

# Executive Summary

2 October 2023



## Balkans on fire again? Political and security dilemma in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo and Western responses

Online Panel Discussion in cooperation with the Ministry of Defence

This analysis is based on an online discussion which took place on October 2, 2023, and was organized by the Austrian Institute for International Affairs - oiip in cooperation with the Ministry of Defence of Republic of Austria.

Donika Emini, Stefan Lehne, Sabina Cudic, and Adnan Cerimagic discussed the September 24, 2023 armed clashes between Serbian paramilitary groups and Kosovo police in the country's north and their implications for the political and security situation in the Western Balkans. The panel was moderated by Vedran Dzihic of oiip, and greeted with a welcome address by Wolfgang Petritsch, president of oiip.

Welcome:

**Wolfgang Petritsch**

President, Austrian Institute for International Affairs (oiip)

Panel:

**Adi Cerimagic**

Senior Analyst, European Stability Initiative (ESI)

**Donika Emini**

Executive Director, CiviKos Platform, member of BiEPAG

**Sabina Cudic**

Member, House of Representatives of Bosnia and Herzegovina, member of PACE

**Stefan Lehne**

Senior Fellow at Carnegie Europe

Moderation:

**Vedran Dzihic**

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## Executive Summary

September 24, 2023 marked a day of violent escalation not seen in Kosovo and the Western Balkans in many years. The attack casts major doubts on existing perceptions of the security situation on the ground and suggests that Serbian ambitions for Kosovo's North may differ significantly from the solution of normalization proposed by the European Union. However, unless a direct link of the violent attack to the Serbian government is established, further sanctions and isolation of Serbia are unlikely. As for Kosovo, EU and US positions in recent months have been critical of the attempts to install minority mayors and Kosovo police without cooperation from local Serbs. This perception may now change, as the top priority should be to decrease the likelihood of further violence. The strengthening of KFOR is welcome from this perspective.

The promise of stability and control over the situation made by the Serbian leadership has now proven to be false. As long as Vucic is increasingly centralizing power domestically and sidelining opposition voices, conditions for such escalation as in Banjska will continue to persist. In Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik is another source of instability. Dodik attempts to strengthen his alliance with other authoritarians like Vladimir Putin, Viktor Orban, and now potentially Robert Fico in Slovakia. Western diplomacy must recognize that addressing the key source of instability should take priority over appeasing autocrats through transactionalism, i.e., making concessions and deals in exchange for promises of a short-term pragmatic stability. The dominant power dynamics in the Western Balkans, especially in Serbia and Republika Srpska, stemming from this practice have been termed "stabilitocracy", as authoritarian leaders are emboldened to continue their strategy of grabbing more power with impunity. The outcome of appeasement and transactionalism has been far from the desired stability, resulting instead in the rekindling of violence and escalation, as the recent Banjska attack has shown.

Likewise, European leadership in sending a clearer message condemning not only the violence itself, but the conditions of authoritarian practices that have facilitated it, appears more necessary than ever. Creating incentives by bringing enlargement negotiations back on the political agenda would have the potential to rekindle trust in the process, with positive implications also for stability and security on the ground.

## Key Takeaways

- The Banjska armed clash of September 24, 2023 is one of the most severe incidents of recent years and exposes the fragility of the security situation in Kosovo's north.

- Even without direct involvement of the Serbian government, the fostering of Serb nationalist paramilitary groups has played a significant role.
- The introduction of a national day of mourning in Serbia following events in Kosovo suggests that Belgrade has an important stake in the Banjska incident.
- Strengthening KFOR presence is a welcome step towards preventing further violence.
- Autocratic tendencies in both Serbia and Republika Srpska of Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as manifold ties to Russia and other European authoritarian leaders like Orbán, stand in sharp opposition to European values and the rhetoric commitment to the EU Enlargement.
- Ahead of new elections in Serbia we can expect Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić to continue balancing between the West (USA and the EU) on one hand side and Russia and China on the other. Vučić's visit to China planned for mid-October 2023 confirms this.
- Western diplomacy and especially the European Union's approach of keeping a blind eye on seemingly related instances of escalation must give way to resolute action of addressing Belgrade as a major source of instability.
- Seeing Kosovo-Serbia relations in isolation from the larger region is mistaken because patterns concerning a turn towards authoritarian consolidation can be observed also in Republika Srpska of Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- Reopening talks of enlargement and giving a clear perspective for Western Balkan countries for accession to the EU could offer the very much needed positive vision for the future and thus strengthen not only stability on the ground but also democracy.

