



European Movement
Montenegro

FOREIGN POLICY AND REGIONAL COOPERATION IN **WB6** IN THE TIME OF CRISIS 2022/2024

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- Visegrad Fund
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Podgorica, 2024.



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Note:

The views expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Visegrad Fund nor European Movement in Montenegro.

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RELATIONS WITH EUROPEAN UNION

Albania officially applied for European Union (EU) membership in 2009 through the Stabilization and Association Agreement, obtaining the status of a candidate country in 2014. Despite active efforts to enhance political and economic ties with the European community, the country faced challenges in receiving approval from the Commission to initiate accession negotiations over four consecutive years. The justice system has been considered as the sector with the highest level of corruption in Albania. According to the 2018 annual study of the Freedom House “Nations in Transit”, Albania’s judicial framework and independence rating remained unchanged at 4.75¹

In April 2018, Albania demonstrated tangible progress by addressing concerns related to judges and prosecutors, establishing independent judicial structures like the Special Anti-Corruption and Organized Crime Structure (SPAK), National Bureau of Investigation (NBI), and Constitutional Court, and bolstering proactive measures against corruption and crime, including high-level cases². Despite the notable progress outlined in the 2019 annual report towards fulfilling the EU’s stipulated conditions, the European Council deferred the initiation of accession talks twice.

In March 2020, the General Affairs Council of the EU, recognizing Albania’s reform implementation, decided to commence accession negotiations. However, the positive decision was contingent upon addressing 15 priorities, with six to be tackled before the first intergovernmental conference and the remainder to meet before the second intergovernmental conference. Albania views European Integration as a key objective, and the First Intergovernmental Conference³ with the EU on July 19, 2022, marked a pivotal moment in Albania’s journey towards EU membership. On September 15, 2022, in Brussels, Albania initiated the analytical examination of EU legislation, known as the screening process. This process is organized into six thematic clusters, covering good governance, internal market, economic competitiveness, and connectivity. Following the new methodology⁴, Albania has completed the screening process for the first, second, and most recently, the third cluster. The upcoming second intergovernmental conference is expected to further propel Albania’s integration process. Notably, Albania hosted the first-ever EU-Western Balkans Summit on December 6, 2022, outside an EU member state, and the Berlin Process Summit on October 16, 2023.

1 Freedom House, “Nations in Transit”. Albania 2018 Report.

2 European Commission, “Albania 2018 Progress Report”. Strasbourg, 17 April 2018. pg.3.

3 Council of European Union, “Intergovernmental Conference at Ministerial level on the Accession of Albania”, 19th July 2022: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/07/19/intergovernmental-conference-at-ministerial-level-on-theaccession-of-albania/>

4 European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DGNEAR)https://neighbourhoodenlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/albania_en; DG NEAR March 9, 2023https://twitter.com/eu_near/status/1633863625541828615; https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/closing-screening-meetings-competitiveness-and-inclusive-growth-cluster-albania-and-north-macedonia-2023-06-16_en

Rhetorically the major political structures in Albania, both ruling and opposition parties, have generally supported EU membership, considering it pivotal for socio-economic development, democratic consolidation, and regional stability. Despite this shared goal, insufficient progress in judiciary reform, challenges in combating corruption and organized crime, and democratic setbacks persist due to internal political conflicts and a highly polarized environment⁵. The success of fundamental reforms within the accession framework requires constructive political dialogue at all levels, given the continuous threat posed by the deeply polarized political landscape.

Public opinion in Albania has consistently shown robust support for EU membership, with surveys consistently reporting over 80 percent in favor. Recent developments have increased awareness regarding the technical aspects of the process and the time it will require; citizens are more knowledgeable about the country's preparedness level and hold a greater awareness of the responsibilities of key institutions involved, viewed as a monitoring one.

A significant hurdle identified by Albanian citizens as a contributing factor to the country's non-membership in the EU is the persistent and widespread issue of corruption. This remains a major concern, with far-reaching consequences for the effective operation of all state institutions. Citizens express skepticism⁶ about the EU's willingness to accept Albania, with 51 percent perceiving this as a distant prospect and 21 percent believing the EU will never be ready. When exploring alternative paths in case of integration failure, the majority (65 percent)⁷ sees no viable alternative, while 27 percent consider options like the Open Balkans initiative or an alliance centered around Turkey.

Albania aligns fully with the EU's Common Security and Foreign Policy, having imposed sanctions against Russia in 2014 and 2022. As a non-permanent member of the UNSC, Albania has actively condemned Russia's⁸ attack on Ukraine, collaborating with the US on resolutions and advocating humanitarian actions.

While within the scope of this support, several decisions were approved, including allowing Ukrainian citizens to enter and stay without a residence permit in Albania for a period of 1 year. From 24th February to 31st December 2022, nearly 32,000 Ukrainians entered Albania, of which nearly 29,000 left the country. As of the end of December 2022, about 2,500 Ukrainians who have fled the war in Ukraine were estimated to be present in Albania.⁹

Despite all the efforts to the domestic reforms and alignment of the country with EU laws progress has been uneven. While the judiciary has undergone some positive changes, significant challenges persist in the areas of rule of law, widespread corruption, escalating organized crime (especially in drugs and money laundering), and deficiencies in public administration characterized by a lack of professionalism and high levels of corruption and polarization¹⁰. There is a new Political

5 European Commission (2023, November 8). Key findings of the 2023 Report on Albania. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_23_5612

6 Public Perceptions towards European Integration, Influence of External Actors and Government Performance in Albania, 2022 <https://csdgalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Barometer-2023-Albania-4-Eng.pdf>

7 ibid

8 Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, "FM Olta Xhaçka statement on Albania's sanctions against Russia", 27th February 2022: <https://puneteshajshme.gov.al/ministrjxhacks-prezanton-sanksionet-e-shqiperise-ndaj-rusise/>

9 IOM, "Albania — Needs and Intentions Surveys with Refugees from Ukraine, Round #01 (December 2022): <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/albania-needs-and-intentionssurveys-refugees-ukraine-round-01-december-2022>

10 European Commission (2023, November 8). Key findings of the 2023 Report on Albania. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_23_5612

Momentum with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with fears over Moscow's influence in the region. This has amplified the strategic importance of the Western Balkans to the EU. Consequently, there exists an opportunity to consider admitting Albania and other Western Balkan countries into the EU more by geopolitical motives rather than fulfillment of the criteria and completion of reforms.

RELATIONS WITH NATO

Albania became a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in April 2009, a significant milestone that has afforded the country a security umbrella and a robust platform for increased collaboration with fellow member states. The fundamental principles of NATO, including collective defense, democratic values, and mutual cooperation, align seamlessly with Albania's pursuit of stability, security, and Euro-Atlantic integration. Since its official NATO membership, Albania has actively implemented an integration plan, ushering in substantial reforms within the security and defense sector to achieve complete interoperability with the alliance. The NATO Air Base in Kuçovë is the only tactical base for national operations and strategic importance operations of NATO in the Western Balkans. The Kuçova Tactical Air Base has undergone a transformative evolution, emerging as a substantial symbol of NATO's presence with a pivotal role in various training and operational activities of the Alliance. Positioned as the exclusive tactical base for both national and strategically significant NATO operations in the Western Balkans, the investment poured into this base totals around 45.8 million euros.

The extensive development encompasses the construction of armament depots, fuel depots, armament stations, aircraft parking facilities, emergency and fire stations, as well as the reconstruction of runways and the establishment of a control tower. Anticipated to be inaugurated next month, (march 2024) the NATO Air Base in Kuçova garnered attention during a joint press release by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Prime Minister Edi Rama. Blinken commended Albania's substantial contributions to NATO, highlighting the nation's role in preserving peace in Kosovo and thwarting Russia's aggression in the eastern flank of the Alliance. Emphasizing the significance of the imminent inauguration, Blinken expressed that it serves as a testament to Albania's dedication to NATO and reinforces the reciprocal commitment of NATO to Albania¹¹. There are also talks between the Albanian government and the US on the construction of a NATO naval base in the port of Durrës, but according to Blinken, construction will depend on the alliance's plan for the distribution of assets and logistics.

Central to this integration plan are 49 objectives, currently under the operational control of the Albanian Armed Forces (AAF). These objectives are designed to contribute operational capabilities to NATO, addressing both present and future mission requirements. A pivotal aspect of this strategy is the establishment of a "light battalion group," a Task Force comprising approximately 1,000 personnel. This group revolves around a motorized light infantry battalion, supported by smaller units at the company or platoon level, responsible for various functions such as intelligence services, fire support, air cover, and military police services.¹² Albanian troops have served alongside U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, Kosovo, Iraq and Latvia.

11 Ministry of Defense: NATO Air Base in Kuçova to be inaugurated on March 4th Retrieved from: <https://rti.rtsh.al/article/ministry-of-defense-nato-air-base-in-kuçova-to-be-inaugurated-on-march-4th>

12 Ministry Of Defense of the Republic of Albania, Defense Directive (2023). <https://www.mod.gov.al/images/PDF/2023/DM-2023-eng.pdf>

As Albania transitions from being a security receiver to a security provider¹³, significant reforms have been undertaken in its security, defense, and foreign policy sectors. The nation aligns comprehensively with the European Union's common defense and security policy, actively contributing to international crisis management and peacekeeping missions. Albania continues to play a constructive and moderating role in fostering stability within the region. However, challenges persist, particularly in addressing domestic vulnerabilities and incapacities. Official surveys reflect robust support for NATO among the Albanian population, with approximately 89% expressing support in 2022¹⁴ and 81% holding a positive stance in 2023¹⁵. The enduring support for NATO is driven by concerns about potential conflicts in Kosovo and Russia's interference. While 76% believe that NATO membership has significantly enhanced Albania's security, opinions on the readiness of the Albanian military vary. While a significant majority, comprising 76 percent, believes that NATO membership has substantially enhanced Albania's security, opinions on the preparedness of the Albanian military vary considerably. In terms of readiness, respondents were divided in their views. Nonetheless, a notable 77 percent are confident that NATO would intervene in the event of an attack on Albania by another nation. Only 7 percent hold an opposing viewpoint, while 16 percent are uncertain about NATO's commitment to Albanian security. The survey also indicates strong solidarity with Ukraine, as 76 percent of participants attribute the origin of the conflict in Ukraine to Russia¹⁶.

BILATERAL COOPERATION

Albania, strategically positioned to stabilize the region, plays a crucial role amid the historical ethnic and religious conflicts in the Western Balkans. Albania consistently advocates for dialogue and stability among states, contributing to the overarching goal of Western Balkans integration into European and international organizations. This commitment not only benefits individual countries but also fosters overall economic and political advancement in the entire Balkan region. Following the Visegrad Fund model, in November 2015 Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Western Balkans 6 (WB6) signed the agreement for the establishment Western Balkan Fund (WBF) fostering a new spirit of cooperation within the Balkans, emphasizing inclusivity and regional ownership. Its Secretariat is in Tirana and it is composed of experts coming from all over the WB Region.

Albania and Poland have consistently maintained positive relations, anchored in their shared history of transitioning from communism to a market economy. As NATO member states, they share strategic considerations and confront common threats within the Alliance. During high-level meetings, Poland assures Albania of support, extending beyond the political realm. Despite the peak in political relations, economic ties between the two nations remain relatively modest, although there are signs of improvement. Poland should increase its interest in Albanian products, especially in the agricultural sector, as well as oil and minerals. In return, Albania should enhance its openness to Polish investments. Both countries need to exert more effort to effectively implement the numerous economic agreements they have signed, promoting the expansion of trade and

13 Jano, D. (2023). Albania Moving from Security Receiver to Security Provider, in "Peace and Security in the Western Balkans". Taylor & Francis. DOI 10.4324/9781003276661-5 <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/59782>

14 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) and the Center for the Study of Democracy and Governance (2022). Albanian Security Barometer National Survey. <https://csdgalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/ASB-2022-ENG.pdf>

15 Albanian Institute for International Studies (AIIS) National Survey, October 2023

16 Ibid

investments. Poland's support for Albania's EU accession journey is underscored by President Andrzej Duda during his visit to Tirana to meet with his Albanian counterpart, Bajram Begaj. Duda reiterated Poland's unequivocal backing for Albania's EU aspirations, pledging to prioritize EU membership for Ukraine and Western Balkan countries, including Albania, during Poland's EU presidency in the first half of 2025.¹⁷ Despite the two-decade gap since the last official visit of a Polish President to Albania, the strengthening of bilateral ties reflects a shared commitment to mutual support and cooperation.

Over the years, Hungary has actively supported Albania's EU integration by assisting with grants, mobility programs, and various aid funds. Recently, the presence of Hungarian companies in Albania has become more prominent, particularly in key sectors such as banking, telecommunications, and travel¹⁸. Wizz Air, a Hungarian low-cost carrier, established itself as a major player in the Albanian market since its operations began in April 2017. OTP Bank, Hungary's largest commercial bank, acquired a 100% stake in Societe Générale Bank Albania in 2019 and later, in December 2021, acquired the Albanian subsidiary of the Greek Alpha Bank.

This move significantly boosted Hungary's economic ties with Albania and enhanced the credibility of the Albanian market among Hungarian investors. Hungary's ongoing political support for Albania is driven primarily by economic interests and security considerations. Prime Minister Orbán emphasized the importance of OTP Bank's presence in the Albanian market, considering it a pivotal moment in the partnership between the two countries, predicting that it would attract more investors and contribute to the development of Albania's economic landscape.

Slovenia and Albania enjoy positive bilateral relations, focusing on EU integration for Albania. During the Bled Strategic Forum 2023, State Secretary Štucin met with Megi Fino Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs to discuss bilateral cooperation and European issues. Minister of Defense of Albania, Niko Peleshi, visited Slovenia, and discussions highlighted the constructive and issue-free nature of their defense and military cooperation. Both countries collaborate in various areas, including military exercises, regional projects, and initiatives in South-Eastern Europe, such as the Balkan Medical Task Force and the Defender 2023 exercise.

Cooperation also extends to naval forces, protection and rescue, and preparations for a new agreement on disaster cooperation. The countries aim to strengthen their ties through upcoming bilateral visits and expert assistance in disaster protection. Countries are also enhancing cooperation through initiatives like the NATO Mountain Warfare Centre of Excellence and aerial fire-fighting capacity development.

The bilateral relations between Albania and the Czech Republic are positive and cordial. Both nations are members of OSCE and NATO. The advanced medical devices signify the Czech Republic's ongoing commitment to supporting Albania's healthcare sector. During the year, they provided support for prosthetic limb production and donated hospital beds to the Mother Teresa University Hospital Center. The Czech Republic, renowned for its advanced medical technology and healthcare system, aims to strengthen economic and trade ties with Albania through healthcare collaboration.

17 Alice Taylor. (May 2023). Poland supports Albania's EU path, Albania asks Poland to support Kosovo in NATO. Euractiv.<https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/poland-supports-albanias-eu-path-albania-asks-poland-to-support-kosovo-in-nato/>

18 Albania-Hungary: where do they stand now, July 26, 2022, retrieved from: <https://tiranaobservatory.com/2022/07/26/albania-hungary-where-do-they-stand-now/>

MULTILATERAL COOPERATION

Since the outbreak of the conflict on February 24th, the Albanian political establishment has promptly showcased its allegiance. Rather than a direct connection to Ukraine, this inclination is primarily influenced by the strategic alliance with the United States (US). The year 2022 provided a significant global platform for Albanian politics due to its non-permanent membership in the Security Council for the period 2022-2023. This granted Albania's government international recognition, which they utilized to express vocal support for Ukraine. The stance of NATO members in this conflict is generally predetermined, Albanian leaders, however, have been unequivocal in their support for Ukraine.

The Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (MEFA), the Albanian representatives at the United Nations (UN), and the entire political spectrum of Albania (including right, left, and center) unanimously condemned Russia and stood in solidarity with Ukraine. From the Albanian Parliament unanimously condemning Russia, to Zelensky delivering a speech in the same, to the Prime Minister visiting Kyiv, to hosting thousands of Ukrainians in the country –made it clear where Albania stands.

In December, the first-ever summit between EU and Western Balkans leaders took place in Albania, where 26 leaders of the EU and 44 delegations participated, and 33 agreements were signed. The main topics of discussion were the consequences of the conflict in Ukraine, intensifying political and policy engagement and reinforcing security, and building resilience against foreign interference. At the end of the summit, the Tirana declaration was issued covering the EU's commitment to aiding the Western Balkans by providing a new energy support package aimed at mitigating the energy crisis, particularly focusing on aiding vulnerable families and SMEs, and expediting the region's transition to energy independence through initiatives like the REPower EU Plan. According to the EC, the Summit was an opportunity to reconfirm the key importance of a strategic partnership between the EU and the WB.

REGIONAL COOPERATION

During the last ten years, regional cooperation has had more promising achievements in comparison to the national reforms in the WB6 or to the enlargement policy of the EU, although heavily influenced by them such as no roaming charges, green lanes, movement with identity cards, three agreements providing freedom of movement and work.

Albania's commitment to regional cooperation is evident in its participation in various organizations such as CEFTA, Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), the Berlin Process, the South East Europe Defense Ministerial (SEDM); the Forum for Western Balkans Defense Cooperation (SEEC), Western Balkans Defense Intelligence Chiefs (WEBADIC); Centre for Security Cooperation (RACVIAC); US – Adriatic Charter; Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative for South East Europe (DPPISSE); and the South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SEESAC).

All these different organizations have enhanced the security framework, have already decreased the propensity for conflict in the region and have paved the way for more integrated markets. And, the Berlin Process, since 2014, has bridged a gap in the EU-Western Balkan relations providing a boost to the lethargic enlargement process by additional incentives to the regional cooperation (Connectivity Agenda, Digital Agenda, Green Agenda, RYCO, CIF, CRM). It also mobilised the

WB civil society to engage more and address issues which are not appropriately considered by administrations, contributing to the democratization, reconciliation and adoption of European values in the societies of the Western Balkans.

Albania's dedication to regional cooperation is exemplified by its active involvement in the Open Balkan initiative. This initiative, launched in July 2021 was greeted with much enthusiasm by the prime ministers of the founding members (Serbia, Albania and N. Macedonia), aimed to establish a 'single market without borders'¹⁹, complementing existing regional organizations like CEFTA and the RCC. However, it faced resistance from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Kosovo, as well as skepticism from political opposition, media, and parts of the public opinion in Albania.

'Open Balkans' initiative was envisioned as an extension of the Berlin Process, designed to complement and expedite the accession process for the Western Balkans (WB6) by adopting a bottom-up approach. In contrast to the perceived top-down nature of the Berlin-led process, 'Open Balkans' faced resistance from three regional countries—Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Kosovo. Additionally, Albania experienced skepticism from its political opposition, significant segments of the media²⁰, and the public. The international response, particularly from Brussels, Washington DC, and EU member countries, displayed fluctuating attitudes. Public support in Albania for the 'Open Balkans' initiative has been inconsistent, influenced by highly polarized political loyalties and the opinions of influential figures.

Understanding the sentiments of Albanian citizens towards the four freedoms (people, capital, goods, and services) and their perception of how 'Open Balkans' contributes to these freedoms is crucial. These freedoms are integral to the Common Market sponsored by the Berlin Process and are essential for EU integration, considering the region's individual countries' small size.

Notably, 74 percent of Albanians believe that 'Open Balkans' promotes freedom of movement, while 67 percent think it facilitates the movement of capital, and 73 percent agree that it aids the movement of goods. Furthermore, 61 percent see the initiative as potentially generating new job opportunities. Analyzing who benefits the most from 'Open Balkans' according to Albanian citizens' perception reveals that 60 percent believe all countries in the region benefit, while 21 percent attribute benefits solely to Serbia. Only 4 percent believe Albania is the primary beneficiary²¹.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Constructive political dialogue at all levels is crucial for the success of fundamental reforms within the framework of EU accession. Given the high polarization of the political landscape, efforts to encourage cooperation between ruling and opposition parties should be intensified to ensure effective implementation of democratic consolidation and other key reforms.
- Enhance efforts to educate the public on the technical aspects of the EU integration process to maintain strong support for membership. This includes clearly communicating the steps, challenges, and benefits of EU accession, ensuring that citizens remain informed and engaged.

