



Countering Escalation in the Western Balkans

The Need for Robust Prevention

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The Serbian parliamentary elections on 17 December 2023 mark the end of a year of rising tensions in the Western Balkans and everything points to a challenging 2024 for international conflict management. While the Russian war against Ukraine has brought new momentum to the European Union's enlargement policy, the path to membership and financial incentives alone have largely exhausted their conflict-mitigating effect, threatening the achievements of the last decades.

This suggests that a major rethink of Western Balkan politics – focusing on robust prevention – is necessary. While militarily contributions to international peace operations in the region remain important, the civilian toolbox should also be reoriented towards more robust prevention efforts.

Recommendations

- The growing tensions in the Western Balkans require more robust prevention. To this end, international diplomacy should be backed by stronger conditionality in its incentives as well as sanctions.
- The peace operations – in particular EUFOR Althea and KFOR – should strengthen their presence visibly to deter escalations.
- Political compromise that contributes to dysfunctional or disintegrating states must be avoided. Further efforts are needed to consolidate Bosnia and Herzegovina and to progress the recognition of Kosovo.
- As internal factors limit the EU's capacity to act, a strong commitment from member states is required, preferably in concert with groups of friends from like-minded countries. Bilateral measures must also be geared towards robust prevention.

For three decades, the EU has raised high expectations with regard to its ability to prevent violent conflicts in South-East Europe. After the Dayton Agreement, which ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995, the EU repeatedly formulated its leadership claim. The Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe and the EU's participation in the UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo, for example, served this purpose.



Internal divisions weaken the EU's credibility when it comes to conflict prevention. Nationalist politicians are exploiting this and undermine the stability of the region.

At the Thessaloniki summit in 2003, the EU promised the countries in the region membership, assuming that this would be the strongest possible incentive for a peaceful future.

The association process, however, has been faltering. On the one hand, the reform record of the prospective members leaves much to be desired. On the other hand, the EU itself is slow to implement internal reforms and not united on important issues for the region.

Concerning Kosovo, the fact that five member states (Greece, Romania, Slovakia, Spain and Cyprus) have yet to recognize Kosovo is an obstacle; in North Macedonia, bilateral Bulgarian concerns are slowing things down; vis-à-vis Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, the axis Budapest-Belgrade-Banja Luka is blocking consistent action.

Serbia

Persistent maneuvering, growing revisionism

On 31 October 2023, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen visited Belgrade. She reiterated that the EU wishes Serbia to become a member and cited common economic interests. Then she focused on the EU's support packages: the €30 billion investment plan and the €6 billion growth plan for the Western Balkans. Already in the [previous year](#), the EU had offered Serbia strong financial incentives in the form of €165 million in budget support and €500 million in infrastructure grants. However, von der Leyen emphasized that the normalization of relations with Kosovo and the resolute prosecution of the perpetrators behind the 24 September armed attack in northern Kosovo were [preconditions](#) to access these funds.



Doubts are growing as to the stabilizing effects of EU's incentives.

In the meantime, doubts are growing as to the stabilizing effect of EU's incentives. Serbia is happy to accept all offers, but under President Aleksandar Vučić the country shows little serious ambition to move closer to the Union – despite his European rhetoric. Overall, Vučić is persistently maneuvering between the EU (and the US) on the one hand, and Russia and China on the other. On 16 October 2023, Vučić was the only head of state in the region to stay away from the Tirana summit of the [Berlin Process](#), which upon Germany's initiative has been fostering EU rapprochement

for nine years. Instead, he flew to Beijing to sign a non-EU-compatible free trade agreement and various infrastructure support agreements with General Secretary Xi Jinping.



Belgrade is continuing its close cooperation with Russia. Meanwhile, the military posture on Kosovo's border is a major security concern.

Even after Russia's all-out attack on Ukraine, Belgrade is continuing its close cooperation with Russia. On 26 September 2022, the foreign ministers of both countries signed another agreement to coordinate their foreign policy in the years 2023-24. Vučić also vehemently rejects joining the EU sanctions against Russia, which is required in the accession process in order to align Serbia's foreign policy with the EU. Apparently, Belgrade has also welcomed expelled Russian diplomats from other European countries.