**Deutsche Zusammenfassung:**

Der bewaffnete Überfall der serbischen Paramilitärs von Banjska im Norden des Kosovo am 24. September 2023 bedeutet eine Eskalation, wie wir sie im Kosovo und auf dem Westbalkan seit vielen Jahren nicht mehr gesehen haben. Der Angriff lässt große Zweifel an der bestehenden westlichen Wahrnehmung der Sicherheitslage vor Ort aufkommen und legt nahe, dass die serbischen Ambitionen für den Norden des Kosovo erheblich von der von der EU und den USA vorgeschlagenen Lösung der Normalisierung der Beziehungen zwischen Serbien und dem Kosovo abweichen. Sofern jedoch kein direkter Zusammenhang zwischen dem Angriff und der serbischen Regierung hergestellt werden kann, sind Sanktionen gegen Serbien und die Isolierung Serbiens unwahrscheinlich. Was den Kosovo angeht, so positionierten sich die EU und die USA in den letzten Monaten sehr kritisch zur Politik der Regierung in Prishtina, die kosovo-albanischen Bürgermeister im Norden des Kosovo zu installieren und auf starke polizeiliche Präsenz im Norden zu setzen. Diese Politik des Westens wird wohl nach dem Angriff in Banjska adaptiert werden müssen. Die oberste Priorität wird aber nun die Stärkung des Sicherheitsumfelds sein. Aus dieser Perspektive ist die Stärkung der KFOR zu begrüßen. Das von der serbischen Führung stets gemachte Versprechen von regionaler Stabilität und entsprechender Kooperation mit dem Westen hat sich mit den Ereignissen in Banjska als trügerisch erwiesen. Solange Vucic die Macht im Inland zunehmend zentralisiert und Oppositionsstimmen ins Abseits drängt, werden die Bedingungen für eine Eskalation wie in Banjska weiterhin bestehen bleiben.

In der Republika Srpska (RS) ist Milorad Dodik eine weitere Quelle der Instabilität. Dodik versucht, sein Bündnis mit anderen autoritären Leadern wie Wladimir Putin, Viktor Orban und nun möglicherweise Robert Fico in der Slowakei zu stärken. Die westliche Diplomatie muss erkennen, dass die Bekämpfung der Hauptursache der Instabilität Vorrang vor der Beschwichtigung von Autokraten durch „transaktionale Politik“ haben sollte, bei der für den Zweck kurzfristigen Stabilität Zugeständnisse an Politiker wie Vucic oder Dodik gemacht werden. Die vorherrschende Machtdynamik im Westbalkan, insbesondere in Serbien und der RS, die aus dieser Praxis resultiert, wird als „Stabilitokratie“ bezeichnet. Während man sich in Bezug auf den Westen als pragmatisch gibt, setzen die autoritär agierenden Politiker innenpolitisch ihre Strategie der Machtakkumulation und des Drucks auf Opposition und freie Medien. Das Ergebnis von Appeasement und Transaktionalismus durch den Westen trägt aber letztendlich nicht zur gewünschten Stabilität, sondern führt vielmehr zu einem erneuten Aufflammen von Gewalt und Eskalation, wie der jüngste Anschlag in Banjska gezeigt hat.