19 There are many declarations in the last years by each of the leaders that support this. For a specific reference at the time of inception see: Julia Simic. 2019. "Three countries agree mini-Schengen in the Balkans." Euractiv. October, 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/three-countries-agree-mini-schengen-in-the-balkans/>

20 Analiza/ "Open Balkan(s), jovetëmnjënismëjo e zgjuar, por e rrezikshme". 2022. Balkanweb. June 17. Retrieved from: <https://www.balkanweb.com/analize-open-balkans-jo-vetem-nje-nisme-jo-e-zgjuar-por-e-rrezikshme/>

21 Survey on 'Open Balkan' conducted from Albanian Institute for International Studies (AIIS), December 2022

- Strengthen solidarity with NATO allies and continue to demonstrate support for the principles of collective defense, particularly in light of concerns over potential conflicts and external interference. Albania should also focus on improving its military capabilities to align with NATO standards and expectations.
- Continue to provide full support to the Berlin Process, which includes promoting the four freedoms (people, capital, goods, and services) in the region and ensuring that all countries benefit equally from these initiatives.
- Intensify efforts to combat corruption and organized crime, which are significant obstacles in Albania's EU accession process. Strengthening the judicial system and public administration, ensuring transparency, and improving law enforcement capacities are key steps in this regard.
- Utilize strong bilateral relations, such as those with Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, to attract investments, particularly in sectors such as healthcare, agriculture, and energy. These partners can help strengthen Albania's economy and support its EU accession efforts.
- Albania should continue to advocate for dialogue and stability in the Western Balkans, using its strategic position to support regional integration into European and international organizations. This will contribute to economic and political progress throughout the region.

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Authors: Nerzuk Ćurak and Sead Turčalo

RELATIONS WITH EUROPEAN UNION

While some parties and politicians support EU membership and actively work towards it, there are also those who are skeptical or have other priorities. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, a “national” narrative is still dominant, meaning that political parties are grouped on the right end of the political spectrum or in the center, but the narrative tends to shift them towards the right. Declaratively, all political parties express support for EU integration, however, the political decisions they make do not always align with this goal entirely. Nevertheless, there have been certain shifts compared to previous periods. In the latest European Commission Report, it is clearly stated that political structures have taken concrete steps towards EU integration: “After obtaining candidate status, the public commitment of political parties to the strategic goal of European integration has yielded positive results. Important steps have been taken towards meeting key priorities, despite negative legislative changes at the entity level. The fact that the state-level coalition was formed at a record speed represents important evidence of new political dynamism and will” (Report on Bosnia and Herzegovina for 2023). Currently, politicians from the Republika Srpska are in the spotlight, which has been recognized by leaders from Republika Srpska, who distribute the narrative to the public that these relations between politicians are reflected in the state coalition, and that this slows down the adoption of laws to a certain extent. After obtaining candidate status, the public commitment of political parties to the strategic goal of European integration has yielded positive results. Important steps have been taken towards meeting key priorities, despite negative legislative changes at the entity level. The fact that the state-level coalition was formed at a record speed represents important evidence of new political dynamism and will (Report on Bosnia and Herzegovina for 2023).

Public opinion in BiH usually shows support for EU membership, but there is also a certain degree of skepticism and lack of information among citizens. According to a recent survey, the majority of citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 73.3%, support EU membership, which is considered an expression of national interest. (research of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian think-tank Atlantic Initiative). The percentage is significantly higher in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, compared to the Republika Srpska, where there is still some skepticism, and this aggregate percentage would be much higher if we looked only at the entity - the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The latest research by the Directorate for European Integration shows a certain decline in citizens’ attitudes towards the EU: “While in previous years, the opinion that BiH’s European path has no alternative was in a slight advantage, this year opinions are divided. Compared to 2021 and 2022, there is a decline in the opinion that the European path of BiH has no alternative (49.2% vs 48% vs 45.4%), a slight increase in the opinion that there is an alternative to the European path of BiH, as well as that citizens refuse to answer this question.” Also, one of the key conclusions of this research is the fact:

“As in previous years, the politicization of the integration process makes the integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the EU more difficult. Unwillingness to change” is in decline in 2023 compared to previous years, but slight growth is recorded by “objective obstacles” (+1.3% compared to 2022 and +5.7% compared to 2021) and the answer “ I don’t know” (+3.8% compared to 2022).

Bosnia and Herzegovina is in the process of accession to the EU, but progress in the technical part of the negotiations may be slow due to political divisions within the country and other internal challenges. The leaders of the European Union member states decided at their regular meeting on March 21 to open accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The main problems in relations with the EU include political instability, slow implementation of reforms, issues of rule of law, and corruption. The EU often demands progress in these areas as a condition for further progress in the negotiations. Currently, several laws essential for the EU path are being adopted, one of which is the Law on Courts. The European Commission’s opinion on Bosnia and Herzegovina’s request to open accession negotiations, published in 2019, contains 14 recommendations divided into 4 areas: democracy, rule of law, fundamental human rights, and public administration, and the current focus is on implementing these recommendations.

The level of alignment and support for EU foreign policy varies in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but there is a certain degree of coordination with the EU on external issues. Bosnia and Herzegovina has achieved a certain level of preparedness in the area of common foreign, security, and defense policy. Some progress has been made as the country has significantly improved its alignment with EU foreign policy, especially regarding statements and restrictive measures following Russia’s war aggression against Ukraine, at the initiative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Alignment with EU restrictive measures remains a subject of political dispute, and certain ministries have obstructed their implementation. Bosnia and Herzegovina needs to join numerous international arms control instruments and strengthen the regime for monitoring arms and military equipment. Bosnia and Herzegovina has continued its participation in EU crisis management missions and operations under the Common Security and Defense Policy.

Bosnia and Herzegovina usually supports the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine, but due to internal political divisions, it is challenging to coordinate specific action. Assistance to Ukraine is currently in the form of diplomatic support, humanitarian aid, but is limited due to political and economic factors. At an emergency session of the United Nations General Assembly held on March 2, 2022, a resolution condemning Russian aggression against Ukraine was passed. The resolution was supported by 141 countries, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, suggesting the dominant narrative. Through the Council of Ministers, BiH allocated approximately 150,000 euros for aid to Ukraine. Several cantons independently decided to send financial assistance to Ukraine, and several humanitarian organizations continuously provide support to Ukraine. The problem lies in the bipolarity of political decisions in the context of Ukraine, as the entity of Republika Srpska has a special relationship with Serbia, and thus has a clear orientation towards Ukraine, i.e., Russia. On the other hand, the political structures in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina have a clear stance towards Ukraine, i.e., they support Ukraine. However, due to the state structure, all political decisions at the state level are made by consensus, which is almost impossible to achieve in the context of Ukraine and Russia, ultimately slowing down all forms of assistance directed towards Ukraine. It is much easier to achieve this at the local level, but this type of assistance is relatively modest. Media also have a bipolar approach conditioned by entity paradigms, which fragments public opinion, and there is no clear stance in that aspect either. Professor at the Faculty

of Political Science, University of Sarajevo, Nerzuk Ćurak, in an interview we conducted, made a strong parallel between the events in Ukraine and potentially dangerous rhetoric that spills over into Bosnia and Herzegovina: “Due to misconceptions in Russian and Serbian geopolitical cultures, the sovereignty of Ukraine and Bosnia and Herzegovina is permanently exposed to degradation, so new rhetorical, political, and legal empowerment of sovereignty and territorial integrity as a red line that aggressive forces cannot cross without consequences is the most important benefit that the free world can make for these two unfortunate homes.” This thesis suggests that the public in Bosnia and Herzegovina should be involved in processes in Ukraine to predict global trends and better

RELATIONS WITH NATO

Ruling political structures in Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly within the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, have generally shown support for NATO membership as a strategic goal. For example, the Party of Democratic Action (SDA) and the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) have expressed support for NATO integration (although SDA is not currently the ruling party, it has a significant influence on these processes). People and Justice, Our Party, and SDP give unconditional support to this process (they are currently the ruling parties in FBiH and at the state level). However, there are significant divisions, especially among the entities of Republika Srpska, where the Union of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) and other nationalist parties oppose NATO membership, citing concerns about sovereignty and historical grievances. Political structures are aware of NATO’s role, but they also understand that European integration is conditioned on this process, so the narrative is aligned with both types of integration. However, divisions still exist when it comes to NATO, as the relationship of Republika Srpska with Serbia and Russia is specific, with strong ties and high skepticism towards NATO integration processes. This narrative is expressed across all political structures in Republika Srpska. On the other hand, all political parties in FBiH support this process.

Public opinion on NATO membership in Bosnia and Herzegovina remains divided along ethnic lines. Surveys suggest that there is generally more support for NATO integration among Bosniaks and Croats, while Serbs are more skeptical or outright opposed. However, there have been fluctuations in public opinion over time, influenced by political rhetoric, international events, and economic factors. A recent survey by the Bosnian think tank Atlantic Initiative, published in February 2024, shows that 39.7% of those who are against Bosnia and Herzegovina’s membership in NATO still choose NATO as a strategic partner when the alternatives are Russia and China. The research also reveals an additional lack of understanding of the strategic relationship between EU and NATO integrations among domestic actors and the depth of the mistake in accepting the narrative of the toxic influence of the NATO path on the EU integration of the country.

The results show that, although the majority in the entity of Republika Srpska does not support NATO integration, the most prevalent perceived benefit of membership in the Alliance, at 20.6%, is bringing Bosnia and Herzegovina closer to joining the European Union. This is followed by investments, at 16%, and regional security, at 11.8%. “A significant portion of citizens actually believe that NATO is also a path to the EU. Especially when it comes to those citizens who are not actually in favor of NATO membership, as a kind of support for that story and accelerating BiH on that path. In fact, the story of Euro-Atlantic integrations should be reconnected, not separately NATO and EU integrations.” Sead Turčalo, Tačno.net

Bosnia and Herzegovina is currently a member of the NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP), which is a step towards eventual membership. However, progress towards full NATO membership has been slow due to internal political disputes and unresolved issues, such as defense property and military reforms. Bosnia and Herzegovina has not yet activated its Membership Action Plan due to disagreements among its constituent entities.

The main problems in Bosnia and Herzegovina's relations with NATO include the lack of consensus among its constituent entities on integration, unresolved defense property issues, and the need for comprehensive military reforms. For full NATO membership, Bosnia and Herzegovina, like other Western Balkan countries, must demonstrate commitment to democratic principles, rule of law, civilian control of the military, and interoperability with NATO forces. Additionally, addressing corruption, strengthening the judiciary, and enhancing defense capabilities are essential requirements. The essence of all problems in this process is the political consent for the NATO integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina. After the political approval is obtained, it is almost certain that there will be another type of problem, which is primarily related to infrastructure, financing, adoption of legal regulations, and the like.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, as a member of the Partnership for Peace program, has expressed support for Ukraine within the NATO framework. However, compliance levels vary depending on political dynamics and internal divisions. Assistance to Ukraine within the NATO framework includes political support, economic aid, and military cooperation. Bosnia and Herzegovina has participated in joint NATO exercises and provided humanitarian aid to Ukraine but has not been directly involved in military operations.

BILATERAL COOPERATION

Bosnia and Herzegovina maintains bilateral relations with other Western Balkan countries, including Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo. These relations are generally characterized by shared historical and cultural ties, as well as efforts for regional cooperation and integration into Euro-Atlantic structures.

As for the countries of the Visegrad Group (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia), the relations between Bosnia and Herzegovina vary. Although there are no historical tensions, the level of engagement varies, with some V4 countries showing greater interest in Western Balkans issues than others. In general, there is potential for increased cooperation, especially in the economic and cultural spheres.

Bosnia and Herzegovina maintains diplomatic relations with all other countries of the Western Balkans and countries of the Visegrad Group. Political relations are often conducted through diplomatic channels, with periodic high-level meetings to discuss various bilateral and regional issues, EU integration and other common interests.

The political relationship between Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Serbia is complex and shaped by various factors, including historical, ethnic, political and economic factors. The history of the Balkan region is marked by conflicts, but also periods of cooperation. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia shared a common history as part of the former Yugoslavia, but were also involved in conflicts during the breakup of Yugoslavia, especially during the wars of the 1990s. Bosnia and Herzegovina is a multi-ethnic country with three constituent peoples: Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats. On the other hand, Serbia is considered a country with a majority population of Serbs. Ethnic tensions and

political rivalries from the past have affected relations between the states. Politics and diplomacy play a key role in relations between BiH and Serbia. Tensions between them periodically appear, especially when it comes to issues related to regional stability, borders, or minority rights. What is particularly important to highlight is the fact that several important agreements were signed between these two countries: a single device for tolling highways in both countries, the IPA III agreement signed between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the agreement between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina on the management of the Drina and Sava rivers, signed electronic data interchange agreement...

The relationship between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro is shaped by various factors, including historical ties, political interests, economic relations and regional cooperation. BiH and Montenegro were parts of the former Yugoslavia, which created historical ties between these two countries. During the period of Yugoslavia, there was cooperation and exchange between them, and these historical traces still influence their relationship. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro have diplomatic relations and regularly cooperate at the bilateral and multilateral level. Both countries are members of various regional initiatives and organizations such as the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and the South East European Cooperation Process (SEECP), where they work together on issues of common interest. Trade and economic cooperation between BiH and Montenegro play an important role in their relationship. There are various opportunities for improving economic cooperation, especially in areas such as tourism, energy and transport. Cultural exchange between BiH and Montenegro also contributes to strengthening their ties. BiH and Montenegro are part of the same Balkan region and therefore have common interests in regional stability, security and economic development. Agreements Bi Hi Montenegro: Established direct payment transaction, Signed agreement on data exchange between the Institute of MIO/PIO and the PIO Fund of Montenegro, Easier border crossing for passengers and goods between BiH and Montenegro..

The relationship between Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Albania is shaped by various factors, and their interaction has several key elements. BiH and Albania maintain diplomatic relations and have open embassies in their capital cities. They regularly exchange diplomatic delegations and support mutual initiatives within international organizations. BiH and Albania are members of various regional initiatives such as the South East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) and the Regional Trade Commission (RCT). This cooperation enables joint action on regional issues, strengthening regional stability and development. There is potential for improving economic cooperation between BiH and Albania, especially in areas such as trade, tourism, and energy. Examples include potential cooperation on the development of tourist routes connecting the two countries or the exchange of experience in the field of renewable energy sources, however, this is currently not being used enough. BiH and Albania often support each other's position on the international scene, especially in issues of common interest such as minority rights or regional stability. Both countries often support each other within international organizations such as the UN or the EU.

Relations between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia are characterized by traditional strong friendship, identical attitudes regarding international and regional cooperation and common strategic goals: peace and stability in the region and integration into the Euro-Atlantic security structures. The Republic of Macedonia continuously supports the sovereignty and territorial integrity of BiH openly and clearly in all possible ways. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia

have signed several agreements, of which the agreements in the field of trade and economy stand out. The political attitudes of these two countries are extremely stable, and it was not detected that there are different political narratives of political structures from these two countries. Over fifty bilateral and ten multilateral agreements have been concluded between Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of North Macedonia, which represent a good legal basis for successful cooperation in various areas of mutual interest.

The relationship between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia is very complex, because in addition to the historical heritage that binds them, they also have a number of open issues, primarily territorial, as is the case with Serbia, but they also have other political issues on which Croatia has a direct reflection on Bosnia and Herzegovina, and here we are primarily referring to the change in the Electoral Law, which HDZ advocates, and for which it has the direct support of politicians from Croatia. Lately, the narrative of "conflict" has been noticeable, emphasized above all by Prime Minister Andrej Plenković. However, on the other hand, we have the open support of Croatian President Zoran Milanović in the EU integration process for BiH.

Trade relations are clearly expressed between these two countries, and there is a clear connection in cultural creativity. Also, cooperation in the field of tourism between these two countries is expressed, and there are numerous agreements between these two countries in the mentioned areas. Relations were further worsened after the International Court of Justice in The Hague issued a final verdict in the case of the so-called of the Herceg-Bosnian Six, and ruled that there was a Joint Criminal Enterprise against Bosnia and Herzegovina.

For years, Croatia has been announcing the beginning of the construction of the Pelješki bridge, which the official policy of Bosnia and Herzegovina strongly opposed, which also "spoiled" the relations between these two countries. Agreements: Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Croatia and the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina on the reconstruction of the bridge Gunja (RO) - Brčko (BiH) on DC 214 (RO) / M14.1 (BiH), Addendum to the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Croatia and the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina on the maintenance and reconstruction of road bridges on the state border, Memorandum of Agreement between the Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Croatia, the Customs Administration and the Administration for Indirect-Indirect Taxation of Bosnia and Herzegovina on electronic data exchange, Memorandum of Agreement between the Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Croatia, the Customs Administration and the Administration for indirect taxation in Bosnia and Herzegovina on the mutual exchange of data and information

The relationship between BiH and Kosovo: The only country in the Western Balkans that has not recognized Kosovo is Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Although there was no recognition of Kosovo by the institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina, citizens of Kosovo can visit Bosnia and Herzegovina with a properly issued visa. The same is the case with BiH citizens who visit Kosovo. Given the non-recognition of Kosovo by Bosnia and Herzegovina, institutional cooperation between the two countries does not exist. However, cooperation between political entities from both countries, as well as visits by professors, academics, and journalists, are not absent. The Prime Minister of Kosovo, Albin Kurti, often meets with the political representatives of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Among them are parliamentarians Šemsudin Mehmedović, Sabina Čudić and members of the presidency Denis Bećirović and Željko Komšić.

The topics of these meetings were regional cooperation and how to implement the signed agreements on mobility. In addition to these types of cooperation, there is also economic cooperation. Although BiH does not import much from Kosovo, the export of BiH to Kosovo is significant. Thus, in 2018 and 2022, exports to Kosovo reached over 60 million euros for each of the mentioned years. The key agreement between these two countries is the abolition of visas.

The relationship between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Hungary: Bosnia and Herzegovina has stable relations with Hungary, and this is best reflected in foreign trade. The growth of foreign trade exchange is positive, but the negative trends in Bosnia and Herzegovina are striking when it comes to the ratio of imports and exports. When it comes to political relations, Hungary has more intensive cooperation with the Republika Srpska, which to a certain extent threatens the sovereignty of BiH, because the negotiations take place between the state and the entities, which is not in accordance with the principles of diplomacy.

Relations between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Slovakia are extremely good, because Slovakia is among the biggest proponents of the admission of Bosnia and Herzegovina into full membership of the European Union. Slovakia is the first member of the NATO alliance that, as part of the package for the development of the defense capacities of Bosnia and Herzegovina (DCB), gave concrete aid of 20,000 euros to the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Recently, cooperation between Slovakia and Bosnia and Herzegovina has significantly intensified in the context of defense and joint military activities.

The Czech Republic also supports BiH in the process of EU integration, and is clearly committed to supporting the territorial sovereignty of BiH. Through its funds, the Czech Republic provides support in the form of grants, especially in the field of agriculture.

Diplomatic relations between Poland and Bosnia and Herzegovina were established on December 22, 1995. Based on the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Poland and the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina on the legal succession of Bosnia and Herzegovina in connection with the agreements signed between the Republic of Poland and the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, signed in Sarajevo on December 22, 2006, the following remain in force: 1. Agreement on scientific and technical cooperation between the Polish People's Republic and the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia, signed on November 14, 1955 in Warsaw, as well as the Protocol amending the Agreement, signed in Warsaw on March 25, 1965; 2. Agreement between the Government of the Polish People's Republic and the Government of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia on multi-year cooperation in the field of transport, signed in Warsaw on October 25, 1979. Trade between the two countries is systematically growing year after year.

MULTILATERAL COOPERATION

Bosnia and Herzegovina, together with the other countries of the Western Balkans and the V4 countries, generally condemned Russia's aggression against Ukraine and supported international efforts to find a peaceful solution to the conflict. However, the level of involvement and public statements may vary among individual countries based on their foreign policy priorities and relations with Russia. Bosnia and Herzegovina, as a member of NATO's Partnership for Peace program, expressed solidarity with Ukraine, but did not directly participate in military operations or sanctions against Russia.

Here are some of the key statements:

The President of the RS Milorad Dodik stated that the Chairperson of the Council of Ministers, Borjana Kristo, at the Ukraine-Southeastern Europe summit in Tirana expressed her personal views on, as he said, the “special military operation in Ukraine”, and not the official position of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Embassy of the Russian Federation in Sarajevo warned Bosnia and Herzegovina last week that it can expect consequences for a “hostile act”, as it called the visit of two members of the Presidency to Ukraine. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, there were mostly no reactions to Russia’s much harsher attitude than before. During the debate in the UN Security Council, Bosnia and Herzegovina joined the statement made by EU Ambassador to the UN Olof Skoog on behalf of the European Union, candidate countries, potential candidate countries and partner countries.

Dragan Čović called on Twitter “for an immediate ceasefire, solidarity and dialogue”, but without specific condemnation of Russia. “There is significant Russian influence in the whole region as well as in BiH. And this, when it comes to BiH, should be strong a signal for all those who are obliged to support BiH, preserve peace and stability in BiH and the Dayton Peace Agreement”, Bosniak member of the BiH Presidency, Šefik Džaferović, told BHRT.

