POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: FROM A REGION OF WAR TO A REGION OF PEACE?

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INTRODUCTION

According to the Global Peace Index report for 2022, the Western Balkans was considered a highly peaceful region. It has been free of armed conflicts for over twenty years. Although there are still political and ethnic conflicts, it displayed low levels of political violence, and only Kosovo was affected by a violent crisis. Other conflicts, including the highly polarised one in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), are estimated as political disputes or non-violent crises. On the Balkan Peace Index (BPI) scale, Kosovo and Bosnia are ranked as contested peace, Serbia and Montenegro as polarised peace, North Macedonia as stable peace, and Albania and Croatia as consolidated peace.

The issues surrounding Kosovo and Bosnia remain sensitive topics in the region. Both are cases of permanent political crisis since the sovereignty of the former is contested from the outside, while the latter's sovereignty is disputed from the inside. Clashes between the Albanian majority and Serbian minority in Kosovo, the Serbian and Kosovo government, or between Republika Srpska and the central government in BiH, and Croatian and Bosniak representatives in the Federation of BiH, are the leading causes of instability in the region. Despite being long-lasting, these two crises are unlikely to escalate into limited or full-scale wars due to the presence of international peacekeeping forces. These forces can effectively contain any possible spread of violence. However, it's important to note that these conflicts may still lead to occasional violent incidents and that additional measures should be taken to prevent their escalation.

MEASURING POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Political violence in the Western Balkan region is relatively low. Out of the seven cases that BPI covers, only Kosovo falls under the category of medium-intensity political violence, while all other entities belong to the 'low-intensity' group. Kosovo is currently affected by a violent political crisis, while the other entities are dealing with political disputes or non-violent crises.

Other indices, such as the Global Peace Index (GPI), confirm our assessment of political violence intensity in the region. GPI ranks all Western Balkan countries and territories as peaceful. Croatia (15th) belongs to the group of the 15 most peaceful countries in the world (very high state of peace). North Macedonia (36th), Albania (41st), Montenegro (48th), Serbia (53rd), and Bosnia and Herzegovina (58th) are included in the second group of 'high state of peace' countries. The territory of Kosovo (71st) is the only case covered by the Balkan Peace Index that belongs to the third group of 'medium state of peace'.

Most of the countries and territories in this region are relatively peaceful. However, except for Croatia, they have a medium conflict potential, which means that there is a

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possibility for further escalation and that nonviolent conflicts can turn violent. The conflicts in this region are of two types: political (related to political power) and ethnic (related to identity and territory).

Serbia is currently dealing with a secessionist conflict over Kosovo and a conflict between the government and the opposition. North Macedonia and Montenegro are also affected by ethnic conflicts (Macedonians vs Albanians, Montenegrins vs Serbs) and political struggles. Albania, on the other hand, is free of ethnic conflicts but is deeply divided between the ruling regime and the opposition.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has a unique institutional design with two entities, three constitutive peoples, and a consociational democracy. This makes it impossible for one political group to monopolise all the power. Paradoxically, ethnic divisions and the ethnicisation of political issues make Bosnia and Herzegovina more pluralistic than other countries in the region. Nonetheless, that makes inter-ethnic conflicts in Bosnia more frequent and intense than intra-ethnic or non-ethnic (political) conflicts.

The potential for ethnic conflict between Croatia and its Serbian minority is low, as Serbs constitute only 3% of the population, and their representatives are integrated into the Croatian government. However, there is a medium impact of radicalisation and extremism on Croatian society. Since the 1990s and the beginning of the Yugoslav wars, the Serbian minority has faced continuous discrimination, which has led to the normalisation of anti-Serb rhetoric in public discourse in Croatia. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Kosovo also exhibit a medium impact of radicalisation, while Serbia and North Macedonia are considered 'low impact' countries.