Serbia's repeated military threats on Kosovo's border are a particular cause for concern. For years, the country has been arming its forces not only with European, but also with Russian and – increasingly – Chinese weapons systems. With a defense budget of €1.4 billion in 2023, Serbia tops the region; in recent years, its military spending has consistently exceeded 2 percent of GDP. This corresponds to that of the other five Western Balkan states combined. The obvious question is what the country is preparing for with this financial tour de force. At a public demonstration of Chinese weapons in April 2022, Vučić said: "We will no longer be anyone's punching bag."

Ideologically, Vučić has rehabilitated the notion of nationalist revisionism, which is reinforced by radical populist sentiment, particularly among the media that align strongly with the president. War criminals like the Bosnian Serb Ratko Mladić are publicly glorified without being countered by the Serbian state leadership – quite the opposite.

Under the slogan *Srpski svet* (Serbian world), some of members of the political elite are propagating the unification of the (majority) Serb-inhabited areas of Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo and *Republika Srpska* (RS) in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

First formulated in 2020 by the then Minister of Defense Aleksandar Vulin, *Srpski svet* is linguistically reminiscent of the concept of *Ruski mir* (Russian world) and reformulates the idea of a Greater Serbia – an idea that once before has ended in war and ethnic cleansing under Slobodan Milošević, whom Vučić served as Minister of Information from 1998.



Srpski svet is not only linguistically reminiscent of Ruski mir. It renews the idea of a Greater Serbia, which once before has led to war and ethnic cleansing under Slobodan Milošević.

Vulin in particular, who is considered a close follower of Vučić and was appointed head of the Serbian secret service BIA in December 2022, gained a reputation as an advocate of *Srpski svet* and a close alliance with Russia, especially in the area of intelligence. After attending a security conference in Moscow in July 2023, jointly with Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić and Bosnian

Serb leader Miroslav Dodik, the USA imposed [sanctions against Vulin](#), freezing his foreign assets. The decision cited abuse of office, involvement in cross-border organized crime and illegal drug trafficking. This would have threatened peace and security in the region and encouraged Russia to continue its harmful activities. On 3 November, Vulin resigned from office in order to avoid “[blackmail and pressure on Serbia and the Serbian world](#)”.

Vučić’s close relationship with his political mentor, the convicted war criminal [Vojislav Šešelj](#), remains undisputed. For the local elections on 17 December 2023 (but not for the simultaneous parliamentary elections), the president’s Serbian Progressive Party has entered into an electoral alliance with Šešelj’s Radical Party. The latter is campaigning with the slogan “[Fatherland Serbia – Mother Russia!](#)”.



Only a third of the Serbian population still considers EU accession to be desirable. This weakens the peace-building power of economic incentives.

Under this constellation, Serbia’s accession to the EU and constructive membership are hard to conceive – in any case, not any time soon. Conversely, [only a third of the Serbian population](#) still considers EU accession to be desirable. This further weakens the peacebuilding power of economic incentives – and has repercussions for the peacekeeping operations in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Kosovo

Armed escalation, stress test for the EU

Since March 2011, the EU has been mediating the political dialogue between Belgrade and Prishtina. The EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, presently Josep Borrell, heads this effort and is supported by Slovakian diplomat Miroslav Lajčák as his Special Representative since 2020. In April 2013, the mediation process resulted in the [Brussels Agreement](#), in which Serbia agreed to give up its parallel state structures in Kosovo and in return, Kosovo was prepared to establish an Association of Municipalities with a Serb majority population.

Kosovo’s [Constitutional Court](#), however, ruled that some features of the planned association were not in line with the constitution; as they would neither preserve the ethnically diverse character of the municipalities with a Serb majority nor safeguard the two-tier governance structure of municipalities and central government. Implementation was therefore suspended. Five years later, Vučić and the then President of Kosovo, Hashim Thaçi, began to strive for a [land swap](#) instead. This destroyed the expectations that had been built up for years that a territorial realignment was not up for discussion.

Since 2021, Kosovo’s current Prime Minister, Albin Kurti, has been pursuing a policy of “reciprocity”, meaning that all regulations between Kosovo and Serbia should apply equally to both sides. So far, Kosovo is still subject to asymmetric disadvantages in many areas, for instance when it comes to the recognition of legal acts and documents by Serbia.

