Western Balkans in the Transatlantic Security Context: Where Do We Go from Here?∗

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Abstract

The Western Balkans has traditionally had vital geostrategic importance in European and transatlantic security. Ever since the 1990s, the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have maintained an active presence in the region, and pursued the goals of stability and peace. Since the 2000s, the Euro-Atlantic actors have sought an eventual integration of the countries in the region into transatlantic structures. The Western Balkans retained its strategic importance for European security, stability and peace in the decades that followed. Due to its location on alternative energy routes, the migration waves it received from the Middle East and North Africa, and the existence of foreign fighters, lately, the region has lately acquired increased attention from the EU and NATO. This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the contemporary situation in the Western Balkans, delving into detail the prospects for Euro-Atlantic integration of the countries in the region and the implications of the recent developments for transatlantic security.

Introduction

The Western Balkans has traditionally had vital geostrategic importance in European and transatlantic security. The region has experienced great power competition for centuries and typically been referred to as the powder keg of Europe. With the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the region experienced serious instability and bloodshed in the form of civil wars and ethnic conflicts. Ever since the 1990s, both the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have played an active role, significantly contributing to the efforts to establish peace and stability in the Western Balkans. Besides playing an active role in the peacekeeping and peacebuilding missions and providing economic and military aid, ever since the 2000s, the two organizations have offered membership trajectory to the countries in the region. In fact, in 2004, Slovenia has become both an EU and a NATO member. In 2009,

Albania and Croatia have become members of NATO. Four years later, in 2013, Croatia has become an EU member state. Finally, in 2017, Montenegro has become the 29th member of NATO.

However, the Euro-Atlantic integration process of the Western Balkans is far from being complete. Montenegro and Serbia are the only two Western Balkan countries that are in accession negotiations with the EU. EU accession negotiations with Montenegro were opened in June 2012. To date, 32 negotiating chapters have been opened, of which three have been provisionally closed. In Serbia's accession negotiations with the EU, 16 out of 35 chapters were opened, two of which have been provisionally closed. The remaining countries, i.e. Albania, Macedonia, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina have still not opened accession negotiations. Albania and Macedonia are regarded as the next two countries in line for opening accession negotiations, as long as they show progress on the fight against corruption and reforming their judicial systems. An intergovernmental conference with participation from Albania and Macedonia is expected by the end of 2019.

There are two Western Balkan countries that have indicated their willingness to join NATO: Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia, even though two, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, joined the Partnership for Peace (PfP) Program of NATO. PfP is seen by some as a de facto waiting room for ultimate NATO membership. However, Serbia, due to its recent history with NATO and its close ties with Russia, has not declared an intention of becoming a NATO member. Kosovo similarly has not declared any aspiration of becoming a PfP Program or NATO member.

The region has continued to maintain its vital importance for the Euro-Atlantic actors, first and foremost due to the direct implications of regional stability for European and transatlantic security, stability, and peace. Put simply, due to its geographical proximity and the ties that different actors have with countries within and outside the EU, any instability in the region would spill over and adversely affect Euro-Atlantic interests. Nevertheless, from 2004 to 2014, there has been little sustained high-level Euro-Atlantic engagement in the region, as the EU and NATO were each preoccupied with other pressing agenda items, such as the Eurozone crisis, the immigration crisis, Brexit, Russian aggression, instability in the Middle East and North Africa, and the rise of nationalism/populism. Consequently, even though integration into the EU and NATO has remained a priority for the countries in the region, the reforms, for the most part, have stalled and the transatlantic actors' political attention to the Western Balkans has been diverted elsewhere. Nevertheless, it is important to note that, even under this time period, the EU and NATO still maintained peace missions in the region.

