

Commentary

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The Balkan Peace Index: Three Years of Measuring Peace

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Introduction

The Balkan Peace Index (BPI) was created in 2022 as part of the research project entitled Monitoring and Indexing Peace and Security in the Western Balkans (MIND). It emerged in response to critiques of universal peace measurements that fail to consider local contexts, such as the Global Peace Index (Džuverović 2023; Tepšić 2024). BPI sought to address these theoretical and methodological issues by implementing a ‘local turn’ in peace measurement and indexing (Džuverović 2024). Empirically, it focused on accurately assessing the quality of peace in the Western Balkans, a region still experiencing considerable political instability several decades after the so-called Yugoslav wars (1991–2001). In addition to integrating ‘local voices’, a key innovation of BPI is its use of an algorithmic approach called Decision Expert Model (DEX) (Džuverović et al. 2024b).

BPI assesses peace in seven states and territories: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Kosovo¹, on a peace scale that varies from violent conflict to consolidated peace (Tepšić 2024, 20). This index measures seven domains: political violence, regional and international relations, state capacity, environmental sustainability, fighting crime, political pluralism, and socio-economic development. Furthermore, domains are divided into 21 indicators and 23 sub-indicators (Džuverović et al. 2024b, 3).

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1 This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

This article offers a comparative analysis of BPI for 2022, 2023, and 2024 (Džuverović et al. 2023; Džuverović et al. 2024a; Džuverović et al. 2025), intending to identify potential trends associated with peace and each specific BPI domain in the Western Balkan region.

Three Years of the Balkan Peace Index (2022–2024)

Global indices indicate that the Western Balkan region experiences relatively high levels of peace (Institute for Economics & Peace 2024). However, the 2022, 2023, and 2024 BPI reveals a division within the region between those who have achieved sustainable peace and those more susceptible to violence, posing a threat to regional stability. For instance, in 2022, Croatia and Albania were evaluated as having consolidated peace, North Macedonia as a country with stable peace, Serbia and Montenegro as exhibiting polarised peace, while Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo were assessed as having contested peace.² In 2023, Montenegro improved its position from polarised to stable peace, while Serbia experienced decline from polarised to contested peace. One year later, North Macedonia advanced its position to consolidated peace.

Over a three-year comparative period, Serbia is the only country to have worsened its standing on the peace scale. In contrast, Montenegro and North Macedonia have enhanced their positions, while Albania, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo have maintained consistent peace values throughout the three years (Figure 1). While only Serbia out of seven countries and territories has worsened its peace status, the overall situation in the region may be more troubling than anticipated. A clear internal divide exists: one group, including Albania, Croatia, and North Macedonia—with Montenegro leaning towards them—has strengthened their peace. In contrast, the other group comprised of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Serbia is facing significant challenges with limited prospects for improvement. This disparity between those who have attained a high level of peace and are EU and/or NATO members, and those “left behind”, poses a challenge to regional peace by itself.