Kurti insists on obtaining equal rights or otherwise imposing reciprocal restrictions on Serbia. At the same time, his government is increasingly trying to enforce the rule of law throughout the territory of Kosovo, referring to the comprehensive minority rights granted by Kosovo's constitution. This continues to be met with great mistrust in the Serb community, especially as there are repeated attacks on their members that are hardly ever prosecuted.

Kosovo's internal dialogue is also sabotaged by the *Srpska Lista* (SL) party, which dominates the Serb community in Kosovo. It is closely intertwined with Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party and generally regarded as Belgrade's arm in Kosovo. Members of the Serb community who are willing to engage in dialogue are systematically threatened with the loss of their jobs in the SL-controlled civil service, of scholarships or even social benefits. Time and again, hand grenades are thrown into the front gardens of suspected 'dissidents' or their vehicles set on fire. The Kosovo government's outreach therefore largely takes place in private so as not to expose those involved to any danger from extremist elements within their own community.

response to international requests. When the last deadline expired in 2021, Kosovo's government decided to make RKS license plates mandatory. As Serbia does not allow vehicles with RKS license plates to enter the country, the Kosovo government decided that, in turn, the license plates of Serbian vehicles were to be covered in Kosovo. When Kosovo police units were sent to the border crossings to enforce this policy, Serbs in the north set up roadblocks and attacked vehicle registration offices. Moreover, Serbia put its troops on alert at the border and its defense minister demonstratively visited the troops together with the Russian ambassador.



The policy of "reciprocity" caused conflicts because Kosovo insisted on either receiving equal rights or imposing reciprocal restrictions on Serbia.

In November 2022, Kosovo decided to enforce the official license plates for good. In response, and at the behest of the *Srpska Lista*, almost all officials from the Serb community left the state institutions. SL chairman Goran Rakić resigned as a minister in the Kosovo government, as did two deputy ministers, 10 members of parliament and the mayors of the four northern municipalities. Over 600 members of the police and judiciary left their positions. When the Kosovar government filled the emerging rule of law vacuum with police forces from other parts of the country, roadblocks, where members of radical groups such as the Russian "Night Wolves" were also spotted, were set up again.

Not least the repeated signs that Moscow had a hand in destabilization efforts led to



The Constitutional Court ruled that the planned association of municipalities must preserve Kosovo's ethnically diverse character and two-tier state structure.

The general introduction of the Republic of Kosovo ("RKS") license plates, which was agreed back in 2011, was a particular source of conflict. Generous transitional periods were repeatedly extended – not least in

a more intensive Western engagement. US special envoy Gabriel Escobar supported Lajčák's efforts to bring new momentum to the dialogue. Germany and France launched a [proposal](#) for a new agreement to normalize relations.

Following a meeting with Kurti and Vučić in Brussels on 27 February 2023, EU foreign policy chief Borrell announced that both parties had reached an "[Agreement on the path to normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia](#)". It included the mutual recognition of sovereign documents and of territorial integrity, the renunciation of violent conflict resolution, the abandonment of the claim to represent the other internationally or to hinder its accession to international organizations, as well as appropriate "self-management" of the Serb community in Kosovo.

more alarming were statements by Vučić and his Foreign Minister Ivica Dacić that they would only implement the agreement up to certain red lines. By voting against Kosovo's [application to join the Council of Europe](#) on 25 April 2023, Belgrade further undermined the credibility of its commitment to the agreement.



The EU mediators announced: "We have a deal". But the parties quickly fueled doubts about whether they really stood behind the agreement.

Following the withdrawal of the Serb mayors, local elections were held in northern Kosovo on 24 April 2023 – largely without Serb participation due to a boycott call by the *Srpska Lista*. With a [turnout](#) of only 3.5 percent, four ethnic Albanians were elected mayor for the first time. When the government had them escorted to their offices under police protection, [violent protests](#) broke out again. More than 93 Italian and Hungarian KFOR forces were injured, some seriously, by explosives and gunfire. Serbia once again put its [army on high alert](#) because "terror is being perpetrated against the Serb community in Kosovo". When Serbian security forces captured three Kosovar police officers on a patrol – apparently on Kosovar territory – this further aggravated the situation.

