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Western Balkans' Horizon 2023 – New
uncertainties in a changed geopolitical setting

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“The age of uncertainty” has recently become the most used description for the time we live in. The aggression of Russia against Ukraine and the war approaching now its second year have changed the globe. Global uncertainties and huge geopolitical changes we witness are mirrored in European semi-peripheral regions like the Western Balkans.

The Western Balkans has been in a limbo for a while with no major progress towards the EU and democracy in general. Instead of steady democratization in the region we witnessed a gradual autocratization, most prominently in Serbia, and constant rise of crisis and tensions.

Serbia vs. Prishtina: Towards a final compromise in 2023?

One major crisis that will leave its mark on the year 2023 will be the one between Kosovo and Serbia. After a rapid deterioration of the crisis in the last months and weeks of 2022 the tensions will most probably remain high. Rhetorical hostilities, barricades, heated public reactions on both sides paired with the withdrawal of Serbs from Kosovar institutions have only deepened the old hostilities and contributed to the feeling of general insecurity and mistrust between Albanians and Serbs. The animosities will not stop from one day to another, that is for sure. The more important question for 2023 is whether we will see more tensions or even an escalation of conflict or rather a new attempt for reaching final compromise between Belgrade and Prishtina.

What has been looming on the horizon for a while is the re-birth of the dangerous political idea of partitioning Kosovo: A malign Russian influence and aggressive rhetoric from Belgrade paired with local and Belgrade-coordinated acts of refusal towards Prishtina on the ground in the Northern part of Kosovo might materialize in a stronger quest for territorial changes of the region and partition of Kosovo. Opening again this debate which we witnessed in 2018 would equal opening the Pandora box in the whole region and would be met with harsh resistance in Kosovo internally. On the other side there is an urgent need for Prishtina to be more pro-active and try not only to approach the Serbian community more offensively, but also to present rather creative and forward-looking actions plans from their side how to meet demands of Serbs for certain type of autonomy within the Republic of Kosovo.

While the EU and the West have been rather chaotic and not on top of their negotiating skills in the conflict between Prishtina and Belgrade, they managed to agree on a common stance. What has been put on the table is known as the French-German proposal to resolve the conflict between Serbia and Kosovo. In order to avoid chaos, intensified conflicts and even violence in Kosovo in 2023, and all other bad scenarios like partition the Western actors – the EU, USA and the NATO – understood that they need to make a much more concentrated, powerful and diplomatically creative effort to work towards a permanent agreement

between Belgrade and Prishtina based on the advanced and nuanced version of the French-German proposal. The new diplomatic offensive of the West in the first days and weeks of 2023 seems to start delivering. Five high-ranked foreign diplomats from the EU and the USA – Emmanuel Bonne, Jens Plettner, Francesco Talo, Gabriel Escobar and Miroslav Lajcak – traveled mid January 2023 to Belgrade and Pristina and presented the ten-point French-German plan for a new final compromise between Serbia and Kosovo. The German-Franco proposal stipulates among other things that two countries would not formally recognize each other but would mutually accept the existence of each other's statehood within the current borders. Serbia, according to this plan, would stop blocking Kosovo's applications to become a member of international organizations. Serbian president Vucic indicated in a press conference broadcasted by all major Serbian TV-outlets on January 23rd that the pressure from the West is too high and refusal of dialogue with Prishtina would cost Belgrade too much, thus Serbia needs to embrace the new plan. Even if this sounds as a first step towards a possible compromise, too many questions remain open: Is Vucic committing to the proposal just to buy time and put pressure on Albin Kurti to make the first move? Will Albin Kurti be ready to implement the Associations of Serbian Municipalities as agreed in 2013? Will the Serbian and Albanian public be supportive of the new deal? And finally, given the persistent pro-Russian stances of the Serbian public and its

high skepticism towards the EU the question remains whether Vucic will be ready to “sacrify” Kosovo for a very vague promise of the EU integration?

Will Bosnia and Herzegovina's new government prove that better politics is possible?

Another development to watch in 2023 remains Bosnia and Herzegovina. While the pragmatic and programmatic coalition agreement between the newly forged political coalition in the Federation of Bosnia and Hercegovina (incl. Socialdemocrats and more liberal parties), the so called “Osmorka” and their partners at the state level, the nationalist parties of Bosnian Croats, HDZ and of Bosnian Serbs, SNSD, promised to set course to something new and better in the Bosnian political realm, the first days of 2023 including harsh tonality and celebrations of the unconstitutional day of the Republika Srpska on January 9th had a sobering effect and reminded us of all the years of crisis and tensions behind us. The big question ahead will be whether the new coalition will start being operative at least in some policy fields relevant for the population. New political “partners” at the state level also need to embrace reforms from the EU agenda to prove to international partners that they are committed and serious in their efforts. In any case, the EU and the USA would need to much better coordinate their approaches to Bosnia and speak to local actors with one voice. They would also need to strengthen their efforts both in the field of security but also in the field of

countering the malign Russian influence and disinformation in Bosnia, which has seen a rise since the beginning of the war in Ukraine and will continue to rise in 2023. The West needs to underline again and again, with words and deeds more importantly, that Bosnia remains in the Western sphere. 2023 would be the year to demonstrate this more vigorously.

Future of the EU Enlargement in the Western Balkans

A general development of a decisive importance for the region in 2023 would be the further course of the EU enlargement in the region. The promise of the EU-integration for years was the single most effective tool for reforms and democratization in the region. While the EU-integration remains the single most powerful vision for the future, we cannot neglect the fact that recently EU-enlargement policy was rather ineffective, inconclusive, and erratic.

With regard to the EU-enlargement there is one particular place we need to watch in 2023 – North Macedonia. Will the Macedonian government manage to regain the momentum, introduce changes of constitution needed for the start of negotiations with the EU, and finally start negotiations about the membership with the EU? It will be only by taking these steps forward that the current government will be able to convince the population that the EU integration is a real and only chance for the country to move forward? A lot of trust in the process was lost in last years, due to French

and then Bulgarian blockade of EU negotiations for North Macedonia. In 2023 the nationalist opposition VMRO-DPMNE waits for its chance and will continue mobilizing population with old nationalist slogans. How the situation in North Macedonia in 2023 plays out internally would largely determine the fate of the EU enlargement in the region.

Yet, it is not only the situation in North Macedonia that will define the course of the EU-enlargement in the Western Balkans. In Serbia the Vucic regime would in 2023 need to provide a final answer if it wants to remain a serious EU candidate country or continue faking EU efforts while playing all other geopolitical cards available. The time to decide between Russia and the EU has come. In general, the EU would need to reinforce its enlargement policy, sort out internal lines of conflicts between the Enlargement commissioner and other stakeholders within the EU, improve the performance of the Commission's Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations

(DG NEAR) efficiency and come up with some meaningful and consistent offer of sectoral integration and the overall vision of the EU Enlargement to finally regain momentum again. Of course, a more intensified communication of the EU including a more intensive effort to make new alliances with pro-European and democratic forces and citizens in the region is very much needed. Given the continuous war in Ukraine the West and the EU have to prove in 2023 that the

Western and in this case the European and liberal-democratic option is the only viable vision for the region.