

**REGIONAL AND
INTERNATIONAL
RELATIONS:
REDUCING THE
ETHNOTERRITORIAL
COMPETITION IN THE
WESTERN BALKANS**

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INTRODUCTION

Peace in the six Western Balkans states and territories is often highly dependent on their mutual relations and relations with great powers. The Balkan Peace Index team created the regional and international relations (R&IR) domain to reflect such a state. We define international affairs as interactions among states that occur at a regional or more broad international level. These interactions could span from regional or international intervention (war, pressure, pressure through proxies) to cooperation (common foreign policy goals, participation in regional initiatives and institutions, etc.).

Accordingly, positive peace in this domain is defined as voluntarily accepted relations among the states that would create an “optimal environment for human potential to flourish” (Positive Peace Index 2020) and allow for the creation of common institutions that would nurture harmonious social relations between states and individuals. Negative peace within the international affairs domain means complete and involuntary “influence and impact of external actors in the functioning of a state” (Fragile State Index 2022).

The measured impact can be political, economic, cultural, diplomatic, and military. A state or a territory can have poor, fair, good, or harmonic international relations, measured by three distinct indicators: regional intervention; regional cooperation; and great powers intervention. Regional intervention considers the influence and impact of regional actors on the functioning of a researched entity. Regional cooperation pertains to states' willingness to participate in regional initiatives on the one hand, or their destructive behavior on the other. Great powers intervention considers the influence and impact of great powers on the functioning of a country or the region.

INTREGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

External relations in the WB region in 2023 were overall fair. Croatian, Albanian, Montenegrin, and North Macedonian R&IR are assessed as good, Serbian as fair, while B&H and Kosovo's*¹ as poor. The increase in non-armed interventions mostly influenced the overall comparative assessment. Both regional actors and great powers conducted interventions through proxies and foreign policy pressures. As for regional relations, the WB region is heavily influenced by ethnopolitics. This means the unresolved territorial disputes from the breakup of Yugoslavia are based on either a demand that ethnic and

¹ All references to Kosovo in the Balkan Peace Index shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo. Status of Kosovo database (<https://statusofkosovo.info>) provides detailed information on this issue.

political units should be congruent or on a demand that the ethnic principle should not be the sole criteria for establishing political units. We relate a couple of processes to this issue: the ongoing secession of Kosovo; mutual ethnic antagonisms and irredentism in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Albania, and Kosovo; and disputes about the rights of institutions related to a certain ethnic group. Although Belgrade and Pristina verbally adopted the normalization agreement and its annexes in Ohrid in March, Kosovo remains the single most important peace-related issue in the WB. The potential for escalation into an armed conflict was the highest in September when a group of heavily armed Serbian men from Northern Kosovo clashed with Kosovo police and then barricaded themselves in the Serbian Orthodox Monastery of Banjska, leaving four dead. The BPI 2022 warned about this kind of escalation but continues to warn that each crisis in Kosovo immediately spills over to B&H, where Serbs then demand the same ethnoterritorial principle be applied to Republika Srpska and Kosovo. Therefore, whenever there were requests for Greater Albania or there were increased activities related to Kosovo, the fragility of the situation immediately involved central Serbia, B&H, and Croatia. Whenever there was an ethnically motivated action in one WB country, it triggered the system of communicating vessels that exacerbated the already antagonized ethnic politics.

On the positive side, in 2023 we saw a significant, but temporary release of tensions between Croatia and B&H related to the B&H electoral law. Montenegro also successfully overcame tensions related to the change of government and census implementation, which is why both Montenegro's and Croatia's regional and international relations improved from fair to good. Overall, regional cooperation remains on a medium level, with a duplicated regional cooperation agenda of the Open Balkan initiative and the Berlin Process.

Finally, the war in Ukraine significantly influenced the complicated ethnoterritorial dynamics in the region, as great powers perceived the entire WB through the potential for proxy conflict with each other. There were foreign policy pressures by the EU and the US to impose sanctions against Russia (on Serbia and B&H), and also constant attempts to discredit Serbian (or Serbian proxy) politics in Kosovo, Montenegro, and B&H as being pro-Russian. Also, the ethnic instability was a chance for Russia to influence the politics in the region and reinterpret the WB conflicts by linking them with the conflict in Ukraine through public propaganda actions, mainly in Serbia. If there is a reason for a broader confrontation of great powers, the WB will see an increase in mutual ethnic antagonization and an increase in foreign interventions.

INTRECOMMENDATION ON HOW R&IR COULD HELP REDUCE ETHNOTERRITORIAL COMPETITION

Some obvious but unrealistic policy recommendations for the decision-makers in the WB would be to resolve their ethnoterritorial disputes peacefully while respecting international law, each other's identities, minority rights, and previous agreements. However, the use of ethnic competition as a way out of uncomfortable political situations is often too powerful and too attractive of a tool that local elites use with ease. Grafted onto that fact is the constant lack of understanding by the international community that ethnoterritorial disputes in the WB must never be perceived in isolation from each other if one strives for a durable positive peace. Therefore, we firmly believe that diplomatic and other foreign policy actions in the WB should rely on making sure that incentives for ethnoterritorial competition are reduced to a minimum. To do that, the international community, which is often a euphemism for different peace mediators and diplomats from the EU, USA, and NATO, should:

- never perceive and report about different irredentism in the WB in isolation;
- never threaten political leaders of one ethnonational unit with sanctions for irredentist statements and acts while being silent about the same when those come from political leaders of another unit;
- instead of thus far selective manner, use threats that include different diplomatic or personal sanctions only cumulatively, meaning for all leaders whose statements and acts are openly irredentist;
- discredit popular international news that reports on one case of irredentist acts without reporting on another.

CONCLUSION

Linking different cases of irredentism in the WB into a single perspective would nurture a consistent set of foreign policy incentives. This would lead to the international community reducing the risk of national frustrations that are provoked by the inconsistent treatment of similar cases in Bosnia, North Macedonia, and Albania. It would also add another layer of diplomatic nuance and increase the potential for de-escalation in the ongoing peace process between Belgrade and Pristina. Moreover, if the structural incentives are no longer present, this would reduce the risk of ethnoterritorial competition as a viable political option for WB leaders. Finally, a consistent foreign policy would also reduce the risk of manipulating the Balkans-specific conflicts by interpreting them in the light of the War in Ukraine.

As peace dynamics during the last three decades in the Western Balkans highly depended on Western mediators, it is important to emphasize that there is no reason to think the future will bring about local solutions to local problems. The international community remains the single most important structural element in containing or contributing to the cultural, structural, and direct struggles in the region. Therefore, our policy recommendations are designed to reflect such reality.

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