Against the background of a strategic attention vacuum, the region has experienced a number of serious setbacks over the past decade in economic development, democratization, rule of law, and an overall slowdown in reform processes towards EU and NATO integration. On the economic realm, markets continue to have the legacy of the communist era, and prove to be difficult to transition into functioning capitalist economies. Hence, many remain inefficient, and have low competitiveness, low productivity, and a high degree of informality.[1] Even though according to the latest World Bank data there have been some improvements in terms of unemployment figures in the region, these figures are still lagging considerably behind

international standards, and the young and educated are emigrating in search of better opportunities abroad, contributing to the brain drain or loss of human capital. To illustrate, the region has about one third of its residents living outside the region.[2] GDP growth in the region has declined to 2.5 percent in 2017, especially due to slower growth in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Serbia.[3] There are large external deficits and public debt, as well as infrastructural deficiencies, as noted in most if not all country progress reports.

From 2014 onwards, the attention of the transatlantic actors has returned back to the Western Balkans, as the EU recognized that tensions are brewing, economies are stalling, outside actors are intervening, and there is a significant deviation from democratic values and the rule of law in the region. Besides a grave recognition of the seriousness of the problems experienced in the region, the renewed interest of the Euro-Atlantic actors may also be attributed to the successive migration/refugee waves the region received from the Middle East and North Africa. As the Western Balkans region functioned as a major transit country for refugees and immigrants en route to the EU, the urgency of the refugee crisis and the pragmatic need to contain it commanded immediate attention to the Western Balkans. Furthermore, the phenomenon of foreign fighters that join terrorist organizations in the fight against the Western allies similarly rang alarm bells in the transatlantic circles. While the numbers of foreign fighters are quite low, the per capita statistics are high, given the relatively small population sizes of the Western Balkan countries. Moreover, the fact that the region is located on alternative energy routes adds to the significance of the region for European nations as they aspire to reduce their dependence on Russian energy. Adding to the concerns were the disturbing debates of a possible agreement for a land swap or "border correction" between Kosovo and Serbia, and the implications this would carry for peace and stability in the region.

There is still much uncertainty and stalemate in terms of the transatlantic integration of the countries in the region. This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the contemporary situation in the Western Balkans, delving into detail on the implications of the stability in the region for transatlantic security. In order to do so, it first provides a historical overview of transatlantic integration attempts in the region, and then examines the recent developments in the region and discusses the implications of the status quo for the Western Balkan countries' prospects for integration into the transatlantic security infrastructures. Consequently, it examines in detail the revival of EU's attention to the region. In addition to examining the Western Balkans-related causes for renewed transatlantic attention, this article also analyzes the EU-related factors to explain the stalemate in the transatlantic integration processes of the countries in the region. It finally discusses the repercussions of these prospects on transatlantic security.

A Historical Overview of Transatlantic Integration Attempts

Overall, NATO accession of Western Balkan countries has proven to be easier than EU accession. In fact, it can be argued that NATO accession helps facilitate the EU integration prospects of Western Balkan countries, as it necessitates significant structural reforms that are necessary for conducting further reform for EU membership criteria. At the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit of the European Council, the countries in the Western Balkans received their first recognition from the EU that "the future of the Balkans is within the European Union."[4] Over the course of the next decade, the EU has welcomed 13 new members, including two that were part

of the former Yugoslavia: ten in 2004,[5] two in 2007, and one in 2013.[6] This has created what is frequently referred to as the enlargement fatigue in the EU, making the EU members more reluctant to accept new members into the Union. Euro-Atlantic actors have long been criticized by civil society organizations for their preference of regional stability over democratization.

Against this background, it is important to underscore that many internal factors prevented the engagement in constructive reform processes to enable successful integration into the EU and NATO. Realizing their diminishing prospects for getting into the EU, many Western Balkan countries started their search for alternative venues, while also stalling their reform processes towards EU membership. This meant that the elites that were already benefiting from the existing system have become less willing to change the status quo and fight against organized crime and corruption. The region has consequently experienced a surge of illiberal forces. There is a troubling track record on good governance, transparency, accountability, transitional justice, and security sector reform. There is a culture of impunity.

