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WESTERN BALKANS 2023 – CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN THE GEOPOLITICAL CROSSFIRE

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Under pressure from the geopolitical conflict with Russia, the European Union is again pursuing strategic goals in the Western Balkans after a prolonged standstill. The French-German plan for Kosovo and Serbia offers the best opportunity in a long time for the EU to engage in constructive conflict management, but it faces great resistance.

Regional fragility

The Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia) represent the merely half-consolidated European Union's front yard in terms of securing peace, democratic principles, and the rule of law. Opportunities for regional cooperation and future integration into the EU have so far been seized only in an inadequate manner. Decisive in this are unsolved conflicts dating back to the wars in the 1990ies. Due to the rise of authoritarian currents in individual Western Balkan states and an EU integration policy that was dominated by bureaucracy rather than strategy for quite some time, hardly any progress has been made in the regional consolidation process since Croatia's accession to the EU in July 2013.

Conflicting interests

The political vacuum in the Western Balkans has been exploited by external actors to strengthen their geopolitical and geo-economic role in South-Eastern Europe. China, Russia and Turkey are particularly engaged in the Balkans, with their activities being partly in competition with the regional engagement of the EU and the USA: In the case of Russia, its

Balkan activities clearly contrast with those of the EU and the USA. Examples for this from the more recent past are Russia's involvement, according to Montenegro's Public Prosecutor's Office, in the failed coup d'état of October 2016 prior to Montenegro's accession to NATO, and the strong criticism of the Prespa Agreement of June 2018 voiced by Russia's Foreign Ministry. The agreement was signed under EU mediation and put an end to the long-standing diplomatic conflict between Athens and Skopje.

The political opposition between the Western actors EU and USA, on the one hand, and Russia, on the other, is particularly apparent in the context of the international support of the peace processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina. There, Russia in conjunction with China in vain tried to prevent the German politician Christian Schmidt from being appointed the new High Representative of the United Nations for

Bosnia and Herzegovina in the UN Security Council in 2021, and supports separatist politicians from the BiH entity Republika Srpska with political means.

Europe's change of paradigm in security policy brought about by Russia's military aggression against Ukraine has significantly increased the Western Balkans' relevance for the West. The EU and the USA face the challenge of preventing, by means of proactive conflict management, the geopolitical crisis in Europe from aggravating conflicts between pro-Western and pro-Russian actors in the Western Balkans, thereby causing new regional instability.

Hot spot North Kosovo

A plan jointly presented by France and Germany in September 2022 encouraged by the European Union and the US government is to "normalise" the conflict-ridden relationship between Belgrade and Prishtina/Priština in 2023. The situation in northern Kosovo, which is predominantly inhabited by Serbs and politically controlled by Belgrade, dangerously escalated at the end of last year. Traffic routes were blocked by Serbs with obstacles and, in parallel, additional checkpoints established by Kosovo's special police force ROSU in the north. Moreover, President Aleksandar Vučić again raised the alert status of Serbia's army to the highest level. The escalation was caused by new regulations in Kosovo applying to licence plates, which resulted in local Serbs withdrawing from the police, law court system and the political institutions as well as in the arrest of a former Serbian officer of the Kosovo police.

The EU and the USA again had to rely on their Special Representatives Miroslav Lajčák and Gabriel Escobar to pacify the conflict through diplomatic activities. Yet, also in view of the conflict with Russia, both international actors do not appear to be willing any longer to tolerate the perpetuated conflict cycles in the

relations between Belgrade and the Kosovo government led by Albin Kurti. The French-German initiative stands a good chance of at least loosening the Gordian knot posed by the Kosovo-Serbian conflict. This assessment is underpinned in particular by the fact that the deal has been supported since December 2022 both by the European Union – including Greece, Romania, Slovakia, Spain and Cyprus, who have not recognised Kosovo as a state so far – and the US government.

French-German initiative regarding Kosovo-Serbia

The French-German proposal, whose main points were published by the Serbian daily newspaper Danas in January, focusses the de-facto recognition of the national and territorial integrity of Serbia/Kosovo by the respective counterpart, which does not need to be effected in the form of an explicit formal recognition. Both sides would recognise national symbols, documents and attributes of their respective neighbour. Should the plan be accepted, Serbia would give up its resistance against Kosovo's admittance into international organisations (including the United Nations). Both sides would commit to support one another in the EU integration process and cooperate economically and in other relevant areas. Comprehensive financial aid from the EU is promised in turn for these concessions. The Western plan to normalise the bilateral relations also provides for all previously entered agreements to be implemented. The Kosovo government is in default in particular in this point, since it has not allowed the Community of Serb Municipalities to be founded on Kosovan territory, as agreed in the Brussels Agreement of April 2013.