Generell erscheint es in der zweiten Jahreshälfte 2023 notwendiger denn je, dass die EU eine Führungsrolle übernimmt und eine klarere Botschaft sendet, in der nicht nur die Gewalt selbst, sondern auch die durch die lokalen Machtstrukturen geschaffenen Rahmenbedingungen, die sie ermöglicht haben, verurteilt werden. Die Schaffung von Anreizen durch eine neue aktive EU-

Erweiterungspolitik hätte das Potenzial, das Vertrauen in die EU und demokratische Reformen zu stärken, was sich auch positiv auf die Stabilität und Sicherheit vor Ort auswirken würde.

### Die wichtigsten Erkenntnisse:

- Der bewaffnete Überfall serbischer Paramilitärs in Banjska vom 24. September 2023 ist einer der schwersten Vorfälle der letzten Jahre und zeigt deutlich, wie fragil die Sicherheitslage im Norden des Kosovo ist.
- Auch ohne den Nachweis einer direkten Beteiligung Serbiens an diesem Angriff ist klar, dass die Förderung serbisch-nationalistischer paramilitärischer Gruppen durch Belgrad eine bedeutende Rolle gespielt hat und der Angriff ohne Wissen und Beteiligung Belgrads kaum hätte stattfinden können.
- Die Ausrufung eines nationalen Trauertages in Serbien nach den Ereignissen im Kosovo lässt darauf schließen, dass Belgrad eine zentrale Rolle beim Vorfall in Banjska spielt.
- Die Stärkung der KFOR-Präsenz ist ein willkommener Schritt zur Verhinderung weiterer Gewaltausbrüche im Kosovo.
- Autokratische Tendenzen sowohl in Serbien als auch in der RS in Bosnien und Herzegowina sowie vielfältige Verbindungen zu Russland und anderen europäischen autoritären Führern wie Orban stehen in scharfem Widerspruch zu europäischen Werten und dem rhetorischen Bekenntnis zur EU-Erweiterung.
- Im Vorfeld der Neuwahlen in Serbien (Dezember 2023) können wir davon ausgehen, dass der serbische Präsident Aleksandar Vucic weiterhin auf die Schaukelpolitik zwischen dem Westen (USA und EU) auf der einen Seite und Russland und China auf der anderen Seite setzen wird. Der für Mitte Oktober 2023 geplante Besuch von Aleksandar Vucic in China bestätigt dies.
- Der bislang dominante Ansatz der Europäischen Union und der westlichen Diplomatie, bei scheinbar zusammenhängenden Eskalationsfällen ein Auge zuzudrücken, müssen einem entschlossenen Vorgehen gegen Belgrad als Hauptquelle der regionalen Instabilität weichen.
- Die Beziehungen zwischen Kosovo und Serbien isoliert von der größeren Region zu betrachten, ist falsch, da auch in der RS in Bosnien und Herzegowina Muster einer Wende hin zu autoritärer Konsolidierung der Herrschaft zu beobachten ist.
- Die Wiederaufnahme der Erweiterungsgespräche und die Schaffung einer klaren Perspektive für den Beitritt der Westbalkan-Staaten zur EU könnten die dringend benötigte positive Vision für die Zukunft bieten und so nicht nur die Stabilität vor Ort, sondern auch die Demokratie stärken.

## Background

Over a period of more than twelve months, inter-state tensions between Serbia and Kosovo had been intensifying. During the month of May, armed confrontations occurred between Kosovo Serbs and security forces, in which soldiers from the NATO-led KFOR were also injured. More recently, the Kosovo government reported an unprecedented concentration of Serbian troops in close proximity to the Kosovo border. The region of northern Kosovo with a Serb majority presents a particular challenge for the Kosovo authorities, as they are difficult to control. The precarious security situation on the ground is exacerbated by the administrative arrangement which is reflective of both parties' aims of exercising control over the region. Tensions rose after the political representatives of the Serb minority resigned from all state institutions at the end of 2022 and the mayors in most Serb-majority communities resigned as well. In April, a broad majority of Kosovo Serbs boycotted the local elections conducted in four Serb dominated municipalities in the North. In response, a small proportion of eligible voters in northern Kosovo elected mainly Kosovo Albanian mayors to those positions, which led to riots to which the Kosovo police responded with coercive measures.