One of the major roadblocks against the Euro-Atlantic integration of the countries in the region is the democratic backsliding experienced by many countries in the region. There is a rising populist wave in the region, which creates additional tensions between different countries in the region, making pundits and scholars wary of renewed ethnic conflicts, seriously jeopardizing the regional stability and peace. As a corollary to the rising populism, the political elites in the region increasingly realized that pursuing irredentist claims pays off electorally. In a region that is traditionally referred to as the powder keg of Europe, such trends cause grave concern in the transatlantic circles.

To make an already complex situation more complex, in summer 2014, when the Juncker Commission came into power, the European Commission announced that there would be no new round of enlargement under its tenure. This has caused a feeling of inertia in the region. Much to the dismay of the candidate countries and the potential candidate countries, the Commissioner for Enlargement position was eliminated in the reorganized Commission structure.

Macedonia has been an EU candidate since 2005, Montenegro since 2010, Serbia since 2012, and Albania since 2014. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo each have a Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU. Kosovo signed it on October 27, 2015, and Bosnia and Herzegovina concluded a Framework Participation Agreement (FPA) in 2015. Bosnia and Herzegovina subsequently submitted its EU membership application on February 16, 2016. The European Commission is currently in the process of preparing an opinion on the country's membership application. Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina are considered to be potential candidate countries for EU membership. Furthermore, in the Strategy for the Western Balkans document, the European Commission recently took note of the important progress that Albania and Macedonia made towards EU membership and underlined that it is ready to prepare recommendations to open up accession negotiations with Albania and Macedonia once the necessary conditions are fulfilled. Consequently, falling short of taking a decision to open up accession negotiations, the European Council announced in June 2018 that June 2019 is the projected date for opening accession negotiations with Albania and Macedonia, if the two countries make progress on reforms in the fight against corruption and improving their judicial systems.

Recent Developments in the Region

Macedonia's EU membership prospects have up until now been stalled due to the name dispute with Greece, which has been going on for almost three decades. Consequently, the EU members recognized Macedonia under the name, The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), instead of under its constitutional name, The Republic of Macedonia. Even though the country submitted its application for membership to the EU in 2005, it was vetoed by Greece. Greece argued that the use of Macedonia's constitutional name "The Republic of Macedonia" implied territorial claims on its northern province, and ignored its cultural heritage and identity that goes all the way back to Alexander the Great. On that front, there are notably positive developments since summer 2018. In June 2018, under the mediation of the United Nations, the Prespa Agreement was signed between the leaders of the two countries, with parties agreeing on a new name for the country – The Republic of North Macedonia.

In January 2019, the Parliament of Macedonia adopted a number of constitutional amendments in order to rename the country the Republic of North Macedonia, and the Greek Parliament ratified the Prespa Agreement too. There are, however, still big divides between the people and the elites. Prior to the ratification of the agreement by the Parliament of Macedonia, there was a referendum on the name change. Many boycotted the referendum, causing a significantly low turnout of 37 percent, even though about 90 percent of those that participated in it voted in favor of a name change.[7] In Greece, the Greek public was never appropriately educated about the implications of the resolution of the name dispute.[8] Even though the resolution of the name dispute removes a significant barrier against the Euro-Atlantic integration of the country, it significantly contributes to the elites-public gap as well.

Regardless of that, the ratification of the Prespa Agreement was welcomed by both the EU and NATO. With the ratification of the Prespa Agreement, the road for Macedonian membership into NATO is open, as NATO has already extended an official invitation on July 11, 2018, for the country to start the accession process. The Republic of North Macedonia will also be able to potentially make progress towards EU accession, with the removal of the Greek veto.

In Macedonia, under the ten-year term of former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, there were many violations of the rule of law and civil and political liberties. There were widespread demonstrations against the government, which eventually resulted in a political crisis and the declaration of early elections in 2016. Ever since the election of Prime Minister Zoran Zaev to power in 2016, there has been a positive reform momentum.