REGIONAL COOPERATION

Bosnia and Herzegovina actively participates in regional cooperation initiatives within the Western Balkans, considering them as key mechanisms for strengthening stability, building trust and promoting common interests in the region. This cooperation covers a wide range of areas, including security, economic development, infrastructure, culture and education. Bosnia and Herzegovina has participated in the Berlin process from the beginning, but within the country there is not a sufficient degree of agreement for the inclusion of the country in the Open Balkans initiative - those who are “in favor” identify the Open Balkans as a great development opportunity, while others are not convinced of the sustainability and credibility of this initiative. The participation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Berlin process, whose goal is to connect the countries of the Western Balkans and their faster integration into the European Union, was blocked after the parliament of Republika Srpska supported the veto on the ratification of the agreement on freedom of movement in the region and mutual recognition of professional qualifications. At the summit in Berlin in November 2022, the prime ministers signed an agreement allowing citizens of the Western Balkan countries to cross borders with identity cards and an agreement on the recognition of university degrees and certificates of acquired professional qualifications. Accordingly, and in this context, there are no unitary views of politicians in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Statements to provide overview of current situation:

“The Berlin Process played a key role in fostering dialogue, improving infrastructure, strengthening economic cooperation and solving regional challenges. This shows the commitment of the EU in providing support to the Western Balkans on our way towards European integration,” said Minister Konaković.

In the context of the Berlin process, the leader of the SNSD, Milorad Dodik, said: “We are withdrawing from the earlier agreement to accept the documents of the temporary authorities from Pristina”, said Dodik.

Through participation in various documents and agreements, Bosnia and Herzegovina shows its commitment to the process of regional cooperation. The Sofia Declaration, signed at the Western Balkans Summit in 2018, emphasizes the importance of regional cooperation in the context of the European perspective of the region. Also, the Multi-Year Action Plan for the Regional Economic Area in the Western Balkans is aimed at promoting market integration, facilitating trade and attracting investments in order to stimulate the economic development of the region. In parallel with the Berlin process, there is also a tendency to form the Open Balkans. Albania and Serbia are particularly committed to this concept, and accordingly the political structures in Bosnia and Herzegovina have a bipolar view of these two processes. Politicians in the FBiH are dominantly in favor of the Berlin Process, while on the other hand we have the opposite opinion of politicians from the RS.

Through the Berlin Process, Bosnia and Herzegovina actively participates in initiatives that promote connectivity and economic development of the region. This includes projects such as building infrastructure, improving energy efficiency, and encouraging youth cooperation through education and exchange programs. The Regional Cooperation Council plays a key role in coordinating these activities and ensuring their alignment with the priorities of the European Union and other relevant stakeholders.

The attitude of Bosnia and Herzegovina towards the “Open Balkans” reflects its cautious policy towards new initiatives within the region. While some see the potential benefit of this initiative in terms of improving economic cooperation and regional integration, others express concern over the possible duplication of existing structures and division within the region. Essentially, these views are difficult to reconcile at the moment because of the political structure. What is particularly problematic is the fact that the processes for which there was initial consent are blocked at certain times.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, together with other countries of the Visegrad Group, clearly expressed support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine during the Russian aggression. Through public declarations and statements, these countries emphasize the importance of respecting international law and the principle of territorial integrity in order to ensure the stability and security of Europe.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Regional Stability and Integration:** Bosnia and Herzegovina, as a key player in the Western Balkans, plays a significant role in strengthening regional stability and integration. Participation in the Berlin Process and other regional initiatives demonstrates its commitment to connecting Western Balkan countries and accelerating integration into the European Union. However, internal political differences and disagreements over initiatives like the Open Balkans hinder consensus and may slow progress in this regard. Bosnia and Herzegovina should work on overcoming these differences to improve its regional cooperation and contribute to the region’s stability.
- **Political Cohesion and National Strategy:** Bosnia and Herzegovina’s policy toward regional initiatives and international agreements is often affected by internal political tensions and differing views among its entities. To strengthen its position and maximize the benefits of regional processes, Bosnia and Herzegovina needs to work on building political cohesion and consensus among key actors. This cohesion will enable the country to engage more effectively in regional and international processes, thereby improving its chances for faster integration into the EU and other international organizations.

- **Economic Cooperation and Development:** Bosnia and Herzegovina has significant potential for economic development through regional cooperation, including projects within the Berlin Process. Although it has participated in numerous initiatives, internal political obstacles and disputes over certain agreements may limit economic benefits. Focusing on improving infrastructure, energy efficiency, and trade within the region can enhance the economic situation and contribute to the country's long-term development. Active involvement in economic projects and initiatives can strengthen economic connectivity and attract additional investments.
- **Support for Ukraine and International Status:** Bosnia and Herzegovina has demonstrated its support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity through international forums. While it has provided political support, greater engagement in humanitarian aid and international efforts to resolve the conflict could further enhance its international status. Active participation in international peacekeeping missions and providing additional assistance to Ukraine could strengthen its position as a responsible member of the international community and increase its influence on the global stage.
- **Enhancing Regional Initiatives:** While Bosnia and Herzegovina participates in various regional initiatives, such as the Berlin Process, there is a need for alignment and enhancement of regional strategies. Bosnia and Herzegovina should continue working on overcoming internal political disagreements and focus on strengthening its role in regional initiatives to better address regional challenges and improve its chances for EU integration. Focusing on more effective implementation of regional agreements can contribute to greater stability and prosperity in the region.

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RELATIONS WITH EUROPEAN UNION

The collapse of communism in former Yugoslavia in 1989, including the abolishment of Kosovo's autonomous status, resulted in establishment of political parties which established a full political consensus on Euro-Atlantic integration. This "national consensus" remains such to this day – all political parties, both in the government and opposition, including the non-majority community parties, strongly support EU membership. This is also reflected in the support for EU membership – 89% would vote in favour of joining the EU, and only 2% would vote against.²²

Kosovo's relations with the EU have been more different than the other Western Balkan countries. The EU became the responsible actor for economic development from 1999-2008 through United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) pillar IV management on economic issues. All legislation in Kosovo had to be EU compliant, same requirement as today. After declaration of independence in 2008, the EU role evolved. Given the lack of unity of EU member states regarding the independence of Kosovo – with 22 members recognizing the independence, while 5 do not – the EU established the EU Office in Kosovo (instead of delegation). The head of the EU Office is also the EU Special Representative (EUSR) which "offers advice and support to the Government of Kosovo, coordinates the EU presence, and promotes human rights and fundamental freedoms".²³ In addition, in 2008 the EU has deployed the largest Common Security and Defense (CSDP) mission – the EU Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX) – which "provides support to rule of law institutions" to achieve independence, sustainability, compliance with human rights standards and best European practices.²⁴

The Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) is the European policy framework for relations between the EU and the Western Balkans, including with Kosovo, until the country accedes to the EU. The SAP is centered around three pillars - political stabilization and the transition to a market economy, regional cooperation and preparation for EU accession.²⁵ The Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) was signed in 2015, and entered into force on 1 April 2016. Since then, the EU conducts regular meetings with the government of Kosovo through a Stabilisation and Association Agreement framework, while the annual progress monitoring is done through annual reports which are structured according to accession negotiation chapters. The main problem in relations with the EU is the division of EU on status of Kosovo. On 15 December, 2022 Kosovo applied for

22 <https://www.iri.org/resources/western-balkans-regional-poll-february-march-2024-full/>

23 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/kosovo/eu-and-kosovo_en?s=321

24 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/kosovo/eu-and-kosovo_en?s=321

25 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/kosovo/eu-and-kosovo_en?s=321

EU membership²⁶, which has not been reviewed because of the disunity on status. In this regard, Kosovo is listed as a “potential candidate” country, and is in great disadvantage from other Western Balkans countries in terms of benefits from the status of candidate countries. Until the EU reaches a unified position on status of Kosovo, the country will be unable to advance in the EU accession process.

Since formally Kosovo is not in an accession process with the EU, the European Commission (EC) does not track alignment of Kosovo with EU foreign policy. However, Kosovo does this alignment unilaterally.

Kosovo has condemned the Russian aggression on Ukraine. It has adopted same measures as the EU on sanctions against Russia. Initially, Kosovo offered to host Ukrainian journalists, including financial humanitarian assistance to Ukraine. On 6 April, 2024 the government of Kosovo has decided to offer two support packages for Ukraine - the first package consisting of tactical trucks, tactical vehicles and military armored vehicles, while the second package consisting of 120, 81 and 60-millimeter mortar shells.²⁷

RELATIONS WITH NATO

The entire Kosovo political spectrum, ruling and opposition parties including political parties representing non-majority communities, support NATO membership. A recent poll by the International Republican Institute (IRI) found that 89% of Kosovars support full membership, while 2% oppose it.²⁸ Even larger number evaluates positively NATO's role in the world – 80% sees it as mostly positive, while 11% as somewhat positive.

Kosovo does not have a formal relationship with NATO, as 4 NATO members do not recognize the independence of Kosovo (Spain, Greece, Slovakia and Romania). Due to this lack of unity on the status of Kosovo, the country cannot advance even in partnership for Peace (PfP) or any other formal relation.

However, NATO is present in Kosovo with the peace-keeping mission through the Kosovo Force (KFOR), since the end of campaign against Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Serbia. KFOR has a mandate from the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999) and the Military-Technical Agreement between NATO, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Serbia.²⁹ KFOR's original objectives were to deter renewed hostilities, establish a secure environment and ensure public safety and order, demilitarize the Kosovo Liberation Army, support the international humanitarian effort and coordinate with the international civil presence.

Today, KFOR continues to contribute towards maintaining a safe and secure environment in Kosovo and freedom of movement for all.³⁰

Given the lack of formal relationship with NATO, Kosovo support to Ukraine can not be evaluated through the NATO policy regarding this support, nor within the NATO framework.

26 <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/EU-KS%20FS.pdf>

27 <https://www.dukagjini.com/maqedonci-pakoja-e-pare-me-ndihma-ushtarake-nga-kosova-per-ne-ukraine-do-te-der-gohet-kete-jave/>

28 <https://www.iri.org/resources/western-balkans-regional-poll-february-march-2024-full/>

29 https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_48818.htm

30 https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_48818.htm

BILATERAL COOPERATION

Political and institutional relations between Kosovo and the rest of Western Balkans as a whole is complex due to non-recognition of independence by Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Western Balkans Six sit together and cooperate within the Berlin Process and dozens of regional organizations. This multilateral cooperation has not advanced the bilateral relations, especially with the two WB no-recognizers. Political cooperation has been estranged between Kosovo and most of the Western Balkans in 2023-2024, but this has not impacted the degree of institutional cooperation. Kosovo has mixed the bilateral cooperation with Western Balkans countries with its views about the Open Balkans Initiative, the dialogue with Serbia and cooperation within the Regional Cooperation Council and CEFTA.

Although politically tense at times, Kosovo has a wide institutional cooperation with Albania. The two countries have signed over 30 agreements and protocols³¹ in the last two years in parallel with Albania's agreements within the "Open Balkans Initiative" countries – Serbia and North Macedonia. These agreements facilitate removal of barriers within the "four freedoms" between the two countries. The estranged political relation between the two prime ministers has overshadowed the bilateral cooperation, and has become the measuring point of the bilateral relations. These tensions are mostly a result of differing views on the EU-facilitated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia.

Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina have no bilateral political or institutional cooperation due to the non-recognition of status. Kosovo prime minister has met with the Bosniak and Croat members of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, objected by the Serb member of the Presidency and the entity of Republika Srpska. There have been no efforts in the past to gradually establish a framework for cooperation, even at a working level. The only venue for contacts is within the Berlin Process, the EU-WB Summits, regional organisations and joint commitments and agreements that are a result of regional cooperation.

There are no open bilateral disputes between Kosovo and Montenegro. Bilaterally, the countries have had a low level of bilateral level visits and agreements. This is a result of the political changes in Montenegro and Kosovo's reactions to it. Regardless, there is a good cooperation in tourism and transport area, as new bilateral infrastructure plans are in place.

Kosovo and North Macedonia have no open bilateral issues. North Macedonia is one of the largest trade partners with Kosovo, as well as tourism. The stable relationship has changed over the last year, especially over disagreements of Kosovo's prime minister with the ethnic Albanian member of the government of North Macedonia over the Open Balkans Initiative, which Kosovo opposes, and Kosovo's behaviour in the dialogue with Serbia. This has resulted in Kurti's direct interference in national and presidential elections in North Macedonia, whereover his patronage the Albanian opposition parties were unified to oust the ruling major Albanian parties, mainly Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) and the Albanian Democratic Party (PDSH) supported by Albania's prime minister Edi Rama. This also resulted in estranging relations with the then ruling Alliance of Social-Democrats of Macedonia (SDSM) which lost recent national and presidential elections.

Kosovo's relations with Serbia are led under the framework of the EU facilitated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. The High Representative/Vice President (HR/VP) Josep Borell, has more than once described the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia as 'crisis management', underlining the complexity

³¹ <https://mfa-ks.net/lajmet/marveshja-shqiperi-kosove/>

of the situation³². The EU brokered Agreement on the Path to Normalisation of Relations between Kosovo and Serbia (also known as the Ohrid Agreement) and its Implementation Annex³³, reached in February and March 2023 respectively, did not produce the expected results, due to disagreements on the sequencing of implementation steps. This Agreement is inspired by the 1972 German-German Basic Agreement and stipulates, among other points, that Kosovo pledges to 'ensure an appropriate level of self-management for the Serb community', including through the establishment of an Association of Serb-majority Municipalities (ASM) – a commitment from 2013 – while Serbia does not object to Kosovo's membership in international organisations. Almost none of the commitments have been implemented. New issues, with a potential to further destabilise the situation, pile up.

The political relationship of Kosovo with Vishegrad countries is multidimensional – though EU, V4 and bilateral. Bilaterally, Kosovo does not have a representation in Slovakia, while with Poland the diplomatic relations were fully established after the Russian aggression in Ukraine. With Hungary and Czechia the diplomatic relations were established after the recognition of independence of Kosovo by both countries, but the space for advancing the full bilateral political, economic and cultural relationship has not been maximised in the past few years.

There have also not been high level visits between Kosovo and V4 countries over the past few years. In September 2022 the president of Hungary Katalin Novak visited Kosovo where she was received by the president of Kosovo Vjosa Osmani. No such high level visits were organized with the other V4 countries, nor at the governmental level. The cooperation with Hungary has also been influenced by the EU facilitated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. As Hungary's political role in the WB has increased over the past few years, it has been inclined to support Serbia's stance against Kosovo's quest to seek membership in international organisations. This, however, has not impacted the result of the Hungary's recognition of Kosovo's independence. All V4 countries have unanimously supported the Agreement on the Path to Normalisation of Relations between Kosovo and Serbia, including the initiative to make the commitments of the Agreement legally binding for both Serbia and Kosovo in their respective EU accession framework processes.

The most substantive framework for cooperation of Kosovo with Vishegrad Four remains the multilateral platform of V4-WB cooperation. Within this framework V4 is supporting extensive regional cooperation, good neighbourly relations, and reconciliation in the Western Balkans also through the International Visegrad Fund's grants (Visegrad+ Grants), scholarship programmes or assistance to the Western Balkans Fund.³⁴ This as well includes the collaboration within the International Visegrad Fund which is regularly active in supporting Kosovo's civil society organizations in promoting democratic values and human rights, alongside scholarships and fellowships for university students enrolled at V4 universities, and academic fellowship exchanges between V4 and Kosovo.

32 European External Action Service, 'Kosovo-Serbia: Press Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell after the crisis management meetings with Prime Minister Kurti and President Vučić', June 2023 (https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/kosovo-serbia-press-remarks-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-after-crisis-management_en).

33 See more (https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-agreement-path-normalisation-between-kosovo-and-serbia_en) and (https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-implementation-annex-agreement-path-normalisation-relations-between_en).

34 <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/official-statements/v4-statement-on-the-190912>

REGIONAL COOPERATION IN THE WB

Kosovo has an active role in the regional development and cooperation networks. The country is part of every significant intergovernmental initiative from various fields such as trade, judiciary, anti-corruption, public administration, local self-governance, energy reforms, EU integration and etc. Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative (MARRI), Network of Associations of Local Authorities in South-East Europe (NALAS), Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative (RAI), Western Balkans Democracy Initiative (WBDI), Regional School for Public Administration (ReSPA), Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), Western Balkans Fund (WBF), collaborates with the Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE), are just some of the initiatives that involve most of the WB countries and in which the country is actively participating and contributing. Kosovo is also in the Energy Community which is the platform through which all WB countries, including Kosovo, are supported in meeting EU requirements on sustainable energy production and use.

Kosovo is also part of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) in which V4 group is also participating. The RCC is the central regional organisation leading and facilitating regional cooperation towards the establishment of the Common Regional Market (CRM). Under the patronage of this organization several crucial documents have been signed and are now effective – the 2022 Roaming Declaration enabling the reduction of the roaming charges between the EU and the Western Balkans as of 1 October 2023³⁵ as well as the 2023 Agreement on the recognition of professional qualifications of nurses, veterinary surgeons, pharmacists, and midwives. Both documents were initiated in the framework of the Berlin Process.³⁶

As a most important document that resulted from the Berlin process in 2022 was the Declaration on Energy Security and Green Transition in the Western Balkans, as well as three mobility agreements under the Common Regional Market (ID travel within the region, recognition of academic qualifications and recognition of qualifications for certain professions).³⁷ In 2023 during the Tirana Summit the Joint Agreement for Recognition of Professional Qualifications Nurses Veterinary Surgeons Midwives and Pharmacists was signed, alongside several declarations such as the Intent Regional Climate Partnership, Intent Regional Climate Partnership Declaration, Single Euro Payments Area of WB Declaration, Facilitation of Trade and Transport Declaration as well as the Declaration on the Establishment of a Convergence Observatory in the WB.³⁸

As of June 2023, the Agreement on free movement in the Western Balkans with ID cards, the Agreement on the recognition of higher educational qualifications and the Agreement on the recognition of the professional qualifications of doctors, dentists and architects entered into force.³⁹ There is a possibility that during the next Berlin Process summit, which is expected to take place in Germany marking the 10th anniversary of this initiative, another mobility agreement will be signed

35 RCC, available at: <https://www.rcc.int/news/792/significant-reduction-of-data-roaming-prices-between-western-balkans-and-eu-to-start-as-of-1-october-2023>

36 RCC, available at: <https://www.rcc.int/news/848/bregu-another-agreement-prepared-by-the-rcc-signed-today-in-tirana>

37 Berlin Process, available at: <https://www.berlinprocess.de/en/the-berlin-process-2022>

38 Ibid. available at: <https://www.berlinprocess.de/>

39 The three agreements within the framework of the Berlin process enter into force, MFA, available at: <https://mfa.gov.mk/mk/page/13/post/3435/stapuvaat-vo-sila-trite-dogovori-vo-ramki-na-berliniski-proces>

– the “Agreement on Admission to and Access to Study in the Western Balkans” which will further mobility of students in the WB, who will be treated as domestic students in each of the countries.

As far as cooperation within CEFTA is concerned, Kosovo has been blocking the adoption of almost ten agreements within CEFTA in an attempt to initiate discussions on its direct representation within the organisation. Kosovo is represented in CEFTA through UNMIK, although the representation is formal and government of Kosovo representative stake participate in the decision making and technical negotiations.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Establishing annual political meeting mechanism between Kosovo (as well as WB region) and V4 countries in a summit format so to ensure regular opportunities for collaboration and regular consultations on foreign policy, security on key transatlantic issues and other areas of interest in regards to EU integration;

- V4 unequivocal support for Kosovo’s advancement in NATO, including the support to offer Kosovo joining Partnership for Peace (PfP);
- Identify are as for further trade exchange, including investment opportunities;
- V4 strong support for full establishment of the Common Regional Market and inclusion in the CRM through Regional Cooperation Council;
- Expand cooperation in mobility of students and professionals between WB and V4
- Continuation of the political, military and economic support from Kosovo to Ukraine;
- Explore establishment of programmes to host Ukranian refugees in Kosovo.

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RELATIONS WITH EUROPEAN UNION

The position of ruling and opposition political structures towards EU membership

In Montenegro, the political structures mostly agree on the strategic goal of membership in the European Union, but there are significant differences in approaches and priorities between the ruling and opposition parties. The ruling coalition, led by party that supports the European agenda, is formally committed to the accession process, although sometimes it seems that a greater degree of Euro-enthusiasm can be observed within the opposition. Opposition parties often criticize the slowness in the implementation of reforms, and believe that the current Government uses the integration process more as a political tool than as a true goal. In some ruling circles, there is also skepticism towards the EU, as the true development goal of Montenegro, bearing in mind its orientation towards the West.