POLITICAL VIOLENCE (BPI)
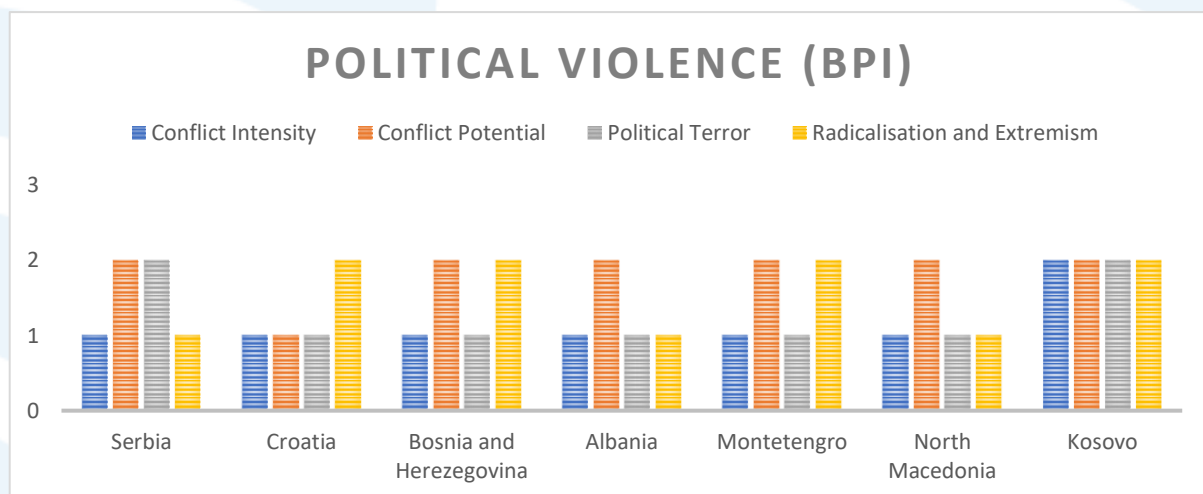
Serbia and Kosovo are the only two cases in the Balkans that experience the medium intensity of political terror and insecurity. The Serbian government is authoritarian, often using tactics of terror and oppression against the opposition, civil society organisations, and media. In contrast, the situation in Kosovo is slightly different, as its government is not as

oppressive towards the political opposition but rather towards the Serbian minority and their representatives. Additionally, Kosovo is the only entity experiencing medium-intensity political violence in the region, mainly due to the secessionist conflict with Serbia and the oppression against the Serbian minority.

CONCLUSION

Although the state of peace in the region is satisfying, the secessionist conflict between Serbia and Kosovo and the internal disputes between ethnonationalist leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina have a significant potential for violence escalation. The former has the potential to lead to further violence between the Kosovo government and the Serb minority, including violence against international peacekeeping forces. Meanwhile, the latter can lead to the disintegration of the Bosnian state and the opening of a full secessionist conflict.

The lack of meaningful dialogue and agreement on crucial issues such as the autonomy of Serbs in Kosovo and the status of Kosovo, as well as a basic consensus on the necessary reforms of the Bosnian state and its entities, will continue to be a constant source of violent conflict potential and a permanent threat to peace in the region.

Recent events, such as the EU's inability to enforce Brussels and Ohrid agreements regarding the Association of Serb municipalities in Kosovo and the de facto recognition of Kosovo by Serbia, have led to further polarisation and escalation of this conflict, including violent incidents and casualties. Similarly, the reinstitution of High Representative 'Bonn powers' in BiH has made state institutions more effective, but, on the other hand, it has further polarised the relations between Bosniak and Croat elites in the Federation of BiH and contributed to the tensions between the central government and Republika Srpska.

Furthermore, simply recognising the independence of Kosovo by Serbia in exchange for the autonomy of the Serb minority will not guarantee a de-escalation of the conflict. This move could potentially trigger clashes between the Serbian government and the opposition, and lead to a spillover of violence in Kosovo.

That is to say that both local and international elites should look for compromise beyond the blueprint solutions and the notions of statehood and sovereignty. It is essential that all parties involved engage in constructive dialogue and find common ground to prevent further escalation of violence and to establish lasting peace in the region.

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