Ever since 2011, the EU has been sponsoring normalization talks between Kosovo and Serbia. Normalization of bilateral relations is a prerequisite for both countries' EU accession. The Brussels Dialogue, facilitated by the EU, aims at resolving long-standing issues between the two countries and advancing their EU integration. In April 2013, the two sides signed the Brussels Agreement, which provided mutual agreement on politically sensitive issues such as security, rule of law, local authorities in the Serbian-inhabited parts of Kosovo, and the judiciary. It called for the creation of the Association/Community of Serb majority municipalities and the reintegration of the north of the Ibar River into Kosovo. However, in the implementation stage,

the Agreement has proven to be very difficult to implement and caused significant tensions between the two parties due to the nationalist backlash against its content. Especially the Association/Community of Serb majority municipalities were regarded by many in Kosovo as a threat against the territorial integrity of the country. Throughout its eight-year lifetime, there were many ups and downs in the process. More recently, in 2018, the assassination of Oliver Ivanović, a Kosovo Serb politician from north Kosovo, and the arrest of the Serbian government official Marko Đurić by Kosovo police in north Mitrovica have added strains to the Brussels Dialogue. Additionally, as was the case with the name dispute resolution between Macedonia and Greece, the Brussels Dialogue is a high-level elite-driven process, creating significant information gaps between elites and public in both Serbia and Kosovo. Aggravating rhetoric has been used by both sides in order to achieve electoral gains.[9]

In summer 2018, there were talks of a possible land swap between Serbia and Kosovo; exchanging the mainly Serbian-inhabited north of the Ibar River in Kosovo with the mainly Albanian-inhabited Presevo Valley in southern Serbia. Even though initially there was not much vocal opposition to the idea with the exception of German Chancellor Merkel, later on, both the EU and NATO urged the parties to refrain from a redefinition of borders between Kosovo and Serbia, as it would open the Pandora's box in the region, inciting others to demand border changes along ethnically homogenous lines, undermining the territorial integrity of other countries in the region, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Montenegro. It might also jeopardize the security of remaining ethnic minorities in the newly defined borders, potentially causing massive population movements across borders.

On the topic, the latest Progress Report of the European Commission on Serbia notes that Serbia remains engaged in the dialogue, even though it "needs to make further substantial on the implementation of existing agreements and contribute to the establishment of circumstances conducive to" full normalization.[10] It also emphasizes that there are ongoing problems with corruption, organized crime, government control over the media, and the justice system in Serbia. The normalization negotiations were reinitiated by Brussels in July 2018. But since then, the issue of Kosovo's imposition of 100 percent tariffs on imported Serbian goods in response to Serbia's veto of Kosovo's membership into INTERPOL created additional strains in the EU-sponsored talks.[11] Consequently, Serbia walked away from the normalization negotiations.

Adding to the complexity of the sovereignty issue is the existence of five EU member states, Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain, that do not recognize Kosovo's independence. All but Cyprus are NATO members, which presents a potential barrier against Kosovo's NATO future. Kosovo is the only remaining Western Balkan country without a visa liberalization framework with the EU. In July 2018, the European Commission concluded that Kosovo fulfilled all the benchmarks for visa liberalization, however, the European Council has been reluctant to grant visa liberalization to the country before the holding of European Parliament elections in May 2019.

In 2016, there was a Russian coup plot to remove Montenegro's pro-NATO Prime Minister from power. The coup attempt was thwarted by authorities and the country has become a NATO member in 2018. It was a good signal to other countries in the region that integration in the transatlantic infrastructures was still a possibility.