The European Union, the United States and NATO appealed to Kosovo and Serbia to reduce tensions. As a consequence of the appointment of ethnic Albanian mayors in the north of Kosovo as well as of Kosovar police actions in the North, the United States imposed measures on Kosovo for the first time (Xharra 2023). Also the EU reacted to these incidents with measures against Kosovo, limiting for example diplomatic exchange. Josep Borrell and other EU and US officials criticized Kurti for failing to comply with the Association of Municipalities project for northern Kosovo, which would see more autonomy for Kosovo Serbs who constitute the majority in that region. At the same time and even following incident in Banjska, no sanctions against Belgrade were introduced until today.

In March this year in Ohrid in North Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo agreed on a path to normalization of relations under the brokerage and supervision of the EU. Even though Serbian president Vucic refused to sign the Agreement, EU declared it as binding for both sides. Previously, Western diplomats appreciated Belgrade's seemingly lukewarm but steady tilt towards a pro-Ukraine stance, with Serbia supplying arms to Ukraine and attempting to reduce dependency on Russian energy (Dettmer 2023). Western diplomacy often favored the Serbian stance, for example by legitimizing its hegemonic regional foreign policy as with the Open Balkan initiative, without paying much attention and reacting to the increasingly worrisome chain of events of the recent years. However, voices in the European Parliament, especially after the Banjska attack, are getting stronger to lift the Kosovo sanctions and to take a tougher stance on Serbia (Taylor 2023). Overall, as the prospect for a compromise foreseeing

Belgrade's recognition or toleration of Kosovo's independence in exchange for some form of autonomy for Kosovo Serbs was already weak, now it seems more out of reach than ever (Bechev 2023).

Finally, Russian influence in Serbia and the region must be taken into account. With its public opinion favoring a pro-Russian stance on the invasion of Ukraine, most Serbs believe that it is the West to blame for the war, not Russia. President Vucic knows this and attempts to hold on to power by pleasing pro-Russian sentiments at home by demonizing the West, and framing Kosovo as its malign pawn. Russian propaganda and investments in the region, as well as Serbia's dependence on its energy, have facilitated Russia's positioning as a protective ally (Dzihic 2023). Naturally, Putin has stood by Vucic's side in recent years whenever Western diplomatic efforts attempted to condemn Serbian autocratization and its attempts at exercising power over Kosovo. Media outlets owned or fostered by Moscow help to spread Russian soft power in Serbia chiefly through disinformation, not shying away from meddling in internal political matters (Vuksanovic 2022). However, the exercise of Russian hard power in the form of economic and political influence has become more difficult to maintain as Western sanctions and diplomatic pressure make reliance on Russian money increasingly unprofitable for the Serbian economy. However, the opportunistic strategy of instrumentalizing anti-Western sentiments at home to stay in power employed by Vucic is likely to persist and allow for Russian influence to take effect in some form (Samorukov 2023).

### **Immediate implications**

As all participants in the panel pointed out, the 24 September incident marks the most serious escalation in Kosovo-Serbia relations of recent years. An armed Serb commando force attacked a Kosovo police checkpoint in the village of Banjska near Mitrovica in which one policeman and three attackers were killed. The Kosovo government classified this incident as an act of terrorism and immediately accused the Serbian government of being responsible for the attack, providing evidence of the presence of large amounts of Serbia-made weapons at the paramilitary group's disposal and of direct links of attackers to Belgrade. The attack in Banjska has caused considerable concern in the international community, especially in connection with reports of movements of troops by Serbia on the Kosovo border, as reported by the United States. As a reaction, the UK increased its KFOR contingent from 200 to 400 troops, aiming at strengthening the mission's UN mandate of ensuring a safe and secure environment. The role of Milan Radoičić, the former vice president of the Serbian List (Srpska Lista) party, known as "the boss of the north", who apparently was leading the paramilitary group in Banjska, is interpreted differently by Pristina and Belgrade. While Kosovo officials claim his tight link to Vučić, who in their view is the one who ordered the Banjska attack, the Serbian leadership



denies these allegations, while Radoičić took the sole responsibility for the attack himself and was temporarily arrested in Serbia but immediately released.