2 For the definitions of peace, see The Balkan Peace Index, <https://bpi.mindproject.ac.rs/>.

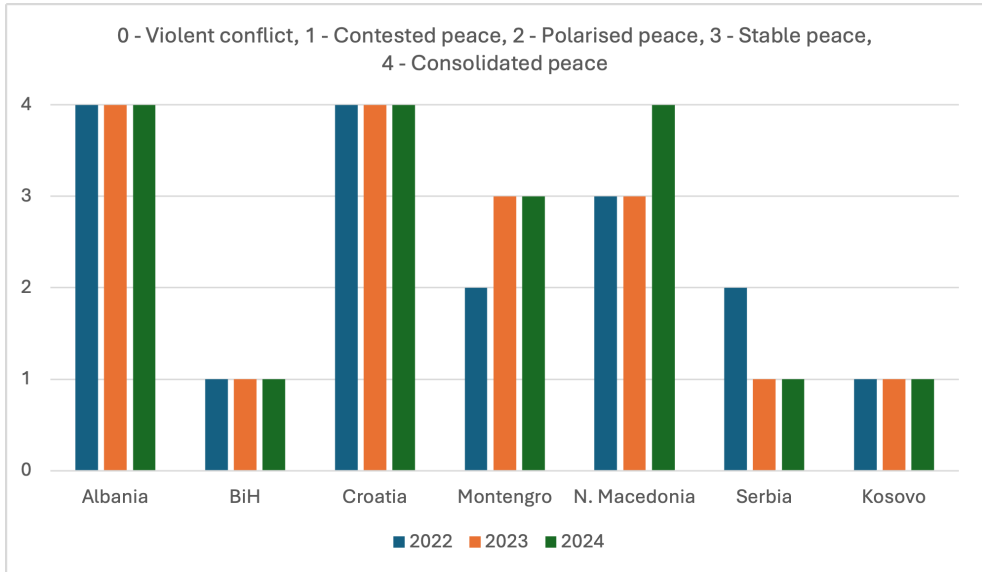


Figure 1: BPI results

Negative Peace Indicators: Political Violence and Fighting Crime

Political violence is essential for understanding peace measurement because any situation marked by significant violence is directly classified as a violent conflict. However, none of the seven states and territories has seen violent conflict in the last three years. In 2022, only Kosovo was deemed to experience medium-intensity political violence, resulting from violent clashes between its government and the Serbian minority, backed by the Serbian government. The remaining countries exhibited low levels of violence. Nonetheless, Croatia was the only case with a low potential for violence, while the other states showed a medium potential attributed to ethnic and/or political divisions.

In 2023, Serbia reached a medium-intensity violence status alongside Kosovo, primarily due to their mutual secessionist conflict. That year, clashes erupted between Serb protesters and international peacekeeping forces in Kosovo, while Serbian paramilitary units organised failed rebel attempt against Kosovo police. One year later, a political crisis marked by medium-level violence persisted between Serbia and Kosovo, compounded by a rise in the secessionist conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which further escalated violence in the region (Figure 2). The internal struggle between the Republic of Srpska and the state government, which has backing from the Office of the High Representative, brought the country to the verge of unilateral secession by late 2024 and early 2025. The potential

secession of the Republic of Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina could have detrimental consequences not only for this country but for the entire region.

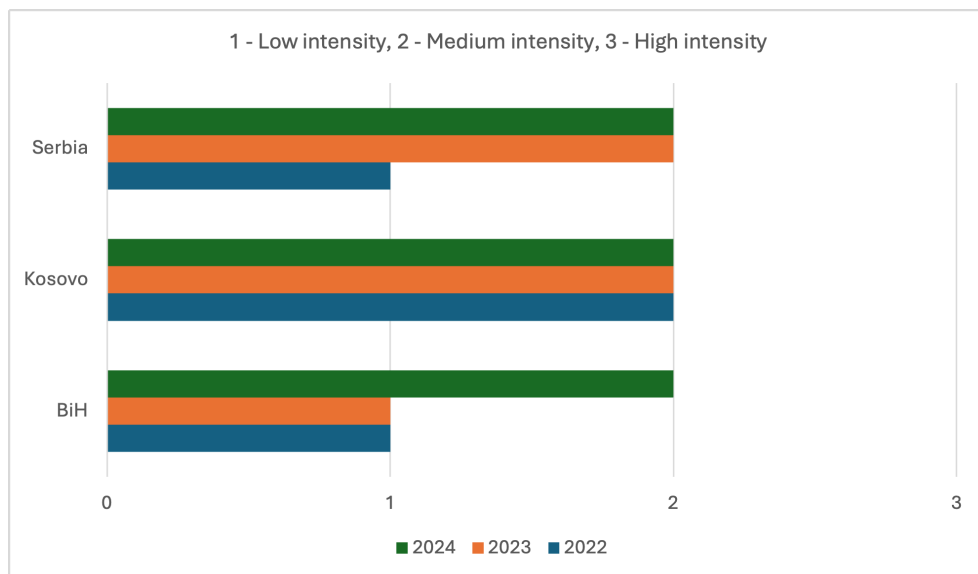


Figure 2: Political violence

Another BPI domain associated with negative peace is the domain labelled as ‘fighting crime’. In 2022, the assessment of crime-fighting efforts and results across Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, and Serbia were deemed generally poor, whereas Albania, Croatia, and North Macedonia obtained moderate scores. While Croatia made significant strides, the region continued to face various crime types, including conventional, organised, and state-sponsored offences. Ongoing challenges such as post-conflict legacies, political instability, interethnic strife, and especially poverty, coupled with a lack of job opportunities, perpetuated a cycle where criminal acts obstruct meaningful progress towards peace and development at local, national, and regional levels. Over the three-year period, there was only one notable change: Montenegro rose from poor to moderate status in 2024, mainly due to improvements in its judicial system.