In 2010, Bosnia and Herzegovina received an invitation from NATO to join the Membership Action Plan (MAP). MAP goes beyond the PfP Program and is intended to give advice and support to countries that have a clear goal of joining NATO. Nevertheless, the Alliance, in 2010, declined to activate MAP until all conditions were met. Republika Srpska is against NATO membership of the country, due to fresh memories of the NATO-led air strikes against Serbs in the 1990s. NATO membership as well as the activation of MAP requires a successful resolution of the issue of registration of military property at the state level. As of now, the military property is under the control of Bosnia's two entities, RS and the federation. Given the structure that is established by the Dayton Agreement, it is hard to have a centralized governance structure in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which hampers the prospects of engaging in successful reforms towards Euro-Atlantic integration of the country. While it created a multi-ethnic state, it The Dayton Agreement institutionalized the ethnic divisions within the country. Despite eight-year inactivity and the continued veto from RS, in December 2018, NATO foreign ministers have agreed to activate MAP and invited Bosnia to submit its first annual national program of political, economic, and defense reforms to bring country in line with NATO standards.

The EU's Renewed Interest in the Western Balkans

The EU is still the most important actor in the region. EU's Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) is a comprehensive framework for the countries in the region for their accession into the EU with three main goals: stability of SAP countries and their swift transition to market economies, enhanced regional cooperation, and eventual membership into the EU. The Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA) Funding adopted by the EU in 2006 comprises of EUR 11.5 billion and is intended for assistance for transition and institution-building, regional integration and development, human resources, and rural development. IPA II covers the period between 2014 and 2020 and has a budget of EUR 12 billion.[12] Different than IPA I, it includes regional cooperation initiatives. Moreover, trade agreements between the EU and a number of Western Balkan countries further have a positive impact on the economies of both sides.

Despite a period of strategic vacuum and lack of attention to the region, German Chancellor Angela Merkel initiated a new process, called the Berlin Process, by organizing the Western Balkans Summit in Berlin in 2014, to emphasize that the future of the Balkans remains within the EU. The goals of the Berlin Process were to emphasize the vision of the Western Balkans' EU integration and to improve regional connectivity and cooperation and encourage the region's structural reforms for an eventual EU accession. European leaders frequently emphasized that the Berlin Process is complementary to EU accession, rather than an alternative. Under its framework, a total of five conferences were held: the 2014 Berlin Summit, the 2015 Vienna Summit, the 2016 Paris Summit, the 2017 Trieste Summit, and the 2018 London Summit. At the Vienna Summit in 2015, the European perspective of the region and the resolution of open bilateral issues impacting the European integration process were put on the table. In line with the Berlin Summit, the Vienna Summit continued endorsing connectivity among the peoples of the region, especially among the youth population. At the Paris Summit in 2016, the parties reconfirmed their commitment to abstain from misusing bilateral issues in the EU accession process. The Trieste Summit in 2017 included three regional cooperation initiatives: connecting people with a special emphasis on youth, connecting economies through a Regional Economic

Area, and connecting infrastructure through a Transport Community Treaty.[13] At the London Summit in 2018, the parties emphasized the importance of connectivity, security coordination, regional cooperation, good neighborly relations, and youth and civil society. Western Balkans countries have signed the Joint Declaration on the Principles of Information-Exchange in the Field of Law Enforcement, and endorsed the Roadmap for a Sustainable Solution to Illegal Possession, Misuse and Trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons and Their Ammunition in the Western Balkans document.[14] The London Summit also indicated the UK's continued involvement in the region, even following Brexit. At the London Summit, the European Commission announced the establishment of a new EUR 150 million guarantee instrument, building on the pledge of EUR 190 million to enhance transport connectivity, and also the signature of the Transport Community Treaty Headquarters agreement, the work by Italy on anti-corruption initiative which was launched at the 2017 Trieste Summit.[15]