On 3 June 2023, the [EU foreign policy chief](#), politically flanked by the US, called on Kosovo and Serbia to de-escalate, otherwise the EU would be prepared to impose "resolute measures". Addressing Serbia, Borrell expressed his concern about the army being on high alert. The [demands directed at Kosovo](#) were more specific: The



Not least the repeated signs that Moscow had a hand in destabilization efforts led to more intensive Western involvement.

On 19 March 2023, after tough negotiations in Ohrid, North Macedonia, Kurti and Vučić also settled on the [Implementation Annex](#) of the agreement. Kurti wanted to sign on the spot, but Vučić refused. Nevertheless, Borrell and Lajčák announced "[We have a deal](#)" and emphasized that a signature was not mandatory for international treaties.

But the behavior of the parties quickly raised [doubts](#) about whether they really stood behind the agreement. Kurti delayed efforts to render the Association of Municipalities with a Serb majority (which had already been agreed in principle in 2013) compatible with the Constitution. Even

police should immediately withdraw from the town halls in the north, the mayors should work in alternative offices, and new elections should be called.



The EU judged Kurti's gradual approach to be a violation of its demands and imposed measures against Kosovo at the end of June.

Kurti, however, opted for a gradual withdrawal of the police, in line with the evolving situation, so as not to create a new security vacuum in the north. Also, new elections would be called in accordance with the legal procedures of the Republic of Kosovo. The EU judged this to be insufficient and adopted the announced "measures", suspending high-level political contacts and financial assistance.

In view of Serbia's role in the escalation, the EU's decision did not meet undivided international approval. In an unusual letter to High Representative Borrell, US Secretary of State Blinken and then British Foreign Secretary Cleverly, parliamentarians from ten European countries, the US and the European Parliament, led by Alicia Kearnes (UK), Bob Menendez (US) and Michael Roth (Germany), expressed their concern that the EU and the US lacked balance and proportionality. In light of unsuccessful attempts to court Belgrade, they called for deterrence diplomacy.

On 24 September 2023, a police patrol in northern Kosovo hit a roadblock and came under fire. One police officer was fatally injured. The patrol had disturbed a paramilitary group of around 30 people who

holed up in the nearby Banjska monastery. In an hour-long firefight, three paramilitaries died while a larger group managed to escape across the border to Serbia.

In close cooperation with EULEX and KFOR, Kosovo police were able to seize a considerable arsenal of weapons, many of which would only be accessible to state institutions. Most of them proved to be of Serbian origin. The US ambassador in Kosovo, Jeffrey Hovenier, assessed the paramilitary action as "coordinated and sophisticated". The gunmen had obviously undergone military training and aimed to seriously destabilize the region.



On 24 September 2023, a police patrol ran into an armed group, followed by an exchange of fire that lasted for hours.

Serbia was unimpressed. The country declared a day of mourning in memory of the Serb paramilitaries killed. Shortly afterwards, Milan Radojčić, deputy chairman of *Srpska Lista*, was identified as the gang leader – he had already been subject to personal sanctions by the US in 2021 due to his involvement in organized crime and corruption. Radojčić took sole responsibility for the operation, was briefly arrested in Belgrade – and set free again after two days.

Meanwhile, Vučić continued his months-long campaign of accusing the Kosovo government of terror and threatening an intervention by the Serbian army to protect the Kosovo Serbs. He informed the Russian ambassador in Belgrade that Prime Minister Kurti was carrying out "brutal

ethnic cleansing” with the support of “part of the international community”. This was followed by the largest ever deployment of troops on Kosovo’s border, which the [US classified](#) as “unprecedented” and “destabilizing”. The EU, on the other hand, once again refrained from imposing measures against Serbia – not least because Hungary’s Prime Minister [Viktor Orban](#) rejected this as “ridiculous” and “impossible”.



Vučić accused Kosovo of terror, his international partners of supporting ethnic cleansing, and again deployed troops on Kosovo’s border.