Overall, the region has not experienced violent conflicts, nor have crime-related activities caused violent outbursts. However, the medium intensity of violence and inadequate crime-fighting results in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Serbia hinder efforts to attain comparable levels of peace throughout the entire region.

Positive Peace (Economic) Indicators: State Capacity and Socio-Economic Development

State capacity and socio-economic development serve as the domains for assessing economic aspects of positive peace in the region. The former includes indicators such as support for vulnerable groups, state provisions, and state control, while the latter encompasses economic outlook, equity, and corruption levels. Regional actors have produced nearly the same outcomes in both areas. Regarding state capacity, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo had low scores in 2022, while Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia earned medium scores. The only change occurred in 2023 when Croatia elevated its status to high state capacity, while the remaining rankings stayed the same for both this year and the next. The sole difference in socio-economic development results is that Albania received a medium rating instead of a low one. All other outcomes mirror those of state capacity (Figure 3).

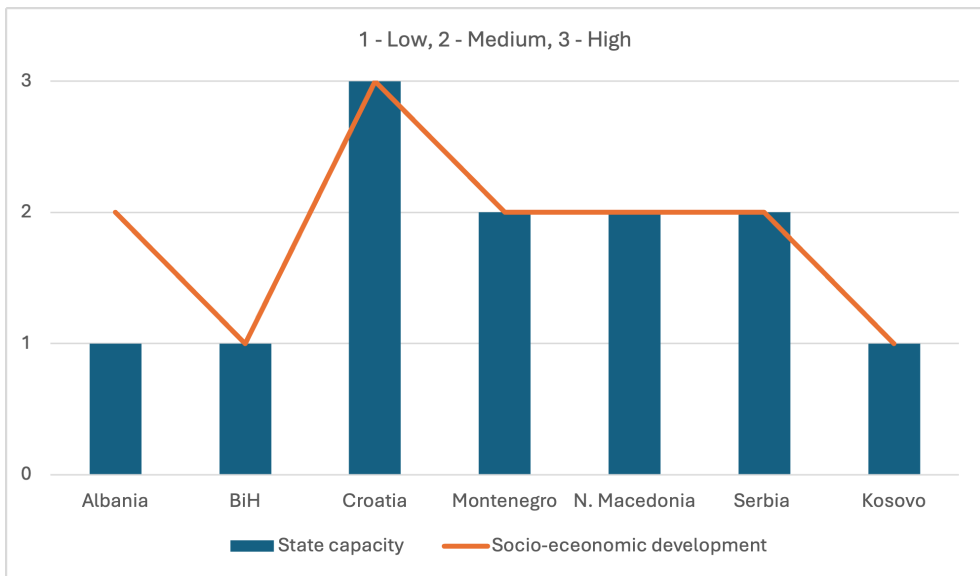


Figure 3: State capacity and socio-economic development (2024)

Croatia obtained the top score in the region largely due to its reforms associated with EU accession and its membership in the Eurozone, along with significant support from EU structural and investment funds. Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia have mirrored Croatia's progress but with limited success. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo recorded the lowest scores, attributable to internal and external disputes regarding statehood, the presence of foreign military forces, and their inability to manage their territories effectively. Meanwhile, Albania's score reflects its struggle with state capacity, primarily due to shortcomings in delivering sufficient healthcare and education to its population. While the region received a medium assessment in both

domains, it reaffirmed the lowest rankings for Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, highlighting their low scores associated with negative peace indicators.

Positive Peace (Political) Indicators: Political Pluralism and Regional and International Relations

The domain of political pluralism—which encompasses civil liberties, elections, and political polarisation as indicators—has produced mixed outcomes in the region. Over the last three years, the evaluated cases varied from problematic to fairly good ratings, with Croatia being a notable exception, earning a good rating for three consecutive years. Overall, political polarisation remains elevated, and political discourse is extremely contentious across the region. Certain countries face a concerning level of pluralism, experiencing further declines in stability, free elections, and freedoms, particularly Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Albania and Kosovo maintained a fairly good level of pluralism throughout the entire period, while Montenegro and North Macedonia experienced fluctuations ranging from problematic to fairly good (Figure 4).