That is why it is not surprising that since 2020, when the political structure of primarily right-oriented parties came to power in Montenegro, rooted in the myths of a great Serbia and undisputed relations with the Russian Federation, it took Montenegro four years to, with a strong pressure, attention and openness of the EU and partners start a new phase of the negotiation process. That is why it is increasingly heard in the public narrative that the new phase of the negotiation process is deserved much more thanks to the EU rather than to the official Podgorica.

Viewed technically, only in relation to the current composition of the reconstructed 44th Government, it is not recognized that Montenegro has ever been more dedicated to the development of foreign policy and European integration in the history of its multi-party system. Today, on key positions in the government (vice president or minister), Montenegro has four people in charge of foreign policy: the Vice President of the Government for Foreign and European Affairs; Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Minister of Foreign Affairs; Minister of European Affairs and Minister of Diaspora.

However, such a cumbersome political bureaucracy might not be a problem even for a small Montenegro, if we exclude the fact that all four people have significantly different political profiles: from pro-Western to anti-NATO and pro-Russian.

The latest results of public opinion polls on EU-related issues

According to the latest public opinion polls, the support of Montenegrin citizens for EU membership remains high, which also implies the fact that even certain political forces that do not truly stand

for the European integration of Montenegro, nevertheless avoid such a narrative and express a declarative attitude of dedication to Montenegro's membership in EU.

According to the CEDEM survey "Political public opinion of Montenegro", conducted in the period from March 5 to 19, 2024, after the historic minimum of 54%, in August 2020, 78% of citizens support Montenegro's membership in the EU, 11% oppose and 11% have no definite opinion. The same survey shows that, if a referendum on Montenegro's EU membership were to be called, 88% of citizens would vote for membership. This survey also shows that citizens have a higher level of trust in the Delegation of the European Union than in the President of Montenegro, the Government or the Parliament, but still lower than in the Serbian Orthodox Church. According to the aforementioned survey, the first foreign policy priority for citizens is Montenegro's membership in the EU (71.4%), followed by Montenegro's membership in NATO (34.6%), as the second choice.

According to the public opinion survey of the DAMAR Agency, from July 2024, 51% of citizens believe that the main pillar of Montenegrin foreign policy should be the European Union, while Serbia (17%) and (Russia 11%) are in second and third place, followed by the USA (6.1%) and Germany (3.2%). 41.7% believe that the current Government can finalize negotiations with the EU, while 38% of citizens gave a negative answer, with 20.3% undecided.

According to research by the Digital Forensic Center (DFC), from April 2024, when asked how much influence certain actors have in Montenegro, 76.1% of citizens answered that the EU has influence, followed by NATO (63.3%), the USA (60.8%), Serbian Orthodox Church (55.3%), Serbia (52.1%), Russia (45.2%), Turkey (35.8%) and China (33.8%). When asked which actor has a positive influence, 70.4% of citizens believe that it is the EU, followed by China (63.2%), Turkey (55.6%), the Serbian Orthodox Church (53.4%), Serbia (51.8%), NATO (47.8%), Russia (47.3%) and the USA (41.8%).

The current status of the technical part of negotiations with the EU

So far, Montenegro has opened all negotiation chapters with the EU, and temporarily closed three of them. On June 26, 2024, after a long period, an Intergovernmental Conference was held in Brussels, at which Montenegro received a positive Report on the fulfillment of temporary (Interim) benchmarks for the rule of law area (IBAR). Thus, Montenegro became the first candidate country for membership in the European Union that received a positive IBAR Report, after the adoption of the new Methodology by the EU. Based on the current enlargement methodology, the adoption of IBAR means that Montenegro can now start the process of creating conditions for closing negotiations in other negotiation chapters.

According to the official information from the Ministry of European Affairs, Montenegro is carrying out activities on the preparation of road maps for each chapter. When it comes to internal readiness, it is evident that in the past four years, the new governing structure did not pay significant attention to the negotiation process. So it was the case before 2020, the official information of the line ministry still states that there is internal readiness only for Chapter 10 (Information Society and Media) and Chapter 20 (Entrepreneurship and Industrial Policy). The Government's plan is to, in addition to the aforementioned chapters, bring to an end the preparations for closing negotiations in chapters 5 (Public Procurement), 6 (Commercial Law) and 7 (Intellectual Property Law) by the end of the Hungarian Presidency.

At the same time, in January 2024, the Government adopted a new Decision on the establishment of a negotiation structure. In accordance with the New Methodology of Accession Negotiations

with the EU, the Government of Montenegro appointed six negotiators to lead the negotiations on the accession of Montenegro to the European Union, for six thematic clusters within which 33 negotiation chapters were arranged. Bearing in mind that several state secretaries of line ministries have been appointed as heads of a certain number of clusters, and that individual ministers have been replaced, and thus the mandate of the state secretaries has ended, it is to be expected that a new change in the negotiation structure will occur very soon.

At the same time, although there is a very low level of transparency in the negotiation process, from the official media appearances of the competent institutions it is noted that the competent ministries have started activities on the creation of action plans for the fulfillment of the final measures for chapters 23 and 24, that contain three final indicators each, in addition to 17 sub-indicators in Chapter 23 and seven sub-indicators in Chapter 24.

According to the statements of the highest state officials, the Government's goal is that Montenegro implements all the necessary activities and finish negotiations on membership in the European Union by 2028 at the latest.

The main problems in the relations with the EU and the main requirements of the EU for the acceleration of the accession process

The main problems in Montenegro's relations with the EU relate to the lack of progress in key reforms, especially in the areas of the rule of law. The EU also emphasizes the need for depoliticization of state institutions, strengthening the independence of the judiciary and better protection of human rights, as issues that increasingly contribute to the lighting of red lights by the Brussels administration. That is why it is not surprising that the European Union requires Montenegro to demonstrate greater progress in these areas as a key condition for closing the negotiation chapters.

To an increasing extent, taking into account the fluid Montenegrin regional politics, the country is getting itself into trouble with its neighbors, especially the Republic of Croatia as an EU member state (more details in Chapter „Regional and bilateral cooperation“).

In addition, Montenegro is expected to implement a long-term strategy for economic development, so that the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, as an important instrument for implementing key reforms on the European path and accelerating economic growth, could be implemented smoothly, and Montenegro would provide almost 400 million EURO of support from the EU, although most of it is in the form of loan.

As from a technical aspect, Montenegro has not taken significant steps in the negotiation process in the past four years, despite the very visible chances and the readiness of the EU to once again recognize Montenegro as a reliable partner and a leader in the Balkans, to which Montenegro contributed the least, and more geopolitical opportunities, especially the stagnation of the EU enlargement policy due to the absence of a “good student” and Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

The civil sector is increasingly pointing to the continuous increase in the level of non-transparency of the negotiation process and the exclusion of the interested public from negotiations with the EU. On the other hand, research also shows a low degree of fulfillment of the institutions' obligations in the process of negotiations, in relation to the plans that they determined independently. Thus, the results of the research by the Center for Civic Education (CGO) show that during the first half of 2024, 49% of the obligations that the Government set for this period through the Program for

the Accession of Montenegro to the European Union (PPCGEU) for the period 2024 - 2027 were fulfilled (out of 102 obligations in the first half of 2024, competent institutions implemented only 50, although 72 obligations are directly under the responsibility of the Government (by-laws and strategic documents, while 28 obligations include the adoption of laws from side of the Parliament). This non-governmental organization emphasizes that a number of laws that were adopted with the aim on obtaining IBAR have serious loopholes within its legal texts for the sake of party and particular interests, thus abusing the important moment and openness of the EU towards Montenegro. Finally, most of the Laws never see the public discussion process, which is obligatory by law.

Level of alignment and support for EU foreign policy

Montenegro is generally considered a leader in the Western Balkan when it comes to harmonization with the EU's foreign policy. This country consistently supports all EU foreign policy declarations and measures, including sanctions against Russia after the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

Attitude towards Russian aggression against Ukraine and forms of aid to Ukraine

Montenegro clearly condemned the Russian aggression against Ukraine and joined the sanctions imposed by the EU on Russia. The issue of Russian aggression against Ukraine in Montenegro is also viewed through the prism of possible implications in a wider geopolitical context. That is why it is not surprising that the then Prime Minister of Montenegro, Dritan Abazović, in the European Parliament, 19.05.2022. stated that the Western Balkans can become a new Ukraine in a few years, which is followed by the statement of the US ambassador to Montenegro, Judy Reising Reinke, during a visit of the accommodation facility where refugees from Ukraine stay in Sutomore: "Montenegro as a country should be aware that it will bear the consequences of the war in Ukraine if Ukraine fails to resist Russian aggression." Bearing in mind the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church for part of the public in Montenegro, as an important secular, and not only spiritual factor, the statement by the chief representative of that religious entity in Montenegro, Joanikije Mićović, should be noted: "The events in Ukraine are the result of godlessness that had taken root and Montenegro was designed to be a small Ukraine".

The current President of Montenegro and also the Prime Minister also expressed their solidarity with the citizens of Ukraine on several occasions, while on July 27, 2022, the Parliament of Montenegro adopted the the Resolution on the condemnation of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, as a document „that is not a political, but a moral issue of relations with the aggressor, that is, Russia“, as announced by the initiator of the initiative, Danijel Živković, leader of the opposition Democratic Party of Socialists.

According to the CEDEM survey, from May 2024, 32.6% of citizens see the conflict between Russia and Ukraine as Russia's aggression against Ukraine, 29% of citizens see the conflict as Russia's defense against NATO expansion, while 38% of citizens do not have an opinion. When asked who, in their opinion, is responsible for the start of war in Ukraine, 25.7% of citizens answered that everyone should be blamed, 24.2% that it is Russia and Vladimir Putin, 19.6% of citizens have no opinion,

16.7% of citizens blame America and their aggressive policy for the conflict, while 8.9% blame NATO. 4.9% of citizens blame Ukraine and Volodymyr Zelensky for Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

For a country like Montenegro, which received refugees from Ukraine, almost a third of its population, which was also the case during the wave of refugees due to the war in Kosovo in 1999, the lack of information and inactivity of state institutions in presenting the causes, problems and challenges that produced Russia's aggression against Ukraine is a big problem and requires a holistic approach from all public stakeholders.

RELATIONS WITH (IN) NATO

The position of ruling and opposition political structures towards NATO membership

Montenegro has been a full member of NATO since 2017. As a member, Montenegro actively participates in NATO operations and contributes to collective security through participation in military missions and cooperation with other allies. The country regularly participates in military exercises and contributes to the Alliance's joint defense efforts. Montenegro is also committed to fulfilling its financial obligations to NATO, although it is still in the process of strengthening its defense capacities in accordance with NATO standards.

Montenegro's membership in NATO continues to cause divided attitudes among political structures. The opposition parties, which led the membership process and supported the membership, consider NATO to be crucial for the country's security and stability in the region. They emphasize the importance of the strategic partnership with NATO, which contributes to strengthening the defense capacities of Montenegro and enables active participation in collective security.

Parties with pro-Serbian and pro-Russian views continue to express skepticism towards NATO. Today, when they are in power, with much less intensity, they state that the membership is moving away from traditional allies, such as Russia. In contrast to membership in the EU, for which around 80% of citizens are committed, membership in NATO is a significantly smaller (49.5% in March 2024), which gives the pro-Serbian and pro-Russian political forces, which currently form the backbone of the ruling majority in Montenegro, room to continue directly, albeit politically in more correct terms, to express a negative attitude towards the position of Montenegro in the NATO alliance.

The latest results of public opinion research on issues related to NATO

The latest public opinion surveys show that the support of the citizens of Montenegro for NATO membership is stable, but not high, at the level of 49.5% (CEDEM survey, March 2024), while a significant part of the population, 30.7%, still opposes membership. The rest of the citizens are undecided. This split in public opinion reflects political and ethnic divisions in the country, where citizens of Serbian nationality and those who identify with pro-Russian views tend to have a negative attitude towards NATO.

However, the stated level of support for Montenegro's membership in NATO is the highest since 2008, and it is also part of the trend of sudden raise of support since August 2020, when pro-Serbian and pro-Russian political structures took power in Montenegro.

In addition, according to a survey by the DAMAR Agency, from May 2024, 53% of citizens support Montenegro's membership in NATO, while 39% are against it, and 7.6% have no opinion. The findings of the research show that the voters of the opposition parties, which are mostly civic-oriented, mostly support membership in NATO (in the range of 79 to 97%), while the voters of the parties that currently hold the majority are mostly against Montenegro's membership in NATO (PES, Demokrats, SNP, DNP, NSD).

The main problems in relations with NATO

The main challenge in Montenegro's relations with NATO relates to internal political divisions that affect the country's stability and can potentially weaken its contribution to the Alliance. However, in a broader sense, Montenegro currently has no systemic problems in its relations with NATO, given its clear commitment to membership. However, during the period October 2020 December 2023, there were several unclear situations with security breach and security checks from the side of NATO structures towards security and intelligence structures in Montenegro.

Level of compliance with NATO policy regarding support to Ukraine and forms of assistance to Ukraine

As a member of NATO, Montenegro has fully aligned itself with the Alliance's policy regarding support for Ukraine. The country supported all measures taken by NATO in response to Russian aggression. Montenegro, within its capacity, provided humanitarian and military aid to Ukraine, including medical supplies and logistical support. Montenegro sent Ukraine 95.3 thousand humanitarian and 11.7 million euros worth of military aid, through the NATO Alliance's CAP program.

In accordance with the Decision of the Parliament of Montenegro on the engagement of members in NATO activities on the eastern borders of the Alliance, the Army of Montenegro engages up to 60 members. Members of the Army of Montenegro, also in accordance with the decisions of the Parliament of Montenegro, participate in the KFOR mission in Kosovo, the NMI mission in Iraq, the UN MINURSO mission in the Western Sahara and the EU mission ATALANTA in the waters of the Gulf of Aden.

REGIONAL AND BILATERAL COOPERATION

Description of political and institutional relations between Montenegro and other countries of the Western Balkans (WB) and the Visegrad Group (V4)

According to the official information of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, since regaining its independence in 2006, Montenegro has been recognized by 182 countries, with whom diplomatic relations have been established.

As the member of NATO and the candidate for EU membership, Montenegro is committed to fulfilling its international obligations and participates in global efforts to preserve peace and stability. Although there are internal political differences, the general course of foreign policy, at

least declaratively, remains aligned with European and Euro-Atlantic partners. This commitment has been confirmed through continuous participation in joint initiatives, bilateral and multilateral projects, as well as a clear attitude towards global issues such as the Ukrainian crisis.

However, limited capacities, level of knowledge and the absence of a clear and well-founded foreign policy course, as a result of the political structure that constitutes the current majority in Montenegro, Montenegrin foreign policy is on infusion and is maintained solely thanks to: (1) policy relapses from 2006 to the present day and (2) the interest of the Western partners to definitely not leave their NATO member to the active wave of interest of other global political players.

Consequently, it is necessary to state that the current overall political distortion in Montenegro has not bypassed the foreign policy sector either, so the intolerance of the political leadership has also resulted in the fact that the already small network of diplomatic-consular missions (a total of 37 DCP) is not functioning at full capacity. Instead of expanding the diplomatic network and strengthening the position of Montenegro, especially among the EU member states, Montenegro is without ambassadors in 27 countries, including the most important centers, such as: the USA, Germany, China, Russia, the UK, the countries of the region, but also international organizations such as the UN and NATO.

The non-appointment of ambassadors, the non-functionality of diplomatic-consular representations in their full mandate and the questionability of the essential unity and harmonization of foreign policy are not the basis on which activities to fulfill foreign policy priorities can be carried out, and especially not the membership of Montenegro in the European Union, for which there is a necessity of a strong and clear diplomatic offensive and presence in decision-making political centres.

When it comes to cooperation with the countries of the Western Balkans, it is noted that bilateral relations have been on a downward trajectory since 2020 and that it is only a matter of time before all the countries around Montenegro have a red light on. Bilateral relations can also be observed through the analysis of the official bilateral visits of the highest state officials to the countries of the region, which are minimal and very questionable in content, and the report from each visit did not bring any new value of cooperation, but mostly the activation of open issues. That is why it is not surprising that in the past four years, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Montenegro, instead of being an engine for the development of good neighborly relations, has become an inbox for protest notes from neighboring countries.

Albania

Relations with Albania are currently not in disbalance, but remain on the level of communication like with any other, not neighbouring country. Back in February 2023, after 3 years, the governments of Albania and Montenegro held the second joint government session in Podgorica, confirming then the good and friendly relations between the two countries. On this occasion a joint declaration was signed, followed by a series of agreements in the areas of: defence, infrastructure, energy, fishing, plant protection, social protection, health, agriculture, sports and culture. The two countries also signed a bilateral agreement for the construction of a bridge on the Buna River to connect the coastal areas of Ulcinj (Montenegro) and Velipoja (Albania) and announced the opening of the border crossing at Saint Nicholas – Pulaj.

Although there were no official meetings between the pro-Russian representatives between a high ranking leaders of Montenegrin institutions and the official Albania, the President of the Parliament of Montenegro Mr. Andrija Mandić reacted in Belgrade to the New Year's statement of the Prime Minister of Albania, Edi Rama, who announced a "no border" agreement, after Kosovo, also with other countries of the region. "We raised the topic with President Vučić of abolishing the borders between Serbian countries, i.e. between those countries where the Serbian population lives. The idea of abolishing the borders with Albania goes in the direction of creating a Greater Albania", said Mandić.

North Macedonia

Bilateral relations between Montenegro and North Macedonia are maintained without producing open questions, nor maintaining the intensity of substantial cooperation to the extent that this is possible. The continuous communication of officials at different levels is recorded.

In February 2023, there was a meeting between the President of North Macedonia and the Prime Minister of Montenegro in the margins of the WEF in Davos and political consultations between the Foreign Ministries took place. Meetings were organized also at the marging of the Adriatic Charter meeting in March 2023 and the Delphi Economic Forum in March 2023. Montenegro and North Macedonia signed a Programme of Cooperation on culture for 2023-2026.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Relations between Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina have to be assessed through twoprisms: one with the official Sarajevo and one with Banja Luka.

There are many agreements and programs being implemented between two countries. As example, in December 2022, the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Government of Montenegro signed a memorandum of understanding and cooperation on the implementation of infrastructure projects. In February 2023, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina paid an official visit to Podgorica.

On the other side, the participation of the Montenegrin Finance and Justice Ministers on 9 January 2023 in a ceremony in Banja Luka celebrating the unconstitutional day of Republika Srpska sparked strong reactions and controversy in Montenegro and regionally.

The last note of protest was sent by Bosnia and Herzegovina to Montenegro due to allegations from the speech of the President of the Assembly Andrija Mandić at the "All-Serbian Assembly" in Belgrade on June 8.

The previous note of protest from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of BiH from February this year referred to the meeting in the Parliament of Montenegro between Andrija Mandić and the president of the BiH entity Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik, when the BiH flag was not displayed, but only the Serbian tricolor.

Croatia

An exact example of a wrong regional policy of Montenegro is evident in the relationship with the Republic of Croatia. There was no progress regarding the pending border demarcation between the two countries. The dispute between the two countries regarding the ownership of the sailingship "Jadran" continues. In August 2023, the Croatian Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent a strong protest

note to Montenegro due to Montenegro's celebration of the ship's 90th anniversary.

Some of the highest state officials: President of the Assembly, Deputy Prime Minister and leader of the party that has ministers in the current Government have been declared *persona non grata* by this EU member. This activity of Croatia is only one point of this type of communication with Montenegro, and it was caused by the behavior of a part of the Montenegrin political scene, which now constitutes the parliamentary majority.

The Republic of Croatia also sent the Protest Note to the Montenegrin authorities in October 2023, due to the campaign 'Proud to be Serbian', when pro-Serbian entities called on citizens to declare themselves nationally as Serbs, presenting Ruđer Bošković and Valtazar Bogišić as Serbs.

With the Protest Notes the official Croatia reacted towards the official Montenegro also in response to the adoption of the Resolution on Jasenovac in the Parliament of Montenegro, saying that in this way the victims of Jasenovac are being manipulated for political purposes.

On that occasion, it was clearly indicated that "the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of Croatia condemns attempts to instrumentalize Croatia in any way for internal political purposes and emphasizes its expectation that Montenegro and its institutions refrain from moves that could have a negative impact on the future of bilateral relations, as well as Montenegro's European path". It is thus clearly implied that in the following activities of Montenegro, relations may escalate in this way and lead to the blocking of the further process of negotiations on Montenegro's membership in the European Union.