One of the main efforts right now, as seen by Stefan Lehne, should be to prevent further violence. Strengthening the presence of KFOR and other security forces like the Kosovo police is desirable from this view. Parties involved must take a resolute stance against actions that use violence for the political goal of pushing Kosovo institutions out of the north. Judicial punishment for the perpetrators of violence and their sanctioning should likewise be enforced.

Kosovo officials and some analysts like Donika Emini draw comparisons between Serbia's actions with Russia's illegal takeover of Ukrainian Crimea in 2014, in which similar hybrid tactics were used, including paramilitary groups claiming to be "on vacation" and not following Moscow's orders. If there is a connection between the events in Banjska and the Serbian leadership, it would mean that methods of hybrid aggression are part of the strategy to achieve political goals of influence in northern Kosovo (Dzihic 2023). From this view, the Banjska events can be seen as a preparation by the Serbian government for covert operations and hybrid measures aiming at the absolute control of the North and even possible annexation of this part of Kosovo. The Alliance of Serbian Municipalities project, which is still in negotiations with Western leaders and part of the negotiating process, is seen by Kosovo government as the Trojan Horse designed to effectively allow Belgrade to take over control of the North. Appeasement of Vucic, so the opinion of all panelists, has emboldened him to take actions in this direction.

## **Rethinking Diplomatic Approach**

Western diplomatic circles have traditionally been split in hawks and doves in relation to Serbia, i.e., those giving credibility to Kosovo's warnings, and those believing that Serbia has no escalatory intentions and exercises hegemonic and stabilizing power over the region. From the first point of view, the Banjska clashes were to be expected and constitute an escalation and a warning to all parties involved to not easily buy into Belgrade's security and stability promises. The other view maintains that the incident is part of a longer series of destabilizing events of the last few years, but does not pose a threat to overall stability. In the future, much will depend on whose position and interpretation of the events in the Western Balkans prevails over the other, and which side gains momentum in not only rhetoric dominance, but also in concrete measures shaping policy decisions in the region.

The Banjska attack, however, taints Vucic's perception by Western leaders as a reliable partner, since the network of paramilitary Serb nationalist groups in northern Kosovo might have seemingly become

partly uncontrollable by Belgrade. The incident shows, says Donika Emini, that Vucic's narrative of being able to assure stability has been false, and that Belgrade's true aims for the region remain shrouded in controversy. Coupled with the Serbian leader's increasing centralization of power and sidelining of opposition in recent years, it is difficult to rule out that Vucic was not aware of the paramilitary group's activities in Kosovo. Ambitions for at least partial control of the north of the country, an idea popular with many Serb nationalists, seemingly still enjoys popularity in Belgrade. Still, unless a direct link of the September 24 events to Vucic is established, Serbia's diplomatic isolation or the toughening of sanctions by the West is unlikely.

Western diplomatic stance towards Kosovo's position may also change, as Stefan Lehne argues. Kosovo's endeavor in recent months has been marked by a push towards introducing Kosovo police control and local mayors in the north to counteract destabilization caused by paramilitary activity. This approach had earned criticism from Western leaders and a disbelief in Kosovo's warnings about a possibility of violence. But this view may shift after the clashes in Banjska, as the total lack of police would likely have enabled paramilitary activity even more. Likewise, sanctions on Kosovo demanding the withdrawal of special units of Kosovo police from administrative buildings in the North (following clashes between Kosovars and Serbs) are now unlikely to have effect, and MEPs are already calling to lift them.