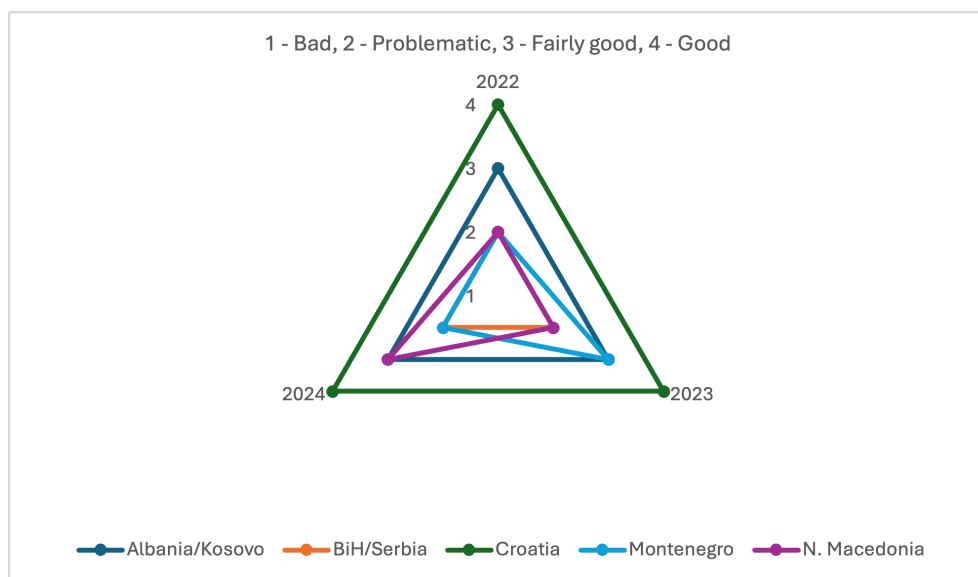


Figure 4: Political pluralism

Regional and international relations, measured through regional cooperation and regional/international interventions, show the fragility of regional politics. The relations ranged from poor to good, sometimes even harmonious, and then back again. Particularly, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo have fared the worst, consistently rated as poor throughout this timeframe. The ongoing dispute over Kosovo's status and the deep-seated divisions within Bosnia and Herzegovina, combined with international

governance, impeded their ability to cooperate and resulted in considerable external interventions.

The outcomes of the political pluralism assessment differ significantly from findings in other areas. Apart from Croatia, which stands out in all aspects, Kosovo attained a notable score in this field. It ranked higher than many regional countries, landing in second place alongside Albania. Conversely, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina recorded the lowest scores, reinforcing their weak positions on the BPI scale. In contrast, trends in regional and international relations mirror those in other areas, placing Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina at the lowest ranks, while Serbia is just slightly higher.

Positive Peace (Environmental) Indicators: Environmental Sustainability

Throughout the entire period, the region showed poor performance in environmental sustainability, both overall and across specific indicators such as natural resource resilience, air quality, and energy system performance. Regional stakeholders largely lack the ability to combat the escalating effects of climate change, which include rising temperatures, frequent heat waves, droughts, floods, landslides, challenges in wastewater treatment, and deforestation. In addition, air quality has plummeted to an unprecedented low due to the presence of inefficient coal industries and individual combustion plants. These factors contribute to the instability of energy systems, while ensuring a sufficient energy supply remains a critical national and geostrategic priority for the countries in the region. However, Croatia and Albania stand out by receiving higher ratings than the rest of the region (Figure 5). It should be noted that Kosovo was excluded from the assessment in this indicator for all three years due to the unavailability of relevant data.