Kosovo

Even if there are no official open bilateral disputes between Kosovo and Montenegro, relations with Kosovo are kept on low level due to political changes in Montenegro since August 2020. Cooperation is being developed in certain sectoral policies on the level of bilateral agreement, such as Memorandum of Understanding on co-operation on the implementation of infrastructure projects. Protocolar official visits and meetings at the margining of international and regional events took place, but without any concrete result.

The behavior of official Montenegro, led by the declaratively pro-European Movement „Evropa Sad“ and the pro-Serbian and pro-Russian Democratic Front (the parties that constituted this political entity), culminated in the session of the Committee of the Council of Europe when the vote was taken on Kosovo's membership in this pan-European organization.

The representative of the Democratic Front, then MP and now Minister of Transport Ms. Maja Vukićević, voted against the admission of Kosovo to the Council of Europe, while the representative of the Movement "Evropa Sad", that's led by the current Prime Minister Milojko Spajić, Mr. Vasilije Čarapić abstained. Such a move is not surprising, taking into account that the official political agenda of the Democratic Front, which are coalition partners of the "Evropa Sad" Movement, includes the withdrawal of recognition of the independence of Kosovo, which they call a "fakestate" and "temporarily occupied territory".

Relying on such behavior of his party colleagues, the president of the Municipality of Pljevlja, Dario Vraneš, also refused to participate in the International Fair in Pristina in April, accompanying such a decision with the statement that "the so-called state of Kosovo does not exist, but is the Serbian province of Kosovo and Metohija".

Serbia

As it is the case with other countries of the WB, Serbia has not had partnership relations with Montenegro for a long time. Until 2020, these relations were maintained at a minimum of dignified diplomatic communication, with strong hybrid attacks in political and any other context by Serbia on Montenegro, while since August 2020, the hegemonic pretensions of Serbia and the attempt to compensate Kosovo with Montenegro are getting their concrete form.

The current Government of Montenegro consists of parties following the official hegemonic policy of Serbia, led by the current President Aleksandar Vučić, who base their political program on the creation of a Greater Serbia, of which Montenegro is a part, the denial of Kosovo's independence, the denial of the genocide in Srebrenica, anti-NATO policies and the subjugation of interests of Serbia, instead of the interests of its own citizens.

After the attempted terrorism in 2016, supported by Russia, and then by acting on social destabilization and direct interference in the political life of Montenegro through its proxy, the Serbian Orthodox Church, one of the last examples of Serbia's paternalistic attitude towards Montenegro is the order to the parliamentary majority of the The Parliament of Montenegro to adopt the Resolution on Jasenovac, immediately after the adoption of the Resolution on the genocide in Srebrenica.

The open interference of official Serbia in the political and overall social events in Montenegro has long gone beyond the classical methods of propaganda. First from Belgrade, and now more and more often through the media in Montenegro, which are in a formal or less formal way mostly under the control of official Serbia there could be heard theses that treat Serbia's great strength, its supremacy over Montenegro, and Montenegro as a Serbian province. That is why it is not surprising that key TV shows in Serbia are devoted day and night to events in Montenegro, both during the smallest local elections (example: the show Battle for Nikšić, which was organized daily on a Serbian TV station), but also in relation to the systematic and unprecedented attack on every individual or organization from Montenegro that opposes the misconduct of official Serbia.

The official authorities in Montenegro, even under public pressure, do not react to such behavior of official Belgrade, but with their silence and support allow Montenegro, as a member of NATO and a future member of the EU, to receive protest notes from a neighboring EU member state, that its officials are declared persons nongrata by the EU members and that the visits of the highest EU officials are canceled due to such behavior of Podgorica (example: the cancellation of the visit of the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, to Montenegro after the adoption of the Resolution on Jasenovac in the Montenegrin Parliament).

Višegrad Group Countries

With the countries of the Visegrad Group (V4), that include Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, Montenegro develops partnership relations, especially in the context of European integration. The V4 countries are an important partner for Montenegro in continuity, offering and providing political, technical and expert support on its way to the EU. These relations are mainly focused on the transfer of knowledge and experience from the integration process, the development of economic cooperation, and support through various projects financed by the EU and other funds.

One of such funds is the Western Balkans Fund (WBF), which was established on the reputation and with the support of the International Visegrad Fund and the countries of the Visegrad Group,

which initiated the idea of creating a project-oriented mechanism in the Western Balkans in 2012. In 2014 and 2015, at the joint meetings of the Heads of Diplomacy of the V4 and the Western Balkans, the Declaration on the establishment of the WBF with headquarters in Tirana was adopted and the Agreement on the establishment of the Fund was signed. The WBF was officially inaugurated on September 5, 2017 in Bled. This day is celebrated as WBF day. The Western Balkans Fund consists of six countries: Montenegro, Serbia, Albania, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. The fund is in the so-called "regional ownership" and represents the first mechanism that was created based on the agreement of the ministers of foreign affairs. The mission of the Fund is the development of more intensive cooperation between the WB countries and the facilitation of integrative processes through project activities in the fields of cultural cooperation, scientific exchange, research, education, sustainable development and youth issues. The seat of the Secretariat is in Tirana.

When it comes to communication at the highest political level, there is a regular level of communication and official visits. Below is an excerpt from the review of the visit at the highest political level:

- January 2021: Visit of the President of Montenegro to Hungary.
- January 2022: Official visit of the President of Montenegro to Albania.
- May 2022: Visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Hungary to Montenegro.
- September 2022: Meeting of the Prime Ministers of Montenegro and Serbia.
- January 2023: Official visit of the Prime Minister to the Republic of Albania.
- February 2023: Official visit of the Prime Minister of the Czech Republic to Montenegro.
- February 2023: Official visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of BiH to Montenegro.
- February 2023: Official visit of the President of Kosovo to Montenegro.
- April 2023: Working visit of the Prime Minister to the Republic of Kosovo.
- May 2023: Official visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of North Macedonia to Montenegro.
- July 2023: Official visit of the President of Montenegro to the Republic of Serbia.
- September 2023: Official visit of the President of Montenegro to the Republic of Croatia.
- October 2023: Participation of the Prime Minister at the Summit of the Berlin Process in Tirana.
- December 2023: Official visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Montenegro to the Republic of Croatia.
- January 2024: Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Albania on an official visit to Montenegro.

In addition to official political contacts, through a large number of bilateral, regional and international projects, Montenegro achieves cooperation with the countries of the Western Balkans and the Visegrad Group, in various areas of importance for socio-economic development. For the sake of illustration, a certain number of such activities are presented below:

- The project of regional cooperation in the field of energy between Montenegro and Serbia, aimed at improving energy efficiency and exchange of technologies.
- Joint cultural program between Montenegro and Poland, which includes the exchange of artists and the organization of cultural events.
- Economic forum between Montenegro and Hungary in Podgorica, focused on the development of tourism and agricultural cooperation.

- International student conference between Montenegro and Slovakia, topic: “Youth and European integration”.
- Joint sports event of Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, organized in order to promote regional cooperation.
- Economic meetings in cooperation with Poland, topic: “Investments in Montenegro: Opportunities and challenges”.

Participation of Montenegro in initiatives for regional cooperation within the framework of the Western Balkans

Since the restoration of independence, Montenegro has become a member, affirmed and participates in all initiatives of a regional character, which aim to strengthen regional cooperation, partnership and trust, respecting all members. Some of the key regional initiatives in which Montenegro participates are:

- Central European Initiative (CEI)
- Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)
- Western Balkans Fund (WBF)
- Adriatic-Ionian Initiative (JJI)
- Visegrad Group (V4)
- Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO)
- ReSPA | Welcome
- RACVIAC - Center for Security Cooperation
- South Eastern European Health Network (SEEHN)
- MARRI – Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative
- Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative (RAI)
- Union for the Mediterranean (UzM)
- Foundation Ana Lindt
- American-Ionian Charter (A5)
- Defense cooperation between the countries of Central Europe (Central European Defense Cooperation - CEDC) and the countries of the Western Balkans (CEDC+WB).

Montenegro’s participation in the Berlin process

Montenegro has been an active participant in the Berlin Process since its establishment in 2014. During this period, Montenegro participated in a series of activities aimed at strengthening regional cooperation, including projects of infrastructure connectivity, energy efficiency and digital transformation.

Montenegro was also active in the work of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), an organization that provides support for regional cooperation and the implementation of joint projects.

As part of the Berlin Process initiative, the Government adopted three mobility agreements on February 24, 2023, which were signed at the ninth Summit of the Berlin Process on November 3, 2022:

1. Agreement on freedom of movement in ZB with an identity card,
2. Agreement on the recognition of professional qualifications of doctors of medicine, doctors of dentistry and architects in the context of the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) and
3. Agreement on recognition of qualifications in the field of higher education).

On May 4, 2023, the Government established a Working Team for the coordination of activities within the Berlin Process, while on May 31, 2023, it appointed members for the RCC/CEFTA joint working groups, which are in charge of implementing the relevant agreements and drafting the rules of procedure.

During 2023, meetings of national coordinators for the Berlin Process (Sherpas) were held on April 18 in Brussels, May 9 (online), May 19 in Tirana, June 23 (online meeting with representatives of the European Commission on the new Growth Plan for the), 21. VII (online), 11. IX (online) and 5. X in Tirana. The tenth Summit of the Berlin Process under the Albanian presidency was held on October 16, 2023 in Tirana, for the first time outside the borders of the EU, in the region of the Western Balkans.

At the Summit, the Agreement on the recognition of professional qualifications for nurses, veterinarians, pharmacists and midwives in the context of CEFTA was signed between the leaders of the ZB, while on the sidelines of the Summit, the Agreement was signed on the establishment of the Cyber Capacities Center of the ZB based in Podgorica.

Also, a bilateral agreement was signed between the College of Europe from Bruges and the Republic of Albania on the establishment of the third College of Europe and several declarations were adopted on cooperation in the field of climate and plastic pollution, WiFi program for the Republic of Serbia, trade and traffic, joining SEPA and establishing the Observatory for convergence, as well as conclusions from the ministerial meetings and forums that preceded the Summit.

The summit of the Berlin Process was preceded by separate meetings of the Ministers of the Interior (14. IX 2023 in Tirana), the Ministers in charge of Roma integration (22 IX 2023 in Skopje) and the Ministers of Economic Development (26 IX 2023 in Tirana), and a meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, October 6, 2023 in Tirana.

On December 11, 2023, the Government adopted all three agreements on mobility, while the Parliament ratified these agreements on December 18, 2023. The fourth Agreement on the recognition of professional qualifications of general care nurses, doctors of veterinary medicine, pharmacists and midwives in the context of CEFTA was adopted by the Government on December 15, 2023, while it was ratified in the Parliament on December 29, 2023.

In 2023, Montenegro chaired CEFTA. The chairmanship ended with the organization of an event within the framework of CEFTA Week 7. XII in Podgorica (chairmanship was taken over by Serbia). According to official information from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, during the Montenegrin presidency, 10 decisions of CEFTA that were harmonized at the technical level were not adopted, nor was Additional Protocol 7 (DP7) on dispute resolution within CEFTA concluded, as an obligation from the Action Plan for the Joint regional market - JRM.

Montenegro's attitudes towards the "Open Balkans" initiative

Montenegro had a reserved position towards the "Open Balkan" initiative, which was joined in the initial phase by Serbia, Albania and North Macedonia. Although the official policy of Montenegro does not exclude the possibility of accession, the government has expressed concern about the potential duplication of efforts with the Berlin process and the fear that the "Open Balkan" could weaken the EU perspective of the region. In addition, individual analyzes have shown that Russia also played a role in the expansion of the Open Balkan initiative, which through its main proxy in the Western Balkans - the Republic of Serbia, strove to connect the Western Balkan market and strengthen its role in the economic context as well - further strengthening the role of Serbia and so controlling, that is, slowing down the total European integration path of every other country towards the West towards the European Union.

In relation to the Open Balkan initiative, despite certain ad hoc excursions by the new political leadership, Montenegro still maintained its position that it prefers regional cooperation to be coordinated with European integration and that all initiatives are developed within the framework of existing regional platforms such as the Berlin Process and Regional Economic Area.

Activities and attitude of Montenegro in relation to the documents of international multilateral organizations related to the aggression against Ukraine

Montenegro has consistently and unreservedly supported all key international documents condemning Russian aggression against Ukraine. This position is in line with its foreign policy aimed at integration into the EU and NATO, and at maintaining the principles of international law and protecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states.

Below are a number of examples of Montenegro's support in international multilateral organizations:

1. United Nations (UN): Montenegro voted for all relevant resolutions of the UN General Assembly condemning Russian aggression against Ukraine. In particular, it supported the resolution of March 2022, which condemned the invasion and demanded the immediate withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine. Also, Montenegro supported resolutions condemning the violation of human rights in the context of Russian aggression, as well as those demanding international humanitarian aid to Ukraine.
2. European Union (EU): As a candidate country for EU membership, Montenegro has fully harmonized its foreign policy with EU policy, including its policy towards Russia and Ukraine. This includes the introduction and implementation of sanctions against Russia, as well as supporting all EU joint statements and declarations condemning Russian aggression. Montenegro actively supported EU initiatives to provide assistance to Ukraine, including humanitarian, economic and military aid.
3. NATO: As a member of NATO, Montenegro actively participated in joint statements and resolutions condemning Russian aggression against Ukraine. Montenegro also supported NATO decisions related to strengthening the defense capacities of NATO members in the eastern wing of the alliance, as a response to Russian aggression.
4. Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE): Montenegro supported all OSCE decisions and declarations condemning Russian aggression and calling for respect for international law, especially with regard to human rights and the humanitarian situation in Ukraine.

5. Council of Europe: Montenegro supported all resolutions and decisions of the Council of Europe condemning Russian aggression against Ukraine and calling for responsibility for violations of human rights and international law. Montenegro also voted for the suspension of Russia's membership in the Council of Europe, which was one of the harshest responses of this organization to Russian aggression.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

Taking into account the geostrategic position of Montenegro, the current politically deviant situation on the internal level and the instability of political conditions, the foreign policy of Montenegro in the context of the EU and NATO integration of WB countries, regional cooperation and support for Ukraine is of key importance for the stability and further progress of the country.

The Government of Montenegro is consisted of different political parties, which have opposing political programs and positions on the external relations of Montenegro. Although in general the orientation of the Government of Montenegro is towards integration into the EU and NATO policy, the question remains as to how much this is really the case in practice, given that the Government includes political parties and politicians who do not have the same views on NATO, Russia and regional politics.

The process of joining Montenegro to the European Union has been intensified since the beginning of the year, and the discussion about enlargement is becoming more and more present both among Montenegrin officials and among EU representatives.

The new events caused by the war in Ukraine prompted the EU to refocus on the enlargement policy. Many EU officials have assessed that Montenegro has made progress in implementing reforms over the past months. This had a decisive impact on receiving a positive IBAR report and Montenegro's entry into the new, final phase of negotiations, in line with the new EU Methodology, despite the fact that the so-called track record has not significantly improved in the past four years. The positive report gives a wind from the back, which should be used, but for final success, the consolidation of all political and social structures in Montenegro and joint work is necessary, in order to achieve the Government's priority that Montenegro becomes a member of the European Union by 2028 at the latest, even though such a signal has not yet been officially received by the European Union.

Since the regaining its independence, Montenegro has been building good neighborly relations, where the development of cooperation, mutual understanding and support have always been above possible open questions. However, in past two years there were misunderstandings between Montenegro and its neighbors, which arose from different attitudes and thinking of politicians and political parties that created the current Government (Morinj, Srebrenica, Jasenovac, Kosovo's membership in the Council of Europe...).

In cooperation with the members of the Visegrad Group, Montenegro maintains quality relations and follows the dynamics of the implementation of the agreed activities, using the support of the member states of this Initiative to the extent that its capacities allow.

Montenegro advocates for the intensification of regional cooperation among the countries of the Western Balkans as a key factor for the stability and development of the region. It participates in initiatives such as the Berlin Process and the Regional Cooperation Council, which aim to improve economic connectivity, build infrastructure and strengthen mutual political and security cooperation.

Regarding the attitude towards Russian aggression against Ukraine, Montenegro has consistently and unreservedly supported all key international documents that condemn Russian aggression against Ukraine, but has also continuously provided humanitarian, military and financial support to Ukraine through various initiatives, especially through the NATO program.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Political situation:** Montenegro needs to achieve a greater degree of political unity and coherence among the key actors in the Government. The current situation, in which key positions in the Government are divided between persons of different political profiles - from pro-Western to anti-NATO and pro-Russian - leads to inefficiency and the slowing down of their reform process. It is recommended to form a single and clear strategy within which all political actors, regardless of their political orientation, would be obliged to focus on the real and continuous implementation of European reforms, and not on the politicization of the integration process. It is necessary to strengthen institutions and depoliticize the administration in order to reduce the influence of ethno-nationalism and political parties on the decision-making process, thereby ensuring the stability and sustainability of Montenegrin integration into the European Union, as well as political stability, which is a prerequisite for socio-economic development and the implementation of the necessary reforms.
- **Foreign policy:** Montenegro must not allow the current political distortion and diversity of political actors that make up the parliamentary majority and the Government of Montenegro to affect the change or obfuscation of the country's current foreign policy priorities. With a clear consensus, without compromise, Montenegro needs to show political maturity and responsibility in conducting foreign policy, from the unique performance of the entire political top, to the establishment of a quality diplomatic - consular network at the level of ambassadors and diplomats who are capable of implementing the necessary activities in a quality and professional manner. The fact that Montenegro currently does not have 27 ambassadors in diplomatic missions is an alarm for urgent response and resuscitation of the failing Montenegrin diplomacy
- **EU:** Montenegro needs to unequivocally improve transparency in the work and implementation of activities from the EU agenda, by including the interested public in every segment of the process, unequivocally working to fulfill the obligations assumed and systematically approaching the planning and implementation of activities that imply the fulfillment of final benchmarks / indicators for closing negotiations in all clusters according to the new EU Methodology. By thus showing commitment and real, measurable results, Montenegro should avoid faking the European integration process and get from the form to the essence - that the integration process means establishing a system that provides citizens with equality, security and a better standard of living, especially in relation to the issue of the functioning of the institutions.
- **NATO:** Montenegro should behave as an active and dedicated member of the NATO Alliance, not allowing it to be perceived as a pro-Russian proxy in the Balkans and in the NATO Alliance at any time. By following the policy of NATO in relation to Ukraine fully, as it follows the CSDP of the EU, Montenegro needs to show that it is a reliable partner that shares the values of modern Western civilizations.

- **Bilateral relations:** Montenegro should carefully create its foreign policy towards the countries of the region, with clear protection of its interests, but also respect for international standards and rights, and understanding of the interests of the countries of the region - focusing on cooperation instead of focusing on open issues should be the priority of Montenegrin foreign policies towards the neighbors. It should act in the same way in bilateral relations with other countries, having previously clearly and sincerely determined foreign policy priorities, followed by sincerely dedicated political support and a well-established diplomatic network.
- **Regional cooperation:** Montenegro should continue to affirm, but also use the potential of regional cooperation, within the existing regional initiatives under the auspices of the EU, NATO and their member states.
- **Visegrad Group:** Montenegro should continue its intensive cooperation with the Visegrad Group, multilaterally and bilaterally, including the International Visegrad Fund and the Western Balkans Fund, but also through continuous diplomatic activity and seeking individual support from these countries for Montenegro's EU membership.
- **Ukraine:** Montenegro should consider opportunities to further increase humanitarian, military, political and technical assistance, in accordance with NATO and EU policy and its own capacities, and continue to support international sanctions against Russia and efforts to achieve peace and stability in Ukraine. In addition, official Montenegro should increase the level of informing the public about the negative consequences of Russian aggression against Ukraine and the potential negative repercussions for Montenegro and the Western Balkans if Ukraine is defeated in this aggression.

NORTH MACEDONIA

Authors: Ana Krstinovska Blazeska and Zlatko Simonovski

RELATIONS WITH EUROPEAN UNION

Since the independence of North Macedonia in the early 90s, there has been firm commitment across the Macedonian political spectrum on the membership in NATO and EU. That has been verified on various occasions in the past three decades through political statements and parties' manifestos. For instance, in 1998 the Macedonian assembly adopted a Declaration on the Development of relations between (in that time) Republic of Macedonia and the European Union, whereas in 2000 a Declaration on the further development of relations with the European Union was also adopted. In these documents, a full EU membership aspiration was stressed as paramount, alongside political determination to harmonize national legislation with the EU *acquis*.⁴⁰ The last similar declaration was adopted in 2017, aimed at fostering the reforms necessary for full membership both in EU and NATO.⁴¹

However, in various occasions these declarations have been challenged in practice due to the bilateral issues that North Macedonia had in the past and nowadays. For instance, after the Greek veto on the membership of North Macedonia in NATO during the Bucharest summit in 2008, VMRO DPMNE, the biggest right wing and ruling party until 2016 said that a change of the constitutional name of the country is a "big bite" that cannot be swollen even for the price of membership in EU and NATO.⁴² The party stands to this position even today claiming that the name change in 2019 came at a high cost for the Macedonian identity and in return the country did not advanced towards EU membership.⁴³ On the other hand, SDSM, the party that led the government signatory of the Prespa Agreement with Greece, which put an end to the almost three decades-long dispute, claims that the country benefited significantly by joining NATO and opening EU accession talks.⁴⁴ However, the echoes and dissonances from the past can be heard today as well.