KFOR responded to the developments by beefing up its presence, adding 500 Turkish troops in June 2023, as well as 200 British and 130 Romanian troops in October. Since then the northern border of Kosovo in particular has been patrolled more intensively. KFOR rejects Serbia’s demand to fully assume the security responsibility in the north – this would have led to the state institutions of Kosovo being pushed out again.

At the end of October 2023, bilateral diplomacy again sought to reinvigorate the dialogue. High-ranking foreign policy advisors from Germany, France and Italy accompanied Escobar and Lajčák to Belgrade and Prishtina. Their message: the Brussels and Ohrid agreements are binding and must be implemented. They also presented a “[modern European proposal](#)” for the Association of Municipalities that was considered to be in line with Kosovo’s constitution.

On 26 October 2023, President Emmanuel Macron, Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, Council President Charles Michel, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and his Special Envoy further emphasized this initiative in a meeting with Kurti and Vučić on the margins of the EU Council of Ministers.

In a subsequent [joint statement](#), the three heads of state and government reiterated: “In order to make quick progress on implementation, we call on Kosovo to launch the procedure to establish the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities in Kosovo as prescribed in the draft Statute, and on Serbia to deliver on de-facto recognition.”



Kurti fears that he is making a significant advance concession without any guarantees for the agreed quid pro quo. Vučić still refuses to sign the Agreements.

By choosing to speak of “de facto recognition” the European leaders clearly expressed what they expected of the Serbian government. Meanwhile, the modalities of the Association of Municipalities are currently subject to further negotiations. Kurti fears, not without reason, that Kosovo is making a significant advance concession without any guarantees for the agreed upon quid pro quo. Vučić still refuses to sign the Agreement, reinforcing doubts about his trustworthiness. Moreover, the Kosovo government also doubts whether the EU is willing and able to push the Agreement through to the end.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Increasing obstruction, threat of secession

In Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the EU is not only involved through the association process, but also through the deployment of EUFOR Althea; the mission, that in December 2004 took over the task to secure the military aspects of the [Dayton Peace Agreement](#) from NATO. From an original force size of almost 7,000, the mission had shrunk to 600 by 2022. In light of growing tensions, EUFOR Althea has since been reinforced to around 1,100 troops. On 2 November 2023, the [UN Security Council](#) extended its mandate by a further year.



The achievements of the Dayton Peace Agreement are increasingly under threat.

At the same time, the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement is increasingly under threat. The agreement ended the three-year war in BiH with a compromise that preserved the state as a whole but also cemented the ethnic dimension of the conflict through a convoluted territorial and political reorganization. There was hope that the full prosecution of war crimes, combined with the prospect of EU accession, would enable social reconciliation. This hope is yet to be fulfilled.

The cleavages became obvious once more in August 2021 with the appointment of a new [High Representative](#), who oversees the civilian aspects of implementing the Dayton Agreement. Both the *Republika Srpska* (RS) entity and the Russian Federation reject-

ed his nomination, claiming that both the Peace Implementation Council (PIC) of the Dayton Agreement and the UN Security Council would need to concur. When the other PIC members rejected this interpretation and appointed the German politician Christian Schmidt, both the RS and Russia refused to recognize him.



The High Representative repeatedly warned of „dangerous developments“ and „unprecedented“ attacks on Bosnia and Herzegovina’s constitutional order.

In his [spring report](#) 2023, the High Representative warned of “dangerous developments”. He described in detail how the RS under its President Milorad Dodik withdrew from state institutions and set up parallel structures. This was a key factor that led to a persistent blockade of legislation, the state budget and important personnel decisions – although politicians from the Bosniak and Croat communities also played their part.

The RS also announced that it would leave the joint BiH army, the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council, and the tax administration and instead create its own institutions and a new RS constitution. At the same time, the domestic political climate is becoming more authoritarian and the space for civil society and independent media is shrinking.

The illegal paramilitary parade 9 January 2023 to mark the anniversary of the founding of the RS on took on a highly visible threatening posture. At the end of November, the Minister of Defense of Bosnia and

Herzegovina, Zukan Helez, announced the discovery of paramilitary training camps in the RS for Serbian and Russian extremists.