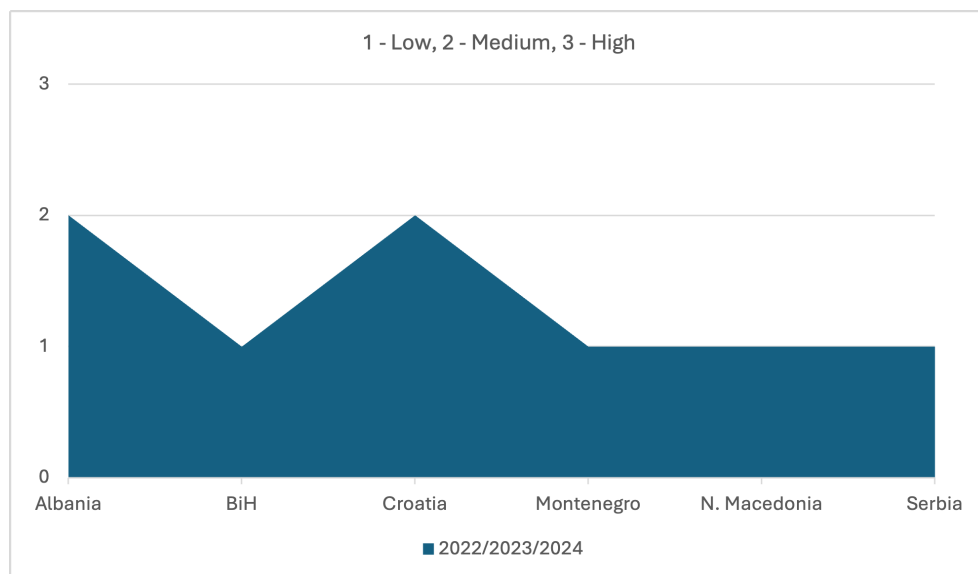


Figure 5: Environmental sustainability

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of BPI results for 2022, 2023, and 2024 reveals a regional stratification, categorising states and territories into two distinct groups based on evaluating seven domains (Figure 6).

The first group, led by Croatia and including Albania and North Macedonia, has succeeded in consolidating peace in their respective countries. Croatia has achieved average to good scores across all seven domains in 2024, while Albania and North Macedonia have performed well in six. Montenegro has produced results comparable to those of Albania and North Macedonia, but has not yet achieved consolidated peace. However, there is a strong tendency for it.

Serbia tops the list of ‘underachievers’ with five out of seven domains rated as poor to average. Also, Kosovo has five out of six domains (with environmental sustainability data lacking) assessed as poor to average, while Bosnia and Herzegovina reports unsatisfactory results in all seven domains. Therefore, an evident trend suggests the region is moving toward a significant polarisation between those at the positive end of the BPI scale and those at the negative end.

The challenges related to Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina continue to be delicate subjects in the region. Both areas face persistent political unrest, with Kosovo’s

sovereignty being externally challenged and Bosnia's facing internal disputes. The underlying instability stems from tensions between the Albanian majority and Serbian minority in Kosovo, along with disagreements involving the Serbian and Kosovo governments, the Republic of Srpska and the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as conflicts between Croatian and Bosniak representatives in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although these conflicts have endured for a long time, they have not escalated to the brink of limited or full-scale war, thanks to the presence of international peacekeeping forces that help curb the potential for violence's spread. Nonetheless, they still hinder the peace consolidation efforts in the region, despite the positive outcomes achieved by the other four countries.

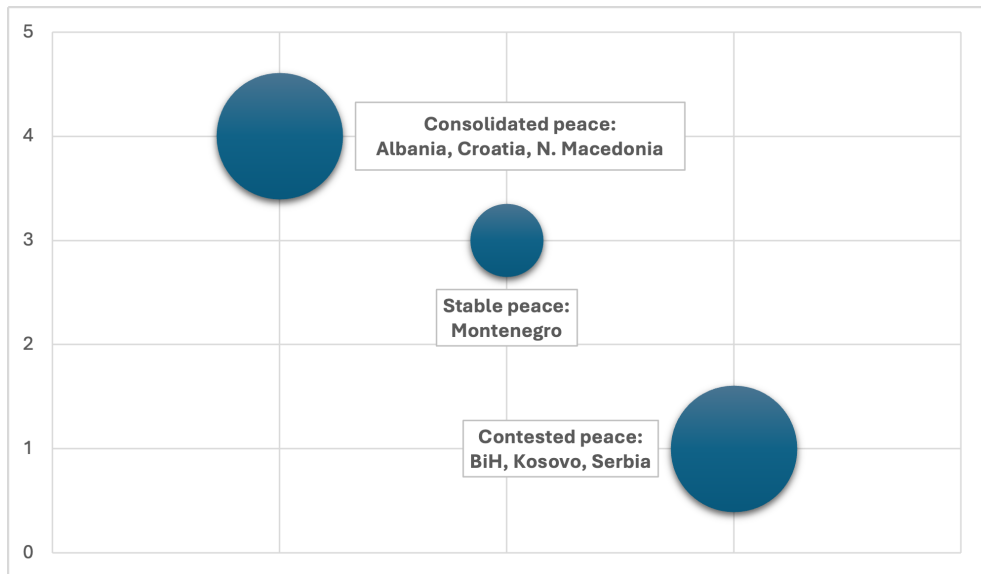


Figure 6: BPI 2024 – regional stratification

Acknowledgments

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