On July 19, 2022, the EU held its first intergovernmental conference with North Macedonia, but the champagne had a bitter taste. In 2020 Bulgaria vetoed the opening of the accession talks with Macedonia due to its claims regarding "ineffective" implementation of the Agreement on good neighbourliness, friendship and cooperation, especially in terms of the issues related to

40 Assembly of North Macedonia, available at: <https://www.sobranie.mk/sobranieto-i-eu.nspcx>

41 Ibid

42 Do we have a reference to this? The Prespa agreement is unacceptable for VMRO-DPMNE, Mickoski replied to the USA in a letter to Mitchell, SDK, available at: <https://sdk.mk/index.php/makedonija/dogovorot-od-prespa-e-neprifatliv-za-vmro-dpmne-im-odgovori-mitskoski-na-sad-vo-pismo-do-michel/>

43 Nikoloski: The citizens were first humiliated by the name change, now with their personal documents, A1.on available at: <https://www.slobodenpecat.mk/nikoloski-gragjanite-prvo-bea-ponizheni-so-promena-na-imeto-sega-so-lichnite-dokumenti/>

44 In a meeting with Jorn Fleck from the Atlantic Council, Maricic confirmed his commitment to European integration. Frontline, available at: <https://frontline.mk/2024/01/22/marichi-na-sredba-so-orn-flek-od-atlantskiot-sovet-a-potvr-di-posvetenosta-na-evrointegraciite/>

interpretation of the history, the “rampant anti-Bulgarian propaganda in the country” as well as the issue that Bulgaria has with the formulation of Macedonian language.⁴⁵ Upon several unsuccessful initiatives from the EU presidencies led by Portugal and Slovenia, as well as individual efforts from the German government, in 2021, during the French presidency, an agreement was reached between the Macedonian and Bulgarian governments that opened the path for the first intergovernmental conference. However, the conditionality for further conferences foresees changing of the Macedonian Constitution again in order to add the Bulgarian minority in the Preamble, alongside speedy delivery and results of the bilateral historic commission on the different interpretations regarding various historic periods. The ruling coalition led by the social-democrats assured that it is a good deal, but the opposition strongly opposed this solution. Their dissatisfaction was effective; the opposition did not support the initiative for constitutional changes and thus the intergovernmental conference on the first cluster Fundamentals did not take place as initially planned at the end of 2023.

The blockades in the form of coming initially from Greece and then Bulgaria,⁴⁶ significantly affected the public’s enthusiasm and confidence that full membership is possible in near future. A rock bottom record of 43% of the citizens in 2023 believe that EU will be ready to accept new countries from the WB region, including North Macedonia, which represents half of the percentage in 2014 when this support reached 80%.⁴⁷ However, the commitments and expected deliverables from the bilateral agreements are not the single challenge that North Macedonia faces in terms of EU accession. The unconvincing fights against corruption, moderately prepared public administration, as well as the ineffectiveness of the judiciary and its lack of immunity to political influences remain biggest concerns highlighted in the latest progress report by the European Commission.⁴⁸ One of the rare fields in which the Commission is grading North Macedonia with a high mark is the compliance of its national foreign policy with the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy. Namely, the country’s alignment rate with relevant High Representative statements on behalf of the EU and relevant Council Decisions has stood at 100% since 2022.

The high grade is also because of North Macedonia’s stance on the Russian aggression in Ukraine. A Declaration in support of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine was adopted in the Macedonian Assembly in March 2022.⁴⁹ In addition, the country has joined EU in its sanctions towards Russia, whereas an aid for Ukraine was provided on several occasions. Though mostly military based, according to the Macedonian Ministry, in the period March 2022 -December 2023, 11 donations have been realized, including tanks, aircrafts, ammunition, as well as targeted training for members of the Ukraine Army. In addition, safe settlement has been provided for ca. 6000 Ukraine refugees.⁵⁰

45 Bulgaria officially vetoed the start of negotiations between Macedonia and the EU, Kanal 5, available at: <https://kanal5.com.mk/bugarija-i-oficijalno-stavi-veto-za-pochetok-na-pregovori-na-makedonija-so-eu/a448437>

46 In addition to the French veto on enlargement more generally in 2019, which stalled the process until a new Methodology was adopted.

47 EU integrations in the shadow of internal processes – Analysis of public opinion for 2023, available at: <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgiclfndmkaj/https://idsos.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/MKD-26-2023.pdf>

48 North Macedonia 2023 Report, available at: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/north-macedonia-report-2023_en

49 Do we have a reference for this? The Sобрание adopted the declaration of condemnation of the military attacks in Ukraine. 360°, available at: <https://360stepeni.mk/sobranieto-ja-usvoi-deklaratsijata-za-osuda-na-voenite-napadi-vo-ukraina/>

50 Bloomberg Macedonia, available at: <https://mk.bloombergadria.com/ekonomija/makedonija/24083/rabotnici-nema-a-na-begalcite-ne-im-davame-rabotni-dozvoli/news>

RELATIONS WITH NATO

On March 27 of this year (2024), North Macedonia will mark its fourth year since joining the NATO Alliance, whereas in 2021 the country completed its overall military integration in line with NATO standards and structures.⁵¹ The most relevant political parties in the Macedonian spectrum, both from the ruling coalition and the opposition remain strongly pro-NATO oriented and share the opinion that Macedonian NATO membership provides strong guarantees both for the national and the regional security and stability, especially in light of the Russian aggression in Ukraine.

However, Levica (the Left), one of the opposition parties that performs solid in recent opinion polls and is expected to have bigger representation in the next composition of the Sobranie (the Assembly) than the current 2 MPs, is openly against Macedonian membership in the Alliance. In their views, NATO is an aggressor (an argument based on internal party observations in regard to the NATO intervention in Serbia in 1999), whereas in their party's manifesto it is stated that "...we oppose the accession of Macedonia in the NATO pact and the participation of our soldiers in their inhumane missions".⁵² These positions led to some of the political parties announcing publicly that they are ready to enter a coalition only with pro-EU and pro-NATO parties, though the outlook will get clearer upon the general elections scheduled for this spring (May 8, 2024).

The high support for North Macedonia's membership in NATO seems to be a blast from the past having in mind the record of ca. 81% of citizens with a pro-NATO mood in 2014.⁵³ According to the NATO Audience Research: pre-Summit polling results 2023, when respondents from North Macedonia have been asked If you could vote for or against membership in NATO, how would you vote?, 59% answered YES, 29% answered NO, whereas 17% restrained of providing an answer (I do not know).

This presents a degree of support that is 11% lower compared to the NATO members' average of 70%.⁵⁴ North Macedonia's national position on international related issues overlaps with NATO's official policy which was confirmed during the latest visit of NATO's General Secretary in November last year when he highlighted that "North Macedonia is a valued ally of NATO... and the alliance can rely on North Macedonia".⁵⁵ The country supports further NATO enlargement which was proven with the speedy ratification of the accession protocols both for Finland and Sweden in the Assembly.

Additionally, the country is strongly supporting Ukraine's membership in the Alliance and it was among the nine countries from Central and Eastern Europe that signed a joint statement on accepting Ukraine's request for NATO membership.⁵⁶ As stated above, the country provided military support to Ukraine with tanks, aircrafts, ammunition, alongside providing training for members on the Ukrainian Army. However, it is worth noting that the latest Ukraine's request for military aid in December 2023 was rejected. As Slavjanka Petrovska, Minister of Defence said "the equipment

51 Shtit, December 2021, available at: <https://mod.gov.mk/storage/2021/12/Shtit-146.pdf>

52 Levica Manifesto, available at: <https://levica.mk/za-nas/platforma/>

53 More than 81 percent of Macedonians want NATO membership, available at: <https://meta.mk/poveke-od-81-protsent-od-makedonsite-sakaat-chlenstvo-vo-nato/>

54 NATO Audience Research: pre-Summit polling results 2023, available at: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2023/7/pdf/2300707-pre-summit-research-2023.pdf

55 Stoltenberg: North Macedonia can rely on NATO, DW, available at: <https://www.dw.com/mk/stoltenberg-severna-makedonija-moze-da-se-potpre-na-nato/a-67511791>

56 Macedonia is among the 10 countries that approve Ukraine's entry into NATO, Faktor, available at: <https://faktor.mk/makedonija-megju-10-te-zemji-koi-odobruvat-vlez-na-ukraina-vo-nato>

requested by Ukraine is needed and used in North Macedonia”, but the country remains open to providing further support, such as a new cycle of training for Ukrainian soldiers.⁵⁷

BILATERAL COOPERATION

North Macedonia holds stable relationships with all WB countries, with no open or residual bilateral disputes. The same can be said for the country’s relations with the Vishegrad group, which has provided strong and persistent collaboration and support towards North Macedonia on its Euro-Atlantic and European perspectives since its independence. Since the opening of the Macedonian embassy in Bratislava in 2021, now the country has a completed and effective diplomatic network in all V4 countries.⁵⁸ Speaking in details, after the Serbian church’s recognized the autonomous status of the Macedonian Orthodox–Archdiocese of Ohrid in May 2022 and accepted its formal reintegration into the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 2022, North Macedonia does not have other political open questions with this country.⁵⁹ Although in the past North Macedonia’s recognition of Kosovo was a thorny bilateral issue,⁶⁰ nowadays it does not seem to cause any disturbances in the collaboration and the interaction with Serbia. Amid the Macedonian OSCE chairmanship, in March 2023 Macedonian foreign ministry in partnership with EU and USA took an initiative to host another consecutive meeting of the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue in Ohrid. The meeting resulted with consent on the so called an Implementation Annex to the Agreement on the path to normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia. Macedonian foreign ministry was especially proud that this initiative was fruitful and announced that similar activities while the chairmanship is going will be taken with Armenia and Azerbaijan (which did not happen) as well as promoting Ohrid in the framework of OSCE as a mediation and negotiation center for conflicted parties.⁶¹

The good relations were obvious in the support coming from Serbia amidst the pandemic when on several occasion tranches of vaccines were donated to North Macedonia. Coupled with the historic ties between the two countries, it is not surprising that Serbia is perceived as the friendliest neighbouring country which has been stated by 45.3 % of the citizens.⁶² During his last visit in Skopje on the occasion of Saint Sava, a national holiday for Serbia as well as for the Serbs in North Macedonia, Serbian president Aleksandar Vucic said that “for Serbs, there are no closer friends than Macedonians”.⁶³ Serbia is traditionally a significant trade partner to North Macedonia: it is positioned second, right after Germany as the biggest export market for Macedonian goods and it is the fourth import partner.⁶⁴

57 North Macedonia rejected Ukraine’s request for a donation of military equipment, Radio Free Europe, available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/32750677.html>

58 Macedonia opens an embassy in Slovakia, for the first time after 30 years of independence, TV 21, available at: <https://mk.tv21.tv/makedonija-otvora-ambasada-vo-slovachka-za-prvpat-po-30-godini-nezavisnost/>

59 EXCLUSIVE: The Ecumenical Patriarchate recognized the MOC-OA and established canonical unity, Religija, available at: <https://religija.mk/ekskluzivno-vselenskata-patrijarshija-ja-prizna-mpc-oa-i-vo-postavi-kanonsko-edinstvo/>

60 Levica is the only major political party still openly advocating to withdraw the recognition of Kosovo.

61 Bujar Osmani wants to reconcile Armenia and Azerbaijan in Ohrid, Faktor, available at: <https://faktor.mk/bujar-osmani-sakada-gi-pomiruva-ermenija-i-azerbejdzan-vo-ohrid>

62 Serbia is the friendliest country for Macedonians, and the USA has the biggest contribution to democracy, Nova Makedonija, available at: <https://novamakedonija.com.mk/makedonija/srbija-e-najprijetelska-zemja-za-makedoncite-a-sad-ima-najgolem-pridones-vo-demokratijata/>

63 Do we have a reference for this? Vucic: The Serbs have no closer nation than Macedonians. Sitel TV, available at: <https://sitel.com.mk/vuchikj-srbite-nemaat-poblizok-narod-od-makedoncite-video>

64 Link

North Macedonia also maintains good relations with Kosovo and Albania, as indicated through the constant growth of trade and tourism. Namely, Kosovo is the biggest export market for Macedonian goods as exports are almost four times higher than imports.⁶⁵ There is also regular communication and collaboration with Albanian officials. In 2021 a Cultural-Info Centre of North Macedonia was opened in Tirana aiming at bringing Macedonian culture and art closer to the citizens of Albania, followed by a Macedonian language center at Tirana University in January 2024.⁶⁶ While good bilateral ties should in part be credited to approximately 25% of Macedonian citizens with Albanian ethnicity, from time to time minority issues come to the fore and challenge the stable relationship. This is especially visible when party representatives of Macedonian Albanians conduct consultations with officials in these two countries, as was the case with the so-called Tirana Platform in 2017 or the recent meeting of Prime Minister Albin Kurti and several parties from the ethnic Albanian camp, which have been perceived by Macedonians as “an attempt to interfere in national affairs”.⁶⁷ On the other hand, North Macedonia is struggling to preserve the identity of the small Macedonian minority in Albania amidst increasing pressure by Bulgaria to present them as Bulgarians, which often includes powerful enticements like the offer to provide them with an EU passport.⁶⁸

The relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina are stable and correct, with no open issues nor different standing points, except the issue related to the recognition of Kosovo. In addition, last year a direct air route Skopje-Sarajevo was established operated by the Greek national air carrier,⁶⁹ whereas the respective ministries of economy signed agreements on economic cooperation and enhancing tourism.⁷⁰ The BiH ambassador in North Macedonia is regularly present at gatherings, conferences and meetings with local officials. However, at least in the public and official, the intensity of meetings and engagements at the official level is not so noticeable.

Traditionally good relations are also maintained with Montenegro, especially when it comes to sharing experiences in regard to the European integration process, tourism, culture and trade. When it comes to the intensity of official visits we can notice a dynamic collaboration both with WB countries as well as with the Visegrad countries. Browsing through the Government’s official archive as well as the web site of the President of North Macedonia, in 2022 we can notice at least five official bilateral visits in the country or paid visits abroad with counterparts from Serbia, Albania and Kosovo. From this group, the meetings with the Serbian Prime Minister or President seem to be most frequent, whereas in 2022 no significant visits have been registered with officials from Montenegro or Bosnia and Herzegovina. Speaking about the thematic focus of these engagements in 2022, our content analysis shows that the economic relations, trade, energy and agriculture are main topics of interest. In 2023 the dynamic is even higher; at least six meetings of the Macedonian Prime Minister with his colleagues from Albania, Serbia and Kosovo have been conducted. In addition joint government session with Albania, Serbia and Kosovo took place where economic

65 Стоковна размена со странство, јануари – ноември 2023 година

66 Cultural and information center of Macedonia opened in Tirana, Nezavisen, available at: <https://nezavisen.mk/otvoren-kulturno-informativen-centar-na-makedonija-vo-tirana/>; <https://telma.com.mk/2024/01/18/svecheno-otvoranje-na-lektorat-po-makedonski-jazik-literatura-i-kultura-vo-tirana/>.

67 The leader of Kosovo against Ali Ahmeti: DUI complains about interference in the internal affairs of the Albanians in Macedonia. Metro, available at: <https://metro.mk/prviot-chovek-na-kosovo-protiv-ali-ahmeti-dui-se-zhali-za-meshanje-vo-vnatreshnite-raboti-na-albancite-vo-makedonija/>

68 <https://www.dw.com/mk/identitetska-bitka-vo-pustec-lugeto-veke-ne-znaat-dali-da-se-cuvstvuvaa-kako-bugari-ili-makedonci/a-68012202>

69 Link

70 <https://economy.gov.mk/mk-MK/news/bektesi-i-kosarac-potpisaa-dogovori-za-ekonomska-sorabotka-i-sorabotka-vo-turizmot-pomegu-severna-makedonija-i-bih.nspk>

collaboration, trade and energy security were again the most recurrent topics. Also, wine and wine placement in the region is one of the specific topics discussed last year. When it comes to the President's agenda, he had official meetings with his Montenegrin counterpart both in 2022 and in 2023. On the other hand, busy agendas both for the Prime Minister's and the President's cabinet can be said in terms of their collaboration with the Visegrad countries. In 2022, the Slovak President paid an official visit to North Macedonia, as well as the President of the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic. The President hosted his Hungarian colleague and paid an official visit to Poland in 2022. One of the first working meetings for the President in 2024 was actually a meeting with the V4 group ambassadors. The Macedonian Prime Minister had official meetings with the Prime Ministers of Slovakia and the Czech Republic, as well as a meeting with the Polish Foreign Minister. A number of meetings between lower level officials also took place.

At the ministerial level, Macedonian Defence Minister and the Czech Ambassador signed a Framework Agreement in 2023 which ensures timely procurement of spare parts and repair service from the Czech Republic for the Macedonian Army's aircrafts and helicopters.⁷¹ When it comes to the thematic focus of the collaboration and topics of interest, the European perspective of North Macedonia is the main issue discussed, alongside trade, energy and European security.⁷² At the level of ambassadors, culture heritage and tourism are also the areas where collaboration has been registered with national ministries and agencies. Various institutions also maintain bilateral cooperation with different V4 stakeholders, with the recently signed memorandum between the Macedonian and Slovak audit offices being a case in point.⁷³

One peculiarity should be mentioned in the relations with Hungary. Two formal requests of North Macedonian authorities' to Hungary to extradite fugitive former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski have been rejected, while a third one has been announced last year. Gruevski has been sentenced to three and a half years in prison for two cases of corruption and abuse of power, but his reportedly close relations with the Hungarian Prime Minister have secured him political asylum by Budapest.⁷⁴

An avenue for collaboration is also the International Visegrad Fund which is regularly active in supporting Macedonian civil society organizations in promoting democratic values and human rights, alongside scholarships and fellowships for university students enrolled at V4 universities. Speaking about the higher education, it is an area where dynamic collaboration is ongoing with partner universities from Poland, Slovakia and Czechia on topics related to Slavic studies.⁷⁵ At the beginning of 2024, three Polish academics have been awarded with Order of Merit for the Republic of North Macedonia as a recognition for their contribution in promoting and studying the Macedonian language, culture and folklore.⁷⁶ In terms of trade, according to the Macedonian Statistical Office, three of the V4 countries are ranked in the top 20 trade partners of North Macedonia, with Hungary ranked 9th, Poland 12th place (with more significant import than export) as well as Czechia 13th.⁷⁷

71 <https://novamakedonija.com.mk/makedonija/makedonija-kje-nabavi-delovi-za-helikopteri-i-avioni-od-cheshka/>

72 <https://vlada.mk/node/35305>

73 <https://dzt.mk/mk/231107-potpishan-memorandum-za-sorabotka-so-vri-republika-slovachka>

74 Hungary does not give Gruevski, DW, available at: link

75 35 years of Macedonian studies at the University of Silesia in Poland, Umno, available at: <https://umno.mk/35-godini-makedonistika-na-sleziskiot-univerzitet/>

76 Ceremony of honoring six Macedonians with the Order Merit of the Republic of North Macedonia, Embassy of Poland in Skopje, available at: <https://www.gov.pl/web/severnamakedonija/-----2>

77 MKD stat, available at: https://www.stat.gov.mk/pdf/2024/7.1.24.01_mk.pdf

MULTILATERAL COLLABORATION

Besides the alignment of national foreign policy with the EU's in regard to the Russian sanctions, North Macedonia has been also active in other fields when it comes to demonstrating support towards Ukraine. In February 2024, the country joined the International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children that aims at coordinating joint efforts and cooperation between Ukraine and partner states to address the issue of the unlawful deportation and forced transfer of Ukrainian children by the Russian Federation.⁷⁸ Last year North Macedonia signed the initiative by the Council of Europe on establishing a Register of Damage for Ukraine as a first step towards an international compensation mechanism for victims of Russian aggression.⁷⁹ In July 2023, the country openly stood behind the G7's Joint declaration of support for Ukraine which was welcomed by the Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.⁸⁰ Before the official start of North Macedonia's chairmanship with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Macedonian Foreign Minister stated that the situation in Ukraine will be one of the main focuses during the presidency. Several visits and meetings have been realized with Ukraine's officials, whereas Russian aggression was one of the main topics during the OSCE 30th Ministerial Council in Skopje at the end of 2023. Namely, the condemnation of the Russian aggression is the opening paragraph of the Statement by the delegation of Luxembourg and co-signed by other 32 countries including USA, alongside strong reaffirmation for Ukraine:

"We will never recognize Russia's attempted illegal and illegitimate annexations, including of Crimea. We fully support Ukraine's rights to self-defense and to choose its own security arrangements. Ukraine's future is in NATO. We remain steadfast in stepping up political and practical support to Ukraine for as long as it takes".⁸¹

The summit sparked a lot of controversies as it was the first occasion after the Russian aggression in Ukraine and the imposed sanctions on Russia during which a Russian top official was present at a larger international gathering, predominantly with countries that have imposed sanctions. Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov attended the summit after Macedonian and Bulgarian authorities lifted the open air space ban on Russian airplanes, which on the other hand triggered boycott of the delegations of Ukraine and Baltic countries.⁸² It is important to mention that North Macedonia promptly reacted right upon the Russian aggression over Ukraine signing the joint declaration of the First Parliamentary Summit of the International Crimea Platform in Zagreb in 2022.⁸³

78 Ambassador Dir: We thank North Macedonia for joining the International Coalition of Countries for the Return of Ukrainian Children, Civil media, available at: [link](#)

79 Macedonia among 44 countries that formed the Registry for damages in Ukraine caused by Russian aggression, SDK, available at: [link](#)

80 <https://telma.com.mk/2023/08/15/zelenski-blagodaren-na-severna-makedonija-shto-se-prikluchi-kon-deklaracijata-na-g7-za-poddrshka-na-bezbednosnite-garancii-za-ukraina/>

81 Statement by the Delegation of Luxembourg, OSCE, available at: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/d/559839.pdf>

82 The reason is Lavrov: Not only Ukraine, but also the Baltic countries will boycott the OSCE Ministerial Meeting in Skopje, Faktor, available at: <https://faktor.mk/prichina-e-lavrov-ne-samo-ukraina-tuku-i-baltichkite-zemji-kje-go-bojkotiraat-ministerskiot-sostanok-na-obse-vo-skopje>

83 Joint declaration of the participants of the First Parliamentary Summit of the International Crimea Platform, Sobranie, available at: <https://www.sobranie.mk/ns-newsarticle-zaednicka-deklaracija-na-ucesnicite-na-prviot-parlamentaren-samit-na-megunarodnata-krimska-platforma.nspk>

REGIONAL COOPERATION

North Macedonia has an active role in the regional development and cooperation networks, both as an initiator and participatory member. The country is part of every significant intergovernmental initiative from various fields such as trade, judiciary, anti-corruption, public administration, local self-governance, energy reforms, EU integration and etc. Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative (MARRI), Network of Associations of Local Authorities in South-East Europe (NALAS), Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative (RAI), Western Balkans Democracy Initiative (WBDI), Regional School for Public Administration (ReSPA), Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), Western Balkans Fund (WBF), the Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE), are just some of the initiatives that involve most of the WB countries and in which the country is actively participating and contributing.