Although the Berlin Process came to an end with the 2018 London Summit, there is a strong commitment to continuing this process beyond 2018. In May 2017, the German Foreign Minister Sigmar announced the Berlin Plus agenda to be a continuation of the Berlin Process.
In February 2018, the European Commission announced its new and ambitious strategy for the region, titled "A Credible Enlargement Perspective for and Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans," which is also known as the EU Strategy for the Western Balkans. A few months after the announcement of the Strategy document by the European Commission, in May 2018, the European Council adopted the Strategy.[16] The Strategy document set a target date of accession of 2025 for Serbia and Montenegro, providing a more credible prospect for the countries to join the EU. It also reiterated the commitment of the EU for enlargement to include the remaining countries of the Western Balkans. It also outlined six flagship initiatives that the EU would engage in to support the transformation of the region on the rule of law, security and migration cooperation via joint investigation teams and the European Border and Coast Guard, socio-economic development, transport and energy connectivity, digital agenda, reconciliation, and good neighborly relations. The Strategy document envisions the enlargement of the EU's Energy Union to the region, and increased connectivity between the EU and the Western Balkans through lowering roaming charges and rolling out broadband.[17]

The novel idea in the Strategy document is that it foresees the EU to take on a more active role in political dispute resolution across the region and upgrade infrastructure as part of the Berlin Process.[18] Therefore, it is possible to conclude that that the EU appears to have drawn key lessons from its previous enlargement rounds, such as the admission in 2004 of the Republic of Cyprus without a resolution of the conflict between the Turkish and the Greek Cypriots, which practically eliminated all incentives for the Greek Cypriots to reach a compromise. In order to ensure that the prospects of the resolution of bilateral conflicts are not hampered, the Union now asks for the resolution of bilateral or multilateral disputes before the countries in the Western Balkans join the EU. Similarly, it illustrates that the Union now sets higher bars for the current candidate countries and does so earlier on in the process, drawing on the lessons learned from Bulgaria and Romania's poor track record on the rule of law, years after these two countries have been admitted into the EU. The Strategy document emphasizes that the enlargement to the Western Balkans is a "merit-based process," which signifies that even though the EU provides a roadmap for the countries in the region for membership, each country still has to fulfill the Copenhagen criteria and be approved by all members of the EU for membership.[19]

The EU accession prospects have already facilitated economic and political reforms in the Western Balkan candidate and potential candidate countries and improved regional cooperation and integration, as clearly seen in the case of the visa liberalization process. All Western Balkans countries but Kosovo now have visa-free travel programs with the EU, contributing to the exchanges between the two regions. As reported by the European Council 2018, in 2016, the region's total trade with the EU was over EUR 43 billion. EU companies account for over EUR 10 billion of FDI in the region since 2013, making the EU the largest contributor to FDI in the Western Balkans.[20]

Conclusion: Projections for the Future

The Western Balkans "remains the last non-integrated part of Europe. This is unfinished business for the EU and a serious test for its credibility"[21] and an important potential investment in European and transatlantic security. Through its Strategy document in 2018, the EU has signaled that it recognizes the strategic significance of the region, and brought the countries of the region closer to EU membership. Through its continued accession process, NATO similarly signals that the region holds strategic importance for transatlantic allies.

Much like the recent resolution of the name dispute between Greece and Macedonia, a potential normalization of bilateral relations between Kosovo and Serbia would remove a significant barrier against EU accession and provide a notable positive momentum in the transatlantic integration of the region. However, the two sides should be presented with greater incentives to achieve mutual recognition of each other's sovereignty, as spoilers are eager to undermine the dialogue.[22] It is pertinent that the countries in the region work towards resolving their outstanding bilateral disputes and engage in further regional cooperation, as indicated in the Strategy document.

Having said that, the timeframe announced by the European Commission for Western Balkan EU accession is extremely ambitious; and it is far from certain that any of the countries will be ready for accession in 2025. For instance, in June 2018, the European Council did not proceed with the decision to open up accession negotiations with Albania and Macedonia. Moreover, the Berlin Process did not have a proper budgetary allocation for covering the Western Balkans Summit costs or for financing its initiatives. The financing of transport and energy projects came from the national budgets of the Western Balkan countries, the IPA, the International Financial Institutions (IFI), and through bilateral formulas.[23] For a concrete step towards transatlantic integration of the countries in the region, there needs to be a more structured financial mechanism.

