

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Study Group Regional Stability in South East Europe (RSSEE SG)

“The War in Ukraine and Resilience in South East Europe – From Democratic Consolidation to Security”

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PfP Consortium of Defense
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Executive Summary of Recommendations

- **EU:** Extending programs that diminish the region’s dependence on Russia’s supply of oil and gas.
- **EU:** Mitigating WB dependency on Chinese loans.
- **EU/NATO/OSCE:** Assisting the WB states in updating their cyber-security strategies and increasing their capabilities to implement them.
- **EU/NATO:** Holding civil-military crisis response exercises with WB partners.
- **EU/NATO:** Preventing a security vacuum in BiH in the event of a blockade of EUFOR Althea in the UN Security Council (UNSC).
- **EU/U.S.:** Increasing the pressure on Belgrade and Prishtina/Priština to implement the EU plan for the normalization of their relations.
- **EU:** Ramping up EU’s strategic communication to fight disinformation campaigns in the WB.
- **EU:** Rewarding full compliance of WB candidates with EU’s CFSP in the integration process.
- **EU/NATO:** Providing maximum inclusion of WB candidates in fora, processes and access to funds even before full membership.

Situation Analysis

The geopolitical “*Zeitenwende*” (sea change) brought about by Russia’s aggression against Ukraine is creating new political and security parameters in the **Western Balkans (WB)** which, similar to the Black Sea region, has become a **geopolitical front region**. Against this backdrop, the only semi-consolidated state of the WB increases the pressure on the Western side to provide much more concrete support to this region on conflict issues previously neglected by Brussels and Washington. This relates primarily to the consolidation of the multiethnic state of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and the normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo. The continuing fragility of this part of South East Europe also provides a good opportunity for Russia to fuel conflicts, especially by diplomatic and security means, and thereby also to harm its Western adversaries in their geopolitical confrontation in the immediate neighbourhood of the EU.

Due to a worse starting position, key **economic parameters** in the WB (such as inflation and GDP) are developing **less critically** than in comparison with the EU. Nevertheless, **regional resilience** in the context of the geopolitical crisis must generally be classified as **weak**. **Political rifts** in the WB have thus **widened** in the context of geopolitical conflicts. On the one hand, the majority of the WB states have joined Western sanctions against Russia and clearly condemn the military aggression against Ukraine. On the other hand, Serbia, an EU candidate country, pursues a two-chair foreign policy even in this dramatic situation, condemning the Russian invasion only half-heartedly and – up to now – not joining the Western sanctions. Besides Serbia, which is in self-imposed political and energy dependence on Russia, the BiH entity **Republika Srpska**, which is even more clearly pro-Putin, is the **preferred area** for **Russian agitation** in South East Europe.



Other target areas of Russian propaganda activities include the NATO members North Macedonia and Montenegro, which have a Christian-Orthodox majority population.

Political propaganda and the fuelling of conflicts challenge the resilience of South East European states, which have **major problems with democratizing** their societies. Furthermore, in the security sector, there has been an **increase in cyberattacks** against targets in South East Europe. Despite the support provided by the EU and NATO, protection against attacks in the digital space is not at a high level. The origin of the attackers often remains unclear. In some cases, such as the Iranian cyberattacks against Albania, the origin does not necessarily correspond with the expected geopolitical conflict pattern.

It should be noted that in the shadow of Russian activities, other geopolitical players continue their efforts to strengthen their political and economic influence in the WB. This concerns in particular China and Türkiye, but also the Gulf states. **China**, in particular, has been very successful in consolidating its **geo-economic influence** in this part of South East Europe. Beijing achieves this primarily by making the WB states increasingly dependent on loans in the context of large-scale projects, some of which are not transparent. According to estimates from the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) in 2022, China was involved in 136 major projects in the region between 2009 and 2021, with a total value of 32 billion euros (see *Politico*, 6 December 2022).

NATO's strong presence in the region, as well as the NATO membership of most South East European countries, is a **key resilience-building** factor in the geopolitical upheaval. Without NATO's presence, the risk of violent conflict spilling over into the WB, especially Kosovo, would be greatly increased. **Security cooperation** between **NATO** and the **EU** is also absolutely essential in view of a possible Russian veto in the UN Security Council for the extension of **future EUFOR missions**.

However, in the medium term, strengthening South East Europe's resilience to negative geopolitical influences seems possible only through the completion of European integration. According to the Study Group *Regional Stability in South East Europe*, the EU candidate status of **Moldova** and **Ukraine** should **not** be perceived as **unwelcome competition** by the candidate countries in the WB, but rather as a possible catalyst for the integration process, which has recently become increasingly bureaucratic and untrustworthy.

Since full EU memberships will take time, it is necessary to consider what can be done relatively quickly and practically to **provide EU candidates** with certain advantages and privileges already at this stage. Depending on the progress of implementing negotiation results, this could go as far as obtaining **privileges close to a full membership** (while keeping open the decision on later full membership for all candidates).

The – from a geopolitical point of view – necessary integration of the WB states into the EU by innovative and proactive ways requires the unconditional respect of democratic rules and the rejection of authoritarian models. Despite its institutional crisis, the OSCE can provide good service in this area through its field missions in the WB. Furthermore, the Council of Europe (CoE) can also play a central role in the pre-accession process, especially in the protection of human and civil rights.

