Kosovo Serbs collectively boycotted Kosovo institutions in the north and in Pristina. The EU only managed to mediate a solution to the conflict with the help of the US. However, so far, Serbs have only returned to Kosovo's parliament while continuing to pursue boycotts in the north. Therefore, the EU should insist on the establishment of the Association/Community of Serb-majority municipalities in Kosovo, which was already agreed upon in 2013. The implementation of this organisation could bring about the reintegration of Kosovo Serbs into Kosovo institutions, which was also one of the conditions for reintegration named during the December 2022 roadblocks in northern Kosovo.

Other major issues also remain unresolved, such as the mutual recognition of Serbia and Kosovo and Kosovo's international status. A first step in the right direction was recently taken with the so-called Franco-German proposal, which envisages a model for Serbia and Kosovo similar to that which governed relations between the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) during the Cold War. The FRG accepted that both German states became members of the UN without granting *de jure* recognition to the GDR as a state. The FRG was thus able to preserve its constitution, but at the same time had to accept that the GDR acted as a sovereign state on the international stage. Even though the adoption of such a proposal would be an interim solution to the full normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina, its implementation should nevertheless be officially monitored by the EU, which should create accountability on all sides.

The adoption of such a proposal could result in Belgrade ending its reliance on Russian and Chinese support in the UNSC and reduce its foreign policy cooperation with these countries. However, it should be noted that even if a normalisation agreement is reached, Russia could still veto the recognition of Kosovo in the UNSC in order

to negotiate international recognition of its rule over Crimea or the Donbas. In other words, an agreement could reduce Serbia's foreign policy dependence on Russia, but would not solve Kosovo's quest for international recognition.

4. *Increasing EU mediation of institutional reforms in Bosnia-Herzegovina.* Electoral and constitutional reforms are necessary before Bosnia-Herzegovina can join the EU or the EU can even begin negotiations. It is important that these reforms do not come about by way of unilateral decisions by the High Representative. Christian Schmidt's decision to amend the electoral law in the middle of the electoral process in October 2022 has provoked negative reactions in the European Parliament and the German Bundestag. "Local ownership" can only be realised through increased consultations with all parties (including the non-constituent minorities), and possibly even with citizens. Legislative decisions should ultimately come from within not without. A reform of the constitution should also minimise Republika Srpska's potential to act unilaterally. This would make its political ties with Russia more irrelevant to the functioning of the country as a whole.

5. *Promoting Serbia's compliance with the CFSP through alternatives and incentives.* This strategy could be pursued, for example, in the energy sector, where the EU has already promised the WB6 €1 billion. Serbia is not only dependent on Russian gas, but also on Russia's support for its Kosovo policy. This is also the main reason why Serbia does not fully align with the CFSP. These dependencies can be mitigated, for example, by increasing investments in renewable energy, by including Serbia in EU common energy purchases and, especially, by continuing to engage in the normalisation process with Kosovo. The EU should be cautious about enacting punitive measures against Serbia, especially when considering the deeply rooted narrative of victimhood at the hands of the "West" in Serbian society; as such, EU sanctions could be counterproductive and play directly into Russia's hands. According to various surveys, a large majority

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of people in Serbia consider Russia to be the country towards which their own government should orientate itself in terms of foreign policy. Russia is also portrayed in the Serbian media as the most positive actor (attitudes towards the EU, on the other hand, are equally positive and negative). The majority of respondents would not support Serbia enacting sanctions against Russia, even if it would mean a more expedient accession to the EU. In this context, punitive measures against Serbia could easily reinforce the pro-Russian narrative in the country – which is also reproduced by President Vučić. The EU must ask itself what signals it is sending by punishing Serbia for failing to enact sanctions against Russia but not for refusing to implement reforms for years in the area of rule of law and freedom of the press. It would be much wiser to apply pressure at other points, such as the normalisation process with Kosovo.

Conclusion

For the WB6, EU-membership still remains the only realistic option for cooperation when compared to external actors who only have as much potential for action as they are afforded by local deficits, whether it is Serbia's refusal to recognise Kosovo or Bosnia-Herzegovina's institutional setup that is based on ethnicity. Geopolitical rivalry with Russia, however, must not lead the EU to turn its back on supporting indispensable reforms in the Western Balkans in favour of looking to "easy fix" solutions. This means that Serbia's enactment of sanctions against Russia will not solve the Kosovo issue. The EU must therefore work more intensively on these fronts. It should also work harder to address local actors like Vučić or Dodik as the main drivers of pro-Russian politics in the Balkans instead of overestimating Russia's potential for interference. In the end, there will always be forces on the ground that can identify with the policies of external actors and make them relevant at home.