North Macedonia is also part of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) as well as the Central European Initiative (CEI) – initiatives in which VG4 group is also participating. When it comes to the RCC, it is worth mentioning that under the patronage of this organization two crucial documents have been signed and are now effective – the 2022 Roaming Declaration enabling the reduction of the roaming charges between the EU and the Western Balkans as of 1 October 2023⁸⁴ as well as the 2023 Agreement on the recognition of professional qualifications of nurses, veterinary surgeons, pharmacists, and midwives. Both documents were initiated in the framework of the Berlin Process (explained below).⁸⁵ In 2020, following the resolution of the name dispute, the country joined the Adriatic Ionian Initiative,⁸⁶ whereas the Energy Community seems to be a solid platform through which WB countries, including North Macedonia, are supported in meeting EU requirements on sustainable energy production and use. When it comes to the initiating role, in a recent interview the Deputy Prime Minister on Good Governance said that the country is commencing a process of establishing a Regional Academy on Good Governance, based in Skopje, that will serve as a platform and tool to tackle the widespread corruption and integrity issues in the region.⁸⁷

However, the most important initiatives that North Macedonia participates in are Open Balkan and the Berlin Process. When it comes to the first one, which in addition to North Macedonia includes Serbia and Albania, in the last two years nine memorandums and five agreements have been signed. The memorandums are related to joint cooperation in tourism, taxation administrations, cultural cooperation, export and import of goods, labour market mobility, cooperation in cinematography and audio-visual activities, mining and energy, cross-border mobility, and common pay-tools policy. Moreover, the following agreements have been signed:

- Agreement on cooperation in the Western Balkans in the field of mutual recognition of diplomas and scientific grades issued by higher education institutions and other authorized institutions;
- Agreement on conditions for free access to the labour market in the Western Balkans;

84 RCC, available at: <https://www.rcc.int/news/792/significant-reduction-of-data-roaming-prices-between-western-balkans-and-eu-to-start-as-of-1-october-2023>

85 RCC, available at: <https://www.rcc.int/news/848/bregu-another-agreement-prepared-by-the-rcc-signed-today-in-tirana>

86 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, available at: <https://www.mfa.gov.mk/mk/page/9/regionalni-inicijativi>

87 Grkovska announced the establishment of a Regional Academy for good governance to deal with corruption, Lokalno, available at: <https://lokalno.mk/grkovska-najavi-formiranje-na-regionalna-akademija-za-dobro-upravljanje-za-spravuvanje-so-korupcijata/>

- Agreement on interconnection of schemes for electronic identification of the citizens of the Western Balkans;
- Agreement on cooperation in the field of veterinary, food and feed safety and phytosanitary in the Western Balkans; and
- Agreement on food security mechanisms in the Western Balkans.⁸⁸

The benefits of the Open Balkan have been continuously promoted by the Macedonian government claiming that this initiative will serve as “a warm up field” before joining the EU. The government is extremely vocal when it comes to the benefits related to trade. Namely, according to former Prime Minister Dimitar Kovacevski, the trade exchange among North Macedonia, Albania and Serbia has increased by 25%. In addition, he highlights that last year alone, the exchange with Albania increased by 40 %, whereas with Serbia by 50 %. When it comes to the trade with Serbia, it exceeded 1.1 billion €, which is the highest level of trade in the last 17 years between the two countries.⁸⁹

North Macedonia is also active in the Berlin Process. Same as for the Open Balkan initiative, Macedonian officials consider this platform as a solid ground for further enhancement of the regional cooperation, especially in terms of the economy.⁹⁰ In 2020, North Macedonia co-chaired the Berlin Process Summit together with Bulgaria, although it happened during the pandemic, hence resulting in lower visibility.⁹¹ The Berlin Process is perceived as an additional opportunity to discuss regional trends and developments between foreign ministries and parliaments in terms of security and good neighbourly relations, as was the case in 2023 and 2022 during the foreign affairs ministerial and the inter-parliamentarian dialogue.

As a most important document that resulted from the Berlin process in 2022 was the Declaration on Energy Security and Green Transition in the Western Balkans, as well as three mobility agreements under the Common Regional Market (ID travel within the region, recognition of academic qualifications and recognition of qualifications for certain professions).⁹² In 2023 during the Tirana Summit, the Joint Agreement for Recognition of Professional Qualifications Nurses Veterinary Surgeons Midwives and Pharmacists was signed, alongside several declarations such as the Intent Regional Climate Partnership, Intent Regional Climate Partnership Declaration, Single Euro Payments Area of WB Declaration, Facilitation of Trade and Transport Declaration as well as the Declaration on the Establishment of a Convergence Observatory in the WB.⁹³ As of June 2023, the Agreement on free movement in the Western Balkans with ID cards, the Agreement on the recognition of higher educational qualifications and the Agreement on the recognition of the professional qualifications of doctors, dentists and architects entered into force.⁹⁴ There is a possibility that during the next Berlin Process summit, which is expected to take place in Germany marking the 10th anniversary of this initiative, North Macedonia to be represented by a new government coalition upon the

88 Open Balkan. Government of Republic of North Macedonia, available at: <https://vlada.mk/Otvoren-Balkan>

89 Wine routes of the Balkan countries are becoming world destination, Nova Makedonija, available Link

90 Debate: Benefits of the Berlin Process, lower roaming tariffs a basis for more ambitious undertakings, MIA, available at: Link

91 Berlin Process, available at: <https://www.berlinprocess.de/en/the-berlin-process-2020>

92 Berlin Process, available at: <https://www.berlinprocess.de/en/the-berlin-process-2022>

93 Ibid. available at: <https://www.berlinprocess.de/>

94 The three agreements within the framework of the Berlin process enter into force, MFA, available at: <https://mfa.gov.mk/mk/page/13/post/3435/stapuvaat-vo-sila-trite-dogovori-vo-ramki-na-berlinski-proces>

elections scheduled in May this year, but the contribution and willingness for regional collaboration is expected to remain, having in mind that almost all relevant political parties across the spectrum are supportive in these and similar mechanisms.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

North Macedonia maintains regular and good bilateral relations both with the Western Balkan countries as well as with Vishegrad countries. No open or bilateral disputes are currently putting strains on the bilateral communication with the two respective regions, especially after the Serbian church's recognition of the autonomous status of the Macedonian Orthodox–Archdiocese of Ohrid.

North Macedonia is also actively participating and contributing to the regional and multilateral cooperation. The country is part of almost all regional and cross-inter-organizational mechanisms and platform on fostering the regional collaboration as well as the dialogue with the European Union, primarily in Open Balkan and Berlin Process. In addition, the country takes the role of an initiator for establishing similar platforms and avenues, especially in terms of streaming regional efforts on tackling corruption and enhancing institutional integrity such as the idea of establishing a regional academy on good governance promoted last year.

In addition, the country holds regular communication with the V4 countries, both bilaterally and in the framework of multilateral fora. The V4 is united in promoting the Western Balkans' integration and thus provides continuous support for North Macedonia's aspirations to join the EU. When it comes to the national position in regards to the Russian aggression in Ukraine, the country has demonstrated commitment to align its positions with the EU, both in terms of condemning the aggression as well as in terms of sanctions. In addition, on several occasions North Macedonia provided military aid to Ukraine in tanks, helicopters, ammunition as well as training for the Ukraine army soldiers.

However, in times of crises, North Macedonia's stance, initiative and contribution can be even more visible and vocal aiming at fostering the regional cooperation, the collaboration with the V4 as well as the defence of the European values in respecting human rights, territorial integrity, sovereignty and freedom of choice in becoming part of multilateral organizations. This could include, but not limited to:

- Fostering youth exchange and introducing joint educational programs among students from the region aiming at enhancing the dialogue on the current challenges and risks for WB and Europe;
- Extending regional cooperation between WB countries and surrounding EU members in South-East Europe such as Greece, Bulgaria and Croatia in order to contribute to reducing (bottom-up) frictions between the WB countries and their EU members neighbours that has resulted in halting WB European integration on various occasions;
- Bigger involvement of WB CSOs in the regional dialogue as per the example with the Civil Society Forum in the framework of the Berlin process; - I think this is very very extensive already, as seen last year in Tirana
- Precise calendars for entering into force of agreements or declaration from the cooperation mechanisms so that timely and effective implementation is secured across all countries;
- Putting into real practice the Open Balkan Memorandum of Cooperation in Film and Audiovisual Activities by simultaneous providing programs for joint production of regional public broadcasters by delivering program on the potential and best practices in the regional cooperation;

- Further simplification of the traveling procedures between the countries, especially in terms of the insurance policies;
- More strategic communication on behalf of the government(s) towards the citizens regarding the potential benefits of the regional cooperation;
- Establishing annual political meeting mechanism between North Macedonia (as well as WB region) and V4 countries in a summit format so to ensure regular opportunities for collaboration and detecting zones of interest;
- Upgrading the strong collaboration among the universities from North Macedonia and V4 on the Slavic studies, with simultaneous diversification of the collaboration in the field of innovations and technology via special tailored funding programs;
- Enhancing the collaboration of the V4 and regional public administrations (including North Macedonia) on the experiences, practices and lessons learned in enhancing national anti-corruption and integrity policies and principles;
- Stimulating further trade exchange with V4 countries, especially with Slovakia by regular trade and economy forums, with strong involvement of national chambers of commerce;
- Introducing regular air connections between Skopje and Prague aiming at fostering tourism, alongside summer seasonal flights from/to Ohrid and V4 capitals;
- Continuation of the political, military and economic support from North Macedonia towards Ukraine;
- Defining state funded tailor made programs for Ukrainian refugees in terms of education and business start-upping in order to facilitate their integration in the Macedonian society;

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RELATIONS WITH EUROPEAN UNION

Entering the history of relations between Serbia and the European Union, one cannot avoid the period when Yugoslavia existed, of which the Socialist Republic of Serbia was a part. Namely, the Presidency of the SFR Yugoslavia issued a special statement in mid-1989 emphasizing the necessity of European integration for the country, mentioning the Council of Europe and the European Community in this context.

The pro-European efforts of the last Yugoslav Prime Minister Ante Markovic, amidst the euphoria of nationalist trends in the SFR Yugoslavia, yielded no results. One of the opponents of such orientation was Slobodan Milosevic, the then President of Serbia, who preferred the concept of a Greater Serbia over the European future of Yugoslavia, and thus Serbia. This preference was one of the factors leading to the bloody breakup of Yugoslavia, thereby nullifying the European orientation of Ante Markovic's government.

The first opportunity to shift from Slobodan Milosevic's isolationist policy towards Europe arose after the beginning of democratic changes on October 5, 2000, and Milosevic's departure from the political scene. The newly elected Prime Minister of Serbia, Dr. Zoran Djindjic, had a pronounced pro-European orientation. His government initiated democratic reforms that could gradually make Serbia compatible with the European Union. Following this idea, he directed Serbia towards the EU. However, with his assassination on March 12, 2003, Serbia lost its main driving force towards that direction. All Serbian governments until 2012 also had a pro-European orientation and implemented reforms leading towards EU membership.

The key to these reforms was aligning domestic legislation with European standards, improving the functioning of state institutions, and privatization, as Serbia was a country with delayed transition compared to other former socialist countries that did not have authoritarian regimes after the fall of the socialist system, nor were involved in the wars of the 1990s, as was the case with Serbia. However, during this period, the weaknesses accompanying the transition process, such as corruption particularly evident in the privatization process, also emerged.

Thanks to the pro-European policies of the government, primarily led by the Democratic Party, the European Union introduced a visa-free regime with Serbia in November 2009. On that occasion, the then Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia, Bozidar Djelic, led a group of young people for Orthodox Christmas to enter the EU without visas for the first time as a promotional gesture. At that time, public support for Serbia's accession to the EU was the highest, at 74 percent. Thanks to such reform policies, Serbia gained candidate status on March 1, 2012, and the European Council made the decision to open negotiations and adopt the negotiation framework on December 20, 2013. The government formed by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) after the defeat of the Democratic

Party in the 2012 parliamentary elections emphasized EU membership as its main priority. In the first years of its mandate, it implemented reforms, primarily in the legislative area, moving in that direction. However, in the second half of the past decade, this reform process increasingly became superficial, as laws passed in accordance with European legislation were not fully implemented, and corruption continued to rise.

After being elected President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic introduced a presidential system through the back door, bypassing the Serbian Constitution, and the separation of powers into three branches became merely formal, as he personally had the final say on all matters. Instead of the rule of law, there was a deterioration of key institutions such as the judiciary, media freedoms were reduced to a minimum, and due to the lack of transparency in the work of state bodies, corruption reached its peak. Initially, the European Union in its progress reports on Serbia turned a blind eye to these occurrences, and these reports remained mostly positive until about three years ago. Only in the last few reports has attention been drawn to these occurrences, which met with sharp negative reactions from officials, primarily the then Prime Minister.

Aside from this, key points of contention with the EU included Chapter 35, i.e., the normalization of relations with Kosovo, as Serbia significantly sabotaged this process. On several occasions, through the Serbian List, tensions were produced (such as the barricades due to the introduction of Kosovo license plates and the exit from Kosovo institutions in December 2022, as well as the armed incident in Banjska, which could have escalated into a wider armed conflict). Of course, the government of Albin Kurti is not innocent in creating tensions either (failure to implement the Agreement on the Community of Serb-majority Municipalities, signed twice in Brussels in 2013 and 2015, endangering the safety of Serbs by the Kosovo special police, and the abolition of the dinar as a legal currency). Although President Vucic verbally accepted the Ohrid Agreement, stating that Serbia would not oppose Kosovo's membership in international institutions, great anger towards the West, and especially towards the EU, was sparked by the recommendation for Kosovo's admission to the Council of Europe. Another key point of contention between Serbia and the EU is the lack of alignment of foreign policy with the EU, which culminated after the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine.

Although it formally voted for UN General Assembly resolutions condemning this aggression, Serbia is the only country in Europe that has not imposed sanctions on Russia. Instead, in response to increasing pressure from the EU in this regard, it has strengthened its ties with the Russian Federation, and in recent years, Serbian officials' narratives have increasingly included sharp words against the "unfair and hypocritical" political West, with none directed against the Russian Federation. Serbian officials frequently visit Russia on official visits and receive high decorations from President Putin. Serbian officials even increasingly suggest that the European Union has an alternative in BRICS. Given that government-controlled media nurture this narrative, it is not surprising that support for Serbia's EU membership has fallen to a historic low and now stands at 35 percent.

A particular tension in Serbia's relations with the political West, and thus with the European Union, was caused by the initiative of Germany and Rwanda to vote on a Resolution on Srebrenica, which later received over 30 co-sponsors, including the most significant EU countries. Serbia called this initiative anti-Serbian, and President Vucic emphasized that after the vote in the UN General Assembly, countries that did not vote for the Resolution would be considered friendly, while those that supported the Resolution would be considered only partners. Such an attitude of the Serbian authorities towards the Resolution further distances Serbia from EU membership, as it contributes

to the destabilization of the region, which aligns with Russian interests to create a potential conflict hotspot in the Balkans to distract attention from its aggression in Ukraine. Speaking of possible regional destabilization, Milorad Dodik's threats to unilaterally declare secession from Bosnia and Herzegovina following the Resolution's vote should also be considered, a move not condemned by Serbian authorities. During the negotiations, 22 out of 35 chapters were opened, each with specific criteria to meet. So far, only two chapters (on science, research, education, and culture) have been temporarily closed out of a total of 35 chapters, and from 2019 to the end of 2021, no new chapters were opened. With the adoption of the new enlargement methodology, negotiations transitioned to so-called clusters. These 35 chapters are grouped into six clusters - the rule of law, market, economy, green agenda, agriculture, and external relations. In December 2021, after a two-year halt, Serbia continued accession negotiations by opening the so-called "cluster four." However, no new clusters have been opened in the last three years.

RELATIONS WITH NATO

The issue of relations with NATO is important because, according to past practice, no country has become a full member of the European Union without first becoming a member of this alliance. If one considers today's extremely negative attitude of the political leadership and government-controlled media towards NATO membership, it seems that this has been a constant from Milosevic to the present day. For example, at the end of Milosevic's regime, on September 21, 2000, in the Palace of Justice in Belgrade, in absentia, William Clinton, Madeleine Albright, Tony Blair, Gerhard Schröder, Javier Solana, and Wesley Clark were sentenced to 20 years in prison for the bombing.

A turnaround in the attitude towards NATO, including membership, occurred after the beginning of democratic changes following October 5, 2000. The former foreign policy advisor to the late Prime Minister Djindjic, Ivan Vejvoda, stated that Serbia could not maintain neutrality, noting that Serbia was moving towards NATO until 2004 and that during Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic's tenure, discussions began about full membership in the Alliance while "not neglecting the crime that was committed." It was only during Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica's term in 2004 that the constitutional provision declaring Serbia militarily neutral was adopted, but it "clearly states that we are militarily, not ideologically neutral."

Although a significant portion of the Serbian public had a negative attitude towards NATO due to the 1999 bombing, the then President of Serbia, Boris Tadic, signed the Partnership for Peace document in 2006, making Serbia one of 23 countries participating in NATO's program with non-member countries. After signing the Agreement, Tadic highlighted that Serbia's entry into the Partnership for Peace was of "historic significance" and represented the first step towards future NATO membership. Within this program, the Serbian Army regularly participated in exercises and other NATO activities.