Policy Recommendations to Increase Western Balkan Countries Resilience

With Reference to the Entire WB

- **EU:** The WBs should be further included into programs which aim to diminish the region's dependence on Russia's supply with oil and gas.
- **EU, NATO and OSCE:** All countries in the region should be assisted in drafting and updating their cyber-security strategies and action plans as well as increasing their capabilities to implement them.
- **EU, NATO and OSCE:** This support should build upon all appropriate assistance mechanisms available to the WB partner countries, e.g. the EU Instrument for Pre-Accession mechanism and European Peace Facility, EU's Horizon Europe Program and expertise from EU's Agency for Cyber Security (ENISA), NATO's partnership tools including the Defence and Related Security Capacity Building (DCB) Initiative, and related OSCE projects.
- **EU and NATO:** Combined civil-military crisis response exercises should be conducted with WB partners in line with the EU Strategic Compass and the NATO Strategic Concept.
- **EU:** In coordination with regional partners, the EU's strategic communication has to be ramped up in order to fight disinformation campaigns in the WB, especially from third party actors.

- **WB governments:** Media literacy programs should be integrated in the education systems to counter disinformation.
- **EU:** In order to mitigate WB dependency on Chinese loans for infrastructure projects, more specific financial actions are needed from the EU side for single country projects or joint projects, e.g. from the Berlin Process and its Connectivity Agenda.
- **WB governments:** The WB countries should not a priori renounce investments and capital from non-EU states, but should increase their negotiation capacity by strengthening the rule of law and thus prevent the abuse and potential negative influence of such investments.
- **EU Commission:** Full alignment of candidate countries with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) must be valued in the context of early integration measures and faster advancement at the technical level in negotiating chapters.
- **EU and NATO:** Membership candidates should be included as observers into all regular formats and only barred from sensitive security and intelligence-related fora. This would create a sense of belonging and enable the candidate countries to learn in practice about the organization they aim to join.
- **EU:** WB candidate countries should be given full access to EU's structural funds.

With Reference to Albania

- **Government and justice system:** The climate of safety for reporters must be improved and thereby the freedom of media increased.

With Reference to BiH

- **EU:** With regard to financial and political support for BiH, a distinction should be made between the Federation of BiH, which supports the EU's policy towards Russia, and Republika Srpska, which maintains close relations with Putin's regime.
- **Office of the High Representative:** The High Representative should use his competences in order to counter Russian false information and Banja Luka's open political support for the Russian aggression.

- **EU and NATO:** Through timely planning prior to the annual renewal of the EUFOR mandate it has to be ensured that a veto in the UNSC cannot result in a security vacuum in BiH.
- **Serbian government:** Activities and projects with the BiH entity Republika Srpska which undermine the constitutionally defined competencies and functional integrity of BiH should be omitted.



With Reference to Kosovo-Serbia

- **NATO:** Kosovo should be offered membership in the Partnership for Peace.
- **EU and U.S.:** Additional pressure should be exerted both on Belgrade and Prishtina/Priština to implement the EU proposal, which was allegedly accepted verbally in Brussels, as well as the road map which was also accepted verbally in Ohrid.
- **Kosovo government:** A substantial confidence-building dialogue should be started with the Kosovo-Serbs, especially with those from Northern Kosovo.
- **EU Special Representative for the Belgrade–Prishtina/Priština dialogue:** Full transparency on the agreement as well as its implementation has to be ensured.
- **CoE:** Kosovo's application for CoE membership should be accelerated.

With Reference to Serbia

- **Serbian government:** Belgrade's swing policy between Russia and the EU must be stopped and Serbia should fully align with the EU's foreign policy. Otherwise, public support for EU accession will decrease in future.
- **EU:** With regard to membership conditions, a special focus should be placed on a particularly critical area, namely the rule of law – especially high-level corruption, organised crime, the unfair electoral process and freedom of media.

With Reference to Montenegro

- **Montenegrin parliament:** Against the backdrop of strong national approval for EU accession, the new parliamentary majority to be formed after the June elections must clearly emphasise its European character and alignment with core EU values through the implementation of the principles of the rule of law. The political parties have to reach an agreement on fulfilling the interim benchmarks within Chapters 23 and 24 within a year and direct all available capacities towards this end.

- **EU:** Montenegro, a small country with just over 600,000 inhabitants, which has been negotiating membership for 11 years, has opened all negotiation chapters, has no bilateral disputes with its neighbours and fully complies with the EU's CFSP, should be granted fast track accession. This could have a positive effect on the reforms in the other countries of the WB and enable the EU to show by example that its transformative power is alive.

With Reference to North Macedonia

- **Macedonian parliament:** A dialogue between the government and the opposition should lead to an agreement on the necessary constitutional amendment to remove Bulgarian objections to concrete EU accession negotiations with North Macedonia.

These policy recommendations reflect the findings of the 44th RSSEE workshop on “The War in Ukraine and Resilience in South East Europe – From Democratic Consolidation to Security”, convened by the PfP Consortium Study Group *Regional Stability in South East Europe* in Reichenau, Austria, 04 – 07 May 2023. They were prepared by Predrag Jureković (Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna) on the basis of the proposals submitted by the participants. Valuable support in proofreading and page-setting came from Sara Milena Schachinger (Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna).