## **Enlargement, European Integration**

What is clear is that the EU needs to intensify efforts in addressing the challenges in the Western Balkans, as both Adi Cerimagic and Sabina Cudic emphasized. It appears that for too long the EU has closed itself off to the growing problems, relying on false promises of short-term stability at the expense of sustainable conflict resolution. Now, when the situation seems more deadlocked than ever, the reaction from EU's Special Representative for the region Miroslav Lajčák left much to be desired. It is necessary for the EU to react more proactively to events like Banjska, assuming more responsibility in containing Serbia. Although Vucic denies that he knew about the plan to attack the Kosovo police, if it turns out that he was involved in the plans, the EU would have to act clearly and sanction Serbia. However, the link to the Serbian government was suggested by Serbia itself as it introduced a day of mourning for the Serbian paramilitary soldiers who were killed in the Banjska attack on Kosovo police. Therefore, leaders like the Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, among others, are demanding the EU Commission to take a more resolute stance on Serbia.

Adi Cerimagic underlined that the EU Enlargement process in the Western Balkans has pretty much fallen asleep over the course of last few years. The new possibility that Ukraine and Republic of

Moldova could join the EU opens a new window of opportunity for the Western Balkans. The EU could send a strong signal to the region with opening negotiations with new countries and a genuine and strategically oriented interest towards enlargement underpinned with new financial offers to states that engage in reforms. There is the need to raise awareness and trust in the process also at the level of public perception, reminding that both countries – Serbia and Kosovo – but also other countries in the region would equally benefit from the freedoms offered by potential membership in the Union.

For Western countries, sending clear political messages towards Kosovo and Serbia would be a stabilizing factor in itself, especially in the case of the acceptance of Kosovo's application for the Council of Europe and EU membership. As the EU's credibility in the Western Balkans regarding enlargement is deeply strained, it requires serious action and strong signals from the EU that commitment to reforms should and will lead to concrete steps towards accession. A complete change towards such steps is unlikely in the near future, however, and thus further instability is to be expected.

### **Implications for Bosnia and Herzegovina**

The situation is similar in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where a "rhetorical crisis" invoked by Milorad Dodik has been observed in recent years and especially after Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine. However, even this type of escalation by words has led to a real negative impact on the country, reducing amounts of foreign investment, exacerbating the emigration of young people, and deteriorating overall stability. Current developments of centralization of power in Republika Srpska, as Sabina Cudic argues, mirror Serbia and are adding fuel to the fire of the overall unstable situation in the Western Balkans, showing Dodik's desperate attempt to hold on to power and limit dissent by curtailing media and NGO sector freedoms. The tactic of exacerbating existing tensions to then propose the solution to Western officials is routinely employed by Dodik, while EU and US diplomats hope that he may genuinely cooperate. With the leadership of Republika Srpska embracing authoritarians like Viktor Orban and now Robert Fico, prospects for unanimous EU action in counteracting the hijacking of political power is unlikely. This goes hand in hand with an overt turn to Russia as a protective force, Bosnians Serb politicians have routinely visited Moscow during the last 1.5 years, including a visit to Moscow in October 2023.

The containment of the Banjska and other related events of the recent years to the realm of Pristina-Belgrade tensions in the perception of Western leaders is erroneous and should be given up in favor of looking at the big picture of the Western Balkans, and addressing the main source of instability - Serbia. Consequences of Western passivity in this regard have real impact on the ground in that they encourage and embolden nationalists and secessionists. The Banjska attack must be therefore seen in

the larger Western Balkans context which is marked by Serbia-led escalation measures also in Bosnia and Herzegovina. To ensure stability and a way forward in a common European future in the region it is necessary to address Belgrade's attempts to achieve geopolitical leverage by hybrid means seriously. The consequence should thus be to increase pressure on Dodik and Vucic as a means of deterrence from conducting further destabilizing actions.

Lastly, strong actions on the part of the European Union are necessary to open the door for European integration negotiations as the governing coalition has already adopted key legislation. This would, as Adi Cerimagic stressed, ultimately help to counteract and contain authoritarian voices in Republika Srpska, which pose a threat to reform endeavors domestically, and Bosnia and Herzegovina's diplomatic efforts internationally.