Serbia's attitude towards NATO drastically changed after the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) came to power. Using populist and nationalist narratives to homogenize public opinion and gain points domestically, Serbian officials and government-controlled media have continuously fueled the narrative about the criminal nature of this alliance, which unjustly bombed the then FRY, causing numerous human casualties and material destruction. This narrative suggests that the FRY was bombed without reason. However, it overlooks the fact that the bombing, although not authorized by the UN Security Council, halted the massacres and persecutions committed by Serbian military,

police, and paramilitary formations against the Albanian population of Kosovo before the bombing. The Hague Tribunal sentenced former Serbian Prime Minister Nikola Sainovic and high security officials Jovica Stanisic and Franko Simatovic to long prison terms for crimes against civilians in Kosovo, among others.

The hypocrisy of the authorities regarding the condemnation of NATO for the bombing of the FRY is evident in the fact that some of the world leaders from that time, who were sentenced to 20 years in prison by a Belgrade court in 2000, later became Vucic's advisors (Blair and Schröder) or were closely associated with him (Vucic participated in activities of the Clinton Foundation). Thanks to the atmosphere created by officials and pro-government media about NATO, today, over 80 percent of Serbian citizens oppose joining the alliance.

BILATERAL COOPERATION (WB+VG4)(4 PGS.MAX)

Serbia has not had normal relations with any member of the WB6 group for a long time. These bad results are primarily the result of the remaining open issues between Serbia and these countries and the relationship to the events of the war years of the 1990s (when it comes to the countries involved in the war conflict - BiH and Kosovo), or due to other inconsistencies in foreign policy, especially paternalistic attitude towards North Macedonia and Montenegro. However, the most significant deterioration of relations occurred in connection with the Resolution on Srebrenica, which was adopted on May 15 in the UN General Assembly and whose adoption was supported by all WB6 countries, except for Kosovo, which is not a member of the UN

Montenegro has been seriously destabilized during the protests organized by the Serbian Orthodox Church organized in 2019 and 2020 as a reaction to the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief. The protests gave rise to Serbian nationalism, as well as nationalist unrests on that basis, which induced Montenegrin nationalism. Nevertheless, the Government insisted on respecting the agreement made by the coalition before its establishment, especially in the part referring to the continuity of handling external policies. That led to continuous disagreement of the new government, and authorities in Belgrade, as they expected it to be predominantly pro-Serbian. The Montenegrin Government did not allow Vladimir Bozovic, a former Serbian ambassador to Montenegro, to return, as he was, during the previous government, declared persona non grata, because he openly interfered with the internal affairs of Montenegro. Cooling of relations between Podgorica and Belgrade was supplemented by the intensified rhetoric of certain officials, and now has been put to halt at the beginning of November 2021, by the visit of the Prime Minister Krivokapic to Belgrade. On that occasion the authorities of both countries agreed to settle all outstanding issues during a joint session of the both governments to be held in foreseeable time. Partial improvement of relations with this country happened during the Government led by Dritan Abazović. He largely supported Montenegro's membership in the Open Balkans project, and during his government's tenure, the Fundamental Agreement with the Serbian Orthodox Church was secretly signed, which was the main cause of conflict with Serbia, which openly supported the protests that led to Đukanović's departure from power. After the fall of the Government of Dritan Abazović, the backbone of the new ruling majority was the "Europa Sad" party, which was expected to further bring Belgrade and Podgorica closer together. Serbia has appointed Nebojša Rodić as the new ambassador to Montenegro, while Montenegro has not yet reciprocally appointed an ambassador to Serbia. However, despite the fact that the New Serbian Democracy of the pro-Serbian politician Andrija Mandić also participates in the ruling majority, the new Government of Montenegro did not

meet Belgrade's expectations because it prioritized the fulfillment of the European agenda over relations with Belgrade. The dissatisfaction of Belgrade was caused by the fact that Montenegro voted for the Resolution on Srebrenica, although its amendment was adopted that the guilt for the genocide in Srebrenica is individual and that in no case can it be attributed to the entire Serbian people.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is the epicentre of the crisis in the region, where the interests of, not only great powers, but also two neighbouring countries, Croatia and Serbia, traverse. The main cause of the crisis lies in the Dayton Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which base the architecture of this country on three constitutive peoples and two entities with minimum powers given the Central Government, all of which is the main hindrance to B&H becoming a functional state and public service to all of its citizens. This situation enabled national leaders to question the very existence of the country through continuous conflicts and certain political moves. One of the most drastic moves was the announcement made by Milorad Dodik, the Serbian Member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina that Republic Srpska will leave all central institutions and form its own army, which received harsh reactions from the US and the EU. Nevertheless, announced sanctions against those who were trying to question the stability of B&H was not followed by or supplemented with a concrete set of steps to fix the crisis in the country. The remaining two members of the Presidency of B&H, i.e. representatives of other two constitutive peoples, who are making the situation worse by their statements and certain political decisions, are not abolished from the responsibility of contributing to the crisis. Instead of contributing to the stabilization of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Croatia, as the signatory countries of the Dayton Agreement, treat B&H as its colony. The last bilateral meeting took place in 2018, when the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, visited Sarajevo, with proposals for solving the remaining open issues, especially the issue of borders, which is very complex because the exchange of territory in the municipality of Priboj, as well as near Štrpac, where the Belgrade Bar railway crosses, was proposed territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The issue of using energy from the Zvornik hydropower plant, as well as the construction of new Buk Bijela hydropower plants, is also a significant open issue, for which the consent of the central authorities in BiH was not obtained, but an agreement was concluded between Serbia and the Republika Srpska entity. The most recent serious worsening of relations between the two countries occurred on the occasion of the adoption of the Resolution on Srebrenica in the UN General Assembly, when there was an exchange of harsh words between the officials of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Government of the Republic of Srpska offered the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina an Agreement on Peaceful Disengagement, to which an immediate negative response was received from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

North Macedonia is one of the countries that Serbia treats as its area of interest and a potential part of the Serbian world. Open interference in the internal affairs of North Macedonia happened when Counselor at the Embassy of Serbia in Skopje and officer of the Security and Information Agency (BIA) Goran Živaljević was in the Assembly of Macedonia at the time of the invasion of violent demonstrators on April 27, 2017, which led to a cooling of relations after the departure from power of the party led by then Prime Minister Gruevski⁹⁵. The new Prime Minister, Zoran Zaev, nevertheless went for the gradual improvement of relations with Serbia, so North Macedonia was one of the three founding states of the Free Trade Zone and Mini Schengen regional initiative, which was jointly launched by Serbia and Albania in Novi Sad in 2019. In 2021, it changed its name

95 [<https://srbin.info/politika/makedonski-mediji-oficir-bia-usao-u-sobranje-tokom-napada-27-aprila/?lang=lat>]

to Open Balkan. Relations with this country have been damaged recently when North Macedonia not only voted for the General Assembly Resolution on the Srebrenica genocide, but was also a co-sponsor of this Resolution.

Albania is a country with which relations have fluctuated in the last decade and in this decade as well. Good relations, primarily personal ones, between the two authoritarian rulers - President Vučić and Edi Rama - were soon restored. Thus, in 2019, Albania, together with Serbia, was the initiator of the initiative of the Free Trade Zone and the mini-Schengen, which later grew into the Open Balkans. Until the beginning of this year, the relations between the two countries were cordial, above all at the level of relations between Vučić and Rama. At that time, occasional outbursts from the Albanian side were tolerated on the part of Serbia, such as, for example, the occasional appearance of a map of Greater Albania, or when the joint session of the governments of Albania and Kosovo in December 2021, the year their unification was announced.⁹⁶ That was the reason for sending the protest note from Belgrade to Tirana. However, this dispute was soon settled so that the partnership within the Open Balkans continued. The latest cooling of relations occurred after Edi Rama declared in September of last year that the Open Balkans had finished its role and that now we should turn to the Berlin Process, in which instead of three, all the countries of the Western Balkans participate. Soon, on October 15, 2023, Tirana hosted the meeting of the Berlin Process, and it was the first time that it was held in a country that is not a member of the European Union⁹⁷. Since then, the activities within the Open Balkans have mostly been frozen, and there have also been hints from North Macedonia that this country also intends to leave this integration, all the more because it failed to incorporate the other countries of the Western Balkans - Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo.

Kosovo is the second neuralgic point in the region. And although negotiations regarding the normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo have been ongoing since 2011, the year when significant progress was made in that direction, the Kosovo problem is still quite far from being resolved. During this period, with the mediation of the European Union, numerous agreements between Serbia and Kosovo were reached and implemented, but some key ones were not - such as the creation of the Community of Municipalities with a Serbian majority, which was signed twice in Brussels - in 2013 and 2015. In addition to other disputed issues, this is one of the key ones, because Prishtina, despite the assumed obligation, refuses to fulfill it. In the last few years, along with Miroslav Lajčak, the negotiator on behalf of the EU, Gabriel Escobar also joined the negotiations on behalf of the United States of America. At the end of last year and during the 2024 year, this duo announced on several occasions the imminent conclusion of the legally binding agreement on the full normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo, and some dates were even mentioned, but instead we witnessed the frequent tightening of relations, which were often on the brink of an armed conflict.⁹⁸ Global trends and conflicts, such as the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine and the conflict in Gaza, but also the fact that this year the elections for the bodies of the European Union, as well as the presidential elections in the USA, will be held, which will significantly slow down efforts to normalize relations between Serbia and Kosovo.

96 <https://www.kosovo-online.com/analize/najave-ujedinjenja-albanie-i-kosova-korak-ka-velikoj-albanija-ili-dodvoravanje-biracima>

97 <https://beta.rs/content/192289-sutra-u-tyrants-summit-of-the-Berlin-process>

98 Barricades and the coming down of institutions in December 2022, an armed incident in Banjska on September 24, 2023

Relations between Serbia and V4 have been stable for a long time. Considering the nature of the regime and the similarity of foreign policies (primarily in relation to the aggression of the Russian Federation on Ukraine), the most cordial relations are between Serbia and Hungary and Slovakia. Above all, relations with Hungary, with which there is intensive diplomatic communication, as well as frequent meetings at the summit, the last of which took place in April 2024, stand out here.⁹⁹ On that occasion, full agreement was emphasized regarding foreign policy issues, primarily regarding the introduction of sanctions against the Russian Federation due to aggression against Ukraine. Numerous agreements on economic cooperation were also concluded, primarily in the field of energy.

Bilateral relations with Slovakia are very good and meaningful. The two countries have an intense and continuous political dialogue at all levels.

The Slovak national minority in Serbia, as well as the Serbian national minority in Slovakia, make a special contribution to the relations between the two countries. In the last few years, numerous high-level visits have been exchanged, and numerous agreements in the field of economic cooperation and other areas have been concluded.¹⁰⁰

Within the framework of good mutual relations with the Czech Republic, the President of the Czech Republic, Miloš Zeman, at the invitation of the President of the Republic of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, officially visited the Republic of Serbia in January 2023. Aleksandar Vučić and the President of the Czech Republic, Miloš Zeman, opened a business forum attended by fifty businessmen from the Czech Republic and 180 representatives of Serbian companies.¹⁰¹

Bilateral relations between Serbia and Poland are traditionally good. Poland supports the European integration process of Serbia. In addition to political cooperation, there is also intensive economic cooperation between the two countries.¹⁰²

MULTILATERAL COLLABORATION

Over the past two years, Serbia has come into open confrontation with the political West on two occasions. For the first time, it referred to its behavior in relation to the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. Namely, apart from voting for two resolutions of the General Assembly of the United Nations condemning this aggression, Serbia has not distanced itself from this aggression in any other way.

On the contrary, it is the only country in Europe that refused to impose sanctions on the Russian Federation and thus did not harmonize its foreign policy with the policy of the European Union in accordance with Chapter 31 of the Negotiating Framework. Instead, she has always nurtured cordial relations with the Russian Federation, high officials of Serbia had frequent high-level meetings with Russian officials, and even Aleksandar Vulin, the former head of the Serbian secret service of Serbia BIA, was awarded a high Russian medal. President Vučić himself met with Vladimir Putin in October 2023 on the sidelines of the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing.¹⁰³ The only positive thing about Ukraine

99 <https://www.republika.rs/vest/svi-komentari/vesti/politics/520702/aleksandar-vucic-viktor-orban-meeting>

100 <https://www.mfa.gov.rs/spoljna-politika/bilateralna-saradnja/slovacka-republika>

101 <http://prague.mfa.gov.rs/lat/newstext.php?subaction=showfull&id=1568640260&ucat=118&template=HeadlinesLat&>

102 <https://www.mfa.gov.rs/spoljna-politika/bilateralna-saradnja/poljska>

103 <https://n1info.rs/vesti/sta-ruski-mediji-pisu-o-susretu-putina-i-vucica/>

is the visit of Olena Zelnsky, the wife of the President of Ukraine Zelensky, and Dmytro Kueba, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, to Belgrade on May 12, 2024. The guests from Ukraine were hosted by Tamara Vučić, wife of President Vučić, and Marko Đurić, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Serbia. On that occasion, President Vučić also received a guest from Ukraine.¹⁰⁴ This behavior of Serbia was met with strong objections from the West, before Serbia persistently refuses to impose sanctions on Russia, while Hungary, which is a member of the European Union, supports it.

Serbia's second open dispute with the political West occurred on the occasion of the adoption of the United Nations General Assembly Resolution on the Srebrenica genocide on May 15, 2024. Namely, since the adoption of the Resolution, which was proposed by Germany and Rwanda, was co-sponsored by the most influential countries of the West, very harsh, and when it comes to Germany, inappropriate words in the world of diplomacy were directed at them, and especially at the expense of Germany. All this, and especially the inappropriate closeness with the Russian Federation and its officials who are under Western sanctions, contributes to Serbia's further distance not only from the West but also from EU membership.

REGIONAL COOPERATION IN THE WB

In 2019, Serbia, together with Albania, launched the regional integration of the Free Trade Zone and mini-Schengen, which changed its name to Open Balkans three years ago. North Macedonia immediately joined this integration, and the ambition was to include the other three countries of the Western Balkans. However, there was resistance in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Kosovo because the two founders of this integration - Serbia and Albania - had their own magnanimous concepts (Serbia Serbian world and Albania Great Albania), which had a repulsive effect on potential new members.

In addition, there is already the Berlin process that Angela Merkel launched in 2014 and which included all the countries of the Western Balkans, within which a series of agreements were reached that make this area free for the movement of goods, labor and cooperation in other areas.

There is also an Investment Plan worth 6 billion euros, within which 2 billion euros are allocated as grants, and 4 billion as loans under favorable conditions. The Berlin process was frozen for a while, only to be revived two years ago. Thus, with Rama's statement that the Open Balkans played its role and North Macedonia's announcement that it could leave this integration, it is obvious that the Open Balkans will go down in history and that the Berlin process will be the main lever for the development of the Western Balkans.

By the way, Serbia also participates in other regional initiatives, such as Brdo - Brioni, Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative (MARRI), Network of Associations of Local Authorities in South-East Europe (NALAS), Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative (RAI), Western Balkans Democracy Initiative (WBDI), Regional School for Public Administration (ReSPA), Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), Western Balkans Fund (WBF), the Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE), are just some of the initiatives that involve most of the WB countries and in which the country is actively participating and contributing.

¹⁰⁴<https://www.mfa.gov.rs/mediji/vesti/supruga-predsednika-srbije-tamara-vucic-ugostila-prvu-damu-ukrajine-olenu-zelenska>

When it comes to Serbia, regional cooperation is burdened with numerous problems and inconsistencies.

- highest-level meetings take place at multilateral gathering exclusively, while bilateral meetings are very infrequent, there were only few. When it is about Serbia, they are intense exclusively with representatives of one B-H entity, i. e. Republika Srpska, and it is similar with the relations of Croatia towards the parts of B&H occupied by Croats.
- joint government meetings are held mainly with the countries with which there are no important open issues, while in the period under observation no joint meeting of any two governments of the Dayton Agreement countries was held;
- instead of improving interparliamentary cooperation in accordance with aspirations of speeding up on the path to the EU, it is constantly on decline if compared with periods preceding the one covered by the report;
- in the period under observation a trend of further deterioration in relations among the four countries of the Dayton Agreement continued, fueled to a great extent by statements of highest officials and media mainly under control of the ruling structures;
- over two decades after the beginning of the normalization of relations among the four countries of the Dayton Agreement there are still unresolved key issues: borders, missing persons, succession, protection of rights of national minorities.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As a country, Serbia does not have a National Foreign Policy Strategy, and this has enabled the governments that have changed since the beginning of democratic changes after October 5, 2000, to declare some of their priorities as strategic in accordance with individual interests. The constant in all of this was that all governments in the mentioned period stated full membership in the European Union as their strategic foreign policy goal. However, during the Democratic Party's rule until 2012, Vuk Jeremić, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, proclaimed four basic pillars of foreign policy. These are the EU, Russia, USA and China. And instead of the EU being the only pillar, and fostering good relations with the other three countries being taken for granted, Serbia did not do enough in that period to speed up its path towards this integration of European countries. Dissatisfied with such an attitude, and especially with the attitude of the then authorities towards Kosovo¹⁰⁵ Angela Merkel, then Chancellor of Germany, helped the Serbian Progressive Party come to power in the 2012 elections.

This party also stated full membership in the European Union as its strategic foreign policy goal. In the first five years, it implemented internal reforms to a significant extent and followed the EU's external political course, which resulted in the opening of new negotiation chapters. However, at the end of the last decade and in this decade, the internal reforms were only fake, because there was a blockage of institutions and the collapse of the rule of law as well as media freedoms, which led to negative evaluations in reports on Serbia's progress towards the EU, and the slowing down of the European path. This is best illustrated by the fact that in the last three years not a single new negotiation chapter, or cluster, has been opened. This was equally contributed to by the misalignment of Serbia's foreign policy with EU policy - now the mainstay of foreign policy

¹⁰⁵During her visit to Serbia in December 2011, Angela Merkel asked the then President of Serbia, Boris Tadić, that Serbia abolish the so-called parallel institutions in the north of Kosovo. Tadić's answer was that he could not do that because in that case there would be no institutions there since Pristina had not yet installed its institutions in the north.

was not the four pillars from the time of the Democratic Party, but the policy of sitting on two chairs. Those two chairs are the EU and the Russian Federation. This was particularly evident after Russia's aggression against Ukraine, when there were frequent criticisms from Brussels about the non-alignment of Serbia's foreign policy with the EU's foreign policy, because Serbia, more or less openly, favored relations with Moscow over relations with Brussels.

In this case, the real recommendation would be that if Serbia really wants to use the benefits of candidate status and one day become a full member of the EU, it must scale up its foreign policy in accordance with Article 31 of the negotiation framework. But, realistically speaking, this will remain only as a recommendation with no chance of being realized, at least for some time to come. Since there is no National Foreign Policy Strategy, the main foreign policy strategy of Serbia is, regardless of his protocol constitutional powers, what President Vučić decides. However, he still personally and through pro-government media implements a pro-Russian policy, directing increasingly harsh words towards the West, especially recently, after the adoption of the Resolution on Srebrenica in the United Nations General Assembly.

WB cooperation (from SRB stance)

Serbia, as the largest country in the region, i.e. of the WB6 countries, could and should have been the backbone of the region's stability and the leader of the road to the EU. In a way, she tried to do this by starting the regional initiative "Open Balkans" together with Albania and later North Macedonia. However, the concept of Great Serbia never actually existed, not even during the time of the government that came into being after the collapse of the Milosevic regime. It was not placed *ad acta*. At that time, his main advocate was Vojislav Koštunica, who in his statements claimed the Republika Srpska entity as his own and thus led to the tightening of relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina. The situation was similar in relation to Montenegro, which, after leaving the state union of Serbia and Montenegro in 2006, he called a quasi-state. All of this was later defined by the SNS government as the policy of the Serbian world, that is, the unification of all parts of the neighboring states in which the Serbs are in the majority, on a national basis. In fact, Serbia does not have stable relations with any WB6 country.

Along with redefining the overall strategy of foreign policy, Serbia should also redefine its regional policy, because the concept of the Serbian world will never be realized (except perhaps in the case of major world turbulences), so that not only is there no benefit, but from disturbed regional relations Serbia it can only have harm. A prerequisite for political, and therefore economic stability, is good neighborly relations, which also requires a willingness to face the past, with the crimes that occurred in the nineties of the last century, which even three decades later are disrupting relations with neighbors.

V4 cooperation (from SRB stance)

Serbia should continue to improve its good relations with the countries of the Visegrad Group. On the one hand, it is a political interest because all these countries are members of the European Union and can help Serbia speed up its path towards this European integration. Although the relations with Hungary are at the highest level compared to all the member states of the European Union, and therefore the other three members of the Visegrad Group, we should also strive to raise the relations with the other three members to a higher level. As already mentioned, political interests point to it, but economic cooperation, which is constantly on the rise, is not negligible either. Finally, there is no reason to strive for such relations, especially since Serbia has no disputed or open issues with any of these countries.