In his fall report, the High Representative noted the “unprecedented extent of RS attacks” on the Dayton Agreement, including a law that denied the jurisdiction of BiH’s Constitutional Court. Among other things, Dodik prevented the publication of the High Representative’s legal acts in the RS, threatened Schmidt with arrest if he entered the territory of the RS again and broke off the contact with him and with the US and British embassies.

Dodik repeatedly reaffirmed his goal of achieving a “peaceful separation” of BiH’s two constituting entities. Some official RS documents also showed the neutral Brčko district, administered by both entities and which either serves to connect or divide the two parts of the RS territory, as incorporated into the latter. In addition, the RS laid claim to all state property on its territory, including natural resources.



Even after the all-out Russian attack on Ukraine, RS President Dodik maintains a close relationship with Moscow.

Dodik and the RS ruling coalition justify their attacks on the state by claiming a “return” to the “original” Dayton Agreement. In their reinterpretation of the agreement, the RS, as a constituting unit of Bosnia and Herzegovina, has a right to self-determination and separation. These claims are accompanied by nationalist rhetoric and demonstrations at the entity boundaries. In September 2023, the Bosnia and Herze-

govina Prosecutor’s Office brought charges against Dodik and the head of the RS Official Gazette, Miloš Lukić, for ignoring the decisions of the High Representative. The RS President appeared at the trial, pleaded not guilty and described the proceedings as a “circus”.

Even after the all-out attack on Ukraine, Dodik – like Vučić – maintains a close relationship with Moscow. In January 2023, the RS President awarded the Russian President the highest order of the RS, and in June received the Order of Alexander Nevsky from Putin. He discussed the further dismantling of the BiH state with the Secretary of the Russian Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev.



Dodik called for unification with Serbia and Montenegro to form a Greater Serbian state.

On 20 October 2023, the US sanctioned four people close to Dodik, including his children Igor and Gorica, because of the “concern that the RS was the RS becoming more like a Dodik family business rather than a political entity of BiH”. In November, sanctions against three other high-ranking RS officials followed, including the Minister of Industry, Energy and Mining and the head of the RS representation office in Moscow.

When Dodik shortly afterwards called for unification with Serbia and Montenegro to form a Greater Serbian state, the US ambassador in Sarajevo declared: “The United States will not stand by idly while Mr. Dodik and his political cronies attempt to tear apart the fabric of Bosnia and Herzegovina, destabilize the country and the region, and impede BiH’s progress toward the EU. We

are determined to protect Bosnia and Herzegovina's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and multiethnic character."

The EU is more cautious in its language and continues to rely on the incentives offered by the prospect of membership. It has assured Bosnia and Herzegovina that it will begin accession negotiations if there is further progress on reforms. However, it is increasingly doubtful whether 20-year promise of accession can effectively counter the destructive tendencies of the RS.



Confidence in EUFOR Althea has dwindled. The mission is said to be too weak and barely capable of responding.

Moreover, among large parts of the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina, confidence in the deterrent effect of EUFOR Althea has largely dwindled – despite high-profile fall exercises. The general feeling is that the mission is too weak and hardly in a position to react to paramilitary actions by the RS. In view of Orban's demonstrative friendship with Dodik and Vučić the fact that a Hungarian major general will take command of the mission in 2024 has further undermined trust.

Conclusion

Time to reorient Western Balkans policy

It is not without good reason that the West sees Serbia as a key driver behind the (de-) stabilization of the region. At present, it is becoming increasingly clear that President Vučić's policy of maintaining power not only strengthens the radical nationalist actors in his own country, but also instrumentalizes conflicts in Serbia's neighborhood. In doing so, he continues to count on Russia's destabilizing influence.

The extent to which fears of a new war and bellicose rhetoric have returned to the public discourse in the Western Balkans is striking. Serbia's elite is especially intent on conjuring up a scenario in which the deployment of its own armed forces could become necessary to protect the Serb minority in Kosovo. At the same time, the presence of security forces in the immediate vicinity of the Kosovo border is expanded.



It is striking that fears of a new war and bellicose rhetoric have returned to the public discourse in the Western Balkans.

Even if Vučić may shy away from an open confrontation with NATO, the danger that acts of violence such as those on 24 September, triggering further escalation, should not be underestimated.