## Conclusion

There can be no surprise about the latest events in the Western Balkans, as several developments have already indicated an aggravation in the region. Serbia is showing strong autocratic tendencies under Vucic. And also in the immediate past, there have been repeated outbreaks of conflict in northern Kosovo. Even if Serbia is not striving for a full-scale war as that would likely isolate Vucic's regime and bring it possibly to an end, fostering paramilitary activities may be part of a larger strategy of creating conditions of instability and chaos in northern Kosovo, including through violence, to increase Belgrade's leverage in the region. Thus, the situation on the ground must be closely followed and the absolute aim must be to contain further possibilities of violence. Kosovo police in the north needs to be endorsed to ensure security, as it is the first responder by mandate, but does not exercise effective control over parts of the region, such as forests. One possibility could be the integration of Serbs into the police, and an administration that is more in line with the composition of the population. Paramilitary forces in Serbia are a concern and have been a long-standing issue in the Western Balkans. The danger is that increasing destabilizing actions by paramilitary groups in northern Kosovo may spiral out of control, jeopardizing possibilities for reconciliation and integration of local Serbs into local government structures. For Western diplomacy, it is ultimately a matter of focusing on long-term stability and having a clear agenda for all countries in the Western Balkans.

## Recommendations

**Western diplomatic efforts in the Western Balkans should be reconsidered** in the light of recent events which have revealed serious gaps in security and stability on the ground. The strategy of accommodating Belgrade's ambitions and tolerating its turn towards autocratization in exchange for promises of short-term pragmatism has proven to be emboldening the activities of nationalists and paramilitary groups even further. **The strengthening of KFOR** is a step in the right direction in ensuring security in northern Kosovo, but the long-term Western policy should prioritize the creation of conditions in which the use of violence as an instrument for political goals would become untenable.

Many expectations lie now on the diplomatic effort of the European Union to assume leadership and a **more proactive stance** in not only containing conflict potential, but also **bringing the perspective of enlargement back** to the table for both countries and the whole region. This would send a strong positive and normative signal, creating incentives for reforms and political change in the entire region, while also helping to isolate authoritarian voices who attempt to jeopardize further association with the EU. The absence of a prospect for membership, on the other hand, opens up the space for authoritarian positions to assume more power and influence, instrumentalizing prevailing public resentment and disbelief in change through populism. Only resolute and concrete steps can rekindle enthusiasm for enlargement and democratization.

## Recommendations for Austrian Foreign and Security Policy

In light of the sobering realization of persisting challenges to security and peace in Kosovo and the region, it is important to **keep strong Austrian KFOR presence** in Kosovo.

Austria should also **keep its critical military presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina** (EUFOR) and work closely with Western allies to secure peace and stability.

Austrian diplomacy should take a **more proactive stance and try to influence ongoing European debates surrounding the prospect of EU enlargement** by lobbying intensively for reshuffle of the EU-enlargement towards being pro-active and offering concrete integration steps as soon as possible (incl. integration in the European single market).

Austria should use its leverage to **work more closely with civil society and citizens in both Serbia and Kosovo** with an aim at opening new lines of dialogue and countering the current hyperproduction of animosities. Should Austria take over the presidency of the Berlin process in 2024 it could **create spaces for meetings and exchange between young Kosovo Albanians and Serbs**.

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## Other sources

Latest news:

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/meps-call-to-lift-eu-sanctions-on-kosovo-tough-action-on-serbia-after-terrorist-attack/>

Context:

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/first-effects-of-eu-sanctions-sting-kosovo/>

<https://en.pks.rs/open-balkan>

BiH context

<https://www.kas.de/en/country-reports/detail/-/content/formation-of-governments-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina-through-new-coalitions>

Ohrid Agreement

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/kosovo-and-serbia-stop-short-of-signing-agreement-normalising-ties/>

Good summary article

[https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2023-10/kosovo-serbien-konflikt-spannungen-haeufigste-fragen-faq?utm\\_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F](https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2023-10/kosovo-serbien-konflikt-spannungen-haeufigste-fragen-faq?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F)