Furthermore, the fight against terrorism, enhanced border management, and cooperation to combat human trafficking and organized crime are important areas, where collaboration between transatlantic actors and the Western Balkans may be enhanced for the mutual benefit of all parties involved. While important documents and roadmaps were agreed upon under the framework of the Berlin Process, the implementation of legislation continues to present a challenge for the parties.

Additionally, the accession process must be modified, and become a more active and multi-layered process. The Berlin Process was a great start but needs to be expanded to cover additional issue areas for cooperation, such as greater scrutiny on rule of law or a greater voice for the civil society and people-to-people networks. Similarly, as we are getting ready to see a change in the European Commission in May 2019, it is not clear whether the region will continue to remain a priority.

The political elites in the region need to be convinced to work towards transatlantic integration. It would also be especially difficult for the countries in the region to stay the course towards democratization, while many in the EU go through their own crises of democracy and experience a rise of populism and ultra-nationalism. Political willingness to engage in a more constructive reform process with the transatlantic infrastructures emerges as a key factor in explaining successful transatlantic integration. Developments since the election of a new government in Macedonia appropriately illustrate this point, as the country made great strides in its reform process to bring itself closer towards EU accession.

If the EU and NATO are unwilling or incapable to take on a leading role, other regional actors might be willing to step in to fill the strategic vacuum created by the EU from 2004 to 2014. Some outside powers, such as China, Russia, and a number of Gulf states, among others, have maintained a more active regional presence during this period. As a result of the recent revival of the rivalry between NATO and Russia, Russia pays extra attention to the region in order to preserve its sphere of influence due to the cultural and historical ties it has with Orthodox Slavs and to prevent the Euro-Atlantic, especially NATO integration of the countries in the region. Russian President Putin perceives NATO enlargement as hostile to Russian interests and was quoted as saying that Russia perceives "the policy of NATO expansion as a remnant of the Cold War and an erroneous and destructive military and political strategy."[24]

Due to its close ties with Russia, Serbia, for instance, refuses to implement EU sanctions against Russia in response to the illegal Russian annexation of Crimea. Serbian President Vučić received a state medal from Russia in January 2019, given to Russian civil servants and foreign officials who have contributed to maintaining good relations with Russia. While Serbia tries to strike a fine balance between its EU accession aspirations and traditional links to Russia, it will have to tackle the difficult issue of choosing one side over the other by 2025.

Russia also maintains important ties with Montenegro, Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina due to the existence of Serb minorities in these countries. The failed coup attempt to replace the government in Montenegro with a pro-Russian government in October 2016 had a chilling effect in the transatlantic circles and indicated how far the Russians were willing to go to avert the NATO accession of Montenegro.

Finally, the absence of hot conflict should not be equated with positive peace. There are still many unresolved conflicts and an increasing appetite for irredentism and secessionism. Similarly, Russia has been a key supporter of Republika Srpska's secessionist aspirations. Russian propaganda outlets are trying to take advantage of the situation to engage in campaigns against the EU and NATO. As indicated in the progress reports by the European Commission, media independence is shrinking in all Western Balkan countries, making it difficult for the

citizens of these countries to receive objective information. In order to counter the spoiler role that Russia and other outside powers seek to play in the region, the EU and NATO should improve their coordination on attempts to resolve outstanding issues and reenergize the enlargement process. The two organizations should make explicit declarations about the importance of the integrity of territorial borders.

The Euro-Atlantic integration and enlargement of the EU and NATO are pathways to maintaining stability, peace and establishing democracy in the Western Balkans. Strengthening of the rule of law, democracy, good governance, and economic progress, public administration reform, fight against corruption and organized crime, encouragement of regional connectivity and cooperation are important steps towards a European future. It remains to be seen how decisively and effectively the transatlantic actors and the countries in the Western Balkans will commit to making progress towards that future.

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