Chances and opposition

With the French-German initiative, Western conflict management with regard to Kosovo/Serbia has returned to a policy oriented towards traditional European autonomy solutions for ethnic and territorial

conflicts. Earlier, EU proposals that were launched mostly in 2018/19 and aimed at an exchange of territories and ethnic shifts had sometimes caused in part strong political irritations in the Western Balkans. But this current, fundamentally constructive plan is also expected to meet with considerable resistance. Serbian president Vučić, who until recently categorically refused both the official and the de-facto recognition of Kosovo as a sovereign state, after intensive talks with EU and US representatives at the end of January avows himself to the French-German draft proposal as a basis for putting an end to the conflict. As Vučić said in a parliamentary speech on 2 February, he had been warned by the West that Serbia's rejection of the plan would terminate the country's integration process into the EU and important further Western investments.

For the first time Vučić, who has been accused both by the liberal-democratic and sections of the national-conservative opposition in Serbia of having established an authoritarian system through his clientelistic Serbian Progressive Party, is facing a strong political headwind. Due to the softening up of his policy vis-à-vis Kosovo, the accusations levelled against him by his political opponents range from constitutional breach to high treason. Moreover, North Kosovo's stance towards the French-German initiative is rather negative. There, the Serbian population refuses to be reintegrated into the Kosovo system. More positive signals regarding the recent plan for Kosovo are received from the Serbian enclaves south of the Ibar River, where approx. 50% of the Serbs in Kosovo live.

But even Western mediators are not automatically supported in the context of the French-German initiative on the side of the Kosovo-Albanians. Prime Minister Kurti has presented himself as an extremely tough negotiator so far. The official recognition of the sovereignty of Kosovo, which is not explicitly demanded from Belgrade by the West, is met with criticism in Prishtina/Priština in the same way as

the Western and Serbian demand on the Kosovo government to implement the Serb Community of Municipalities. Many Kosovo-Albanians see this as an attempt by Belgrade to render Kosovo dysfunctional as a state by imitating the Bosnian and Herzegovinian entity Republika Srpska. On the one hand, the USA categorically rules out a Republika Srpska scenario for the Serb Community of Municipalities, which in the Western view is to have only limited autonomy rights and be compatible with the constitution of Kosovo. On the other, the Kosovo government has been clearly signalled by the USA that continued refusal to implement the Community of Municipalities may result in the withdrawal of the political support for Kosovo.

Regional dimension

An improvement of the relations between Belgrade and Prishtina/Priština and Serbia's adoption of a pro-Western course by supporting sanctions against Russia, which has been refused by Belgrade so far, would be highly relevant to the entire region. Such a scenario would probably have a restraining effect on separatist Serbian actors in the BiH entity Republika Srpska. The multi-ethnic and multi-religious state of Bosnia and Herzegovina would then stand a far better chance of using its status as a candidate for accession to the EU, a status that is owed exclusively to the current geopolitical situation, and implement reforms in the area of democracy and the rule of law.

Similarly, the long-standing domestic political conflict in Montenegro, a NATO member and candidate country for EU accession, also has a strong link to Serbia, in addition to its democracy-political and constitutional dimension. Polarising conflicts of identity between pro-Western/national-Montenegrin actors, on the one hand, and national-Serbian/pro-Putin actors, on the other, massively impede Montenegro's negotiation process with the EU. By abandoning pro-Putin positions and adjusting Serbia's policy towards Russia and China

to EU positions, Belgrade might have a de-escalating effect on Montenegro.

A new alignment of Belgrade's foreign policy would also lend credibility to regional initiatives launched by Serbia, such as Open Balkan. So far, especially Kosovan and Bosniak politicians have been highly suspicious of such initiatives due to nationalistic and pro-Putin statements emanating from Belgrade.

Conclusions

- Under pressure from the geopolitical conflict with Putin's Russia, the EU is strategically proactively engaged in the Western Balkans in cooperation with the USA.
 - The reformation of the EU accession process, which henceforth will allow candidate countries gradually to participate in EU programmes already before their formal accession, is an important step in this direction. The same applies to the candidate status of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the start of negotiations for accession with Albania and North Macedonia.
 - From the perspective of security policy, the NATO membership of Albania, Croatia, Montenegro and North Macedonia acts as a protective shield for this part of South-Eastern Europe in a period of geopolitical change.
 - Negotiations on the French-German plan regarding Kosovo/Serbia could usher in a constructive era for solving existing conflicts in the Western Balkans. Yet, the window of opportunity is exceedingly small in 2023 (uncertain outcome of the war in Ukraine, US presidential election campaign as of autumn 2023, etc.) Western conflict management might also fail because of internal political conflicts in the Western Balkan states concerned.
- In this situation of regional and geopolitical fragility, military and political safety nets in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo remain absolutely indispensable. This particularly refers to the continuation of the Austrian-backed military peace support operations EUFOR ALTHEA in Bosnia and Herzegovina (overall strength approx. 1,300, with approx. 300 of them being Austrian service personnel) and KFOR in Kosovo (overall strength approx. 3,800, with approx. 300 of them Austrian service personnel).

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