The fact that Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned in May 2023 that a "big explosion is brewing in the center of Europe" is also worrying. Since the invasion of Ukraine at the latest, Moscow warning of events that Russia itself initiates has been a recurring pattern. Russian propaganda media support the nationalist rhetoric of the Serbian media, which in turn spread Moscow's anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western narratives.

- **Serbia** is the country in the region that has received the most pre-accession aid from the EU to date, and the EU is the country's largest donor. But this has hardly contributed to strengthening Serbia's European orientation in recent years. President Vučić displays little serious interest in leading his country into the EU. Instead, it appears that he is primarily focused on maintaining his own power – while trying to receive as much EU funding as possible.



Russia's foreign minister warned in May 2023 that a major explosion was brewing in the center of Europe. This is worrying.

European Balkan policy should therefore focus on more robust prevention and deterrence diplomacy in order to avoid further escalation. Peace operations in the region can make a substantial contribution to preventive efforts. Given internal obstructions within the EU, strong bilateral diplomatic engagement by member states is required, preferably in concert with groups of friends from like-minded countries. Germany should also gear its bilateral incentives and sanctions towards more robust prevention.

The first signs of a rethink are visible. The US have started to impose several personal sanctions against particularly destabilizing actors. The EU is planning to tie its aid to greater conditionality. The punitive measures that Brussels imposed on Kosovo in the summer of 2023 are a novelty in the EU's toolbox. They should be used in a balanced and proportional manner. So far, the EU has reacted cautiously to Serbia's unwillingness to prosecute the perpetrators responsible for injuring 93 KFOR members in May and for the paramilitary attack in Banjska in September 2023.

The EU should therefore be more selective with its financial aid, and rather use it as an incentive in case there is actual progress. It should sanction those actors that threaten peace more heavily and demand their prosecution – especially if they are supported by Russia. Suspending EU accession negotiations must not be taboo. Germany should also put its investment and trade promotion to the test.



European Balkan policy should focus on robust prevention and deterrence diplomacy.

- **Bosnia and Herzegovina** shows that the promise of EU integration is ineffective if confronted with actors who are committed to sabotaging the state. A premature dismantling of the institutions that guarantee the Dayton Peace Agreement – i.e. EUFOR Althea and the Office of the High Representative – would be counterproductive as the EU accession process is presently too weak to consolidate the country.

EU assistance should continue to provide targeted incentives for reforms. At the same time, tough sanctions are necessary to deter a further escalation towards secession. Germany has rightly suspended its bilateral aid programs in the RS.



The promise of EU integration is ineffective when confronted with actors who are committed to sabotaging the state.

A credible posture of EUFOR Althea is essential. The mission should be further increased and the offer of renewed British participation accepted. That way, EUFOR can increase its visibility and strengthen public confidence in its protective function. More frequent patrols and more personnel in the Brčko district would also contribute to this.

- **Kosovo** was the target of an unprecedented paramilitary attack in September 2023. If the Brussels-Ohrid-Agreement is not to turn into a Pyrrhic victory, destructive actors must be shown clear limits. The rapid reinforcement of KFOR was an important step in deterrence and should be maintained. NATO should also make Kosovo an offer to participate in its Partnership for Peace.

As Serbia's President Vučić's words and deeds are feeding doubts as to whether Serbia stands by the Brussels-Ohrid-Agreement, stronger legal guarantees would strengthen confidence in their binding nature. Both parties signing the agreement would serve this purpose – after the Serbian parliamentary elections on 17 Decem-

ber 2023 would be an appropriate time to do so. It is also important to ensure that the planned association of municipalities is compatible with Kosovo's constitution not only in the wording of its statute, but also in political practice, and that it preserves the multi-ethnic character of the state.



Stronger legal guarantees would strengthen confidence in the binding nature of the agreements.

The EU and its member states should also use the Brussels-Ohrid Agreement as an opportunity to persuade the five EU states who not yet done so to take steps towards recognizing Kosovo. In view of the current geopolitical disputes, a stable Western Balkans region and an assertive EU are in the best interests of all member states.

Photo

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Assessments in this briefing are also based on discussions the author had in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo in October 2023.

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