

DGAP POLICY BRIEF

CHANGING REGIONAL ORDERS

The Decline of Russian Power in the Western Balkans

Fragmentation Amid Intensified Geopolitical Competition



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Due to its war on Ukraine, Russia has less bandwidth to interfere in the Western Balkans, yet it preserves its leverage over post-conflict settlements in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. While the EU remains the political and economic center of gravity for the small countries in this region, some leaders continue to pursue strong bilateral relationships with a changed United States, China, and other external powers. Even if EU integration is still the main declared aspiration of these countries, their foreign policy will involve more transactional diplomacy with third powers at the expense of liberal norms and rule of law standards.

- Since 2022, Moscow's role and influence have significantly diminished in the Western Balkans and, to a lesser extent, in Serbia.
- Amid increasing geopolitical complexity, Balkan leaders will pursue their own agendas with various major powers simultaneously. Their strategic calculus will be influenced by how the war on Ukraine evolves.
- The revival of EU enlargement policy as a geopolitical tool allowed Montenegro and Albania to accelerate their EU accessions, but it also generated new regional tensions and challenges that need to be managed – now without the United States.
- Given the changing US role, the EU and its key member states need to develop a tailor-made accession path and future political resolution mechanism for both Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo.

US dissent with European powers over the future of the Office of the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina and the visit of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to Serbia indicate the geopolitical relevance of the Western Balkans (WB). On its end, due to its war against Ukraine, Russia has lost its role as regional hegemon in Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia, as well as its capacity to shape and influence the dynamics in the WB. Now, Moscow must not only bargain with China, Türkiye, and Iran for influence across these regions, but also with other powers such as the United States and European Union. Emerging regional powers and the rise of authoritarian

Russia continues to act as a spoiler to the Euro-Atlantic integration of the WB, its role and influence there have clearly declined since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. It continues to focus its influence on Serbia, the largest country in the region, with which it has strong historical and religious ties. But even Belgrade has been gradually reducing its military and security cooperation with Russia.

Three interconnected policy tracks highlight Russia's decreased influence in the WB:

- Except for Serbia, all countries in this region joined the EU sanctions that severely restricted diplomatic and economic relations with Russia.
- Under pressure from Brussels and Washington, Balkan economies such as Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and North Macedonia that are dependent on Russian oil and gas – an important source of Russia's influence in the region – began to diversify their energy supplies. For example, US sanctions on NIS, the largest Serbian oil company, which were imposed because of its majority Russian ownership, forced Belgrade to start negotiating a sale of the Russian-held stakes to Hungary's energy giant MOL in early 2026.
- The war on Ukraine offered some leeway to Serbia's President Aleksandar Vucic for improving his bargaining position with Western powers. He could leverage the provision of military supplies to Ukraine to limit diplomatic pressure to curtail Belgrade's special ties with Russia.

Rather than being treated as an autonomous regional actor, Serbia will have to accommodate external bargaining

governance will challenge the EU's influence, creating insecurity, transactional relations, and the absence of any functioning order. In this volatile context – as local actors pursue ad hoc alliances and engage in transactional foreign policy, thus changing the logic of interaction in the region and with third powers – Germany and the EU will need to pay strategic attention to the WB. Security risks may arise as competition between the liberal normative framework and the transactional, authoritarian model begins to shape a new era in the region's development.

The WB, which were not part of the Soviet Union's foreign policy reach, are geographically far from Russia's immediate neighborhood. Therefore, Moscow never had a grand policy design for this region. Although

Yet, two critical hotspots of Russian influence remain – both intertwined with Serbia's hegemonic legacy after the Yugoslav Wars and the international liberal interventionist era:

First, Serbia's continued rejection of Kosovo's independence through meddling in the country's internal affairs and challenging its integration in international institutions.¹ In this context, Russia's veto in the United Nations Security Council helps Serbia to prevent Kosovo's further integration into the international system and limit its diplomatic recognition.²

Second, thanks to its role in the UN Security Council, Russia also holds a veto over affairs in Bosnia,

1 "Toward Normal Relations between Kosovo and Serbia," International Crisis Group Commentary, January 30, 2024:

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/cmt/europe-central-asia/kosovo/toward-normal-relations-between-kosovo-and-serbia>.

2 "Northern Kosovo: Asserting Sovereignty amid Divided Loyalties," International Crisis Group Report No. 269, April 2, 2024:

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/rpt/europe-central-asia/balkans/kosovo/269-northern-kosovo-asserting-sovereignty-amid-divided-loyalties>.

particularly over the continuation of the EU-led peace-keeping mission EUFOR.³ It also continues to dispute the role of the High Representative and demands closure of his office (OHR). Further, Russia employs soft power to fuel ethnic division via media outlets like RT and Sputnik that help share Russian disinformation in Bosnia's Serb entity and Serbia itself.⁴

EU ENLARGEMENT RE-DYNAMIZED: A NEW REALITY

Before Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine, EU enlargement was stagnating. A lack of political and societal consensus for further enlargement within member states, plus a lack of reforms by candidate countries, has eroded the political credibility of the whole process. In the context of the war on Ukraine, the EU's approach has shifted from a slow, bureaucratic regulatory expansion to an urgent geopolitical strategy for continental security. And Ukraine's rapid formal application forced EU leaders to offer membership prospects for the so-called Eastern Trio – Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia – that, in turn, also revived accession or pre-accession talks with the countries of the WB.

While each WB country is different, all of them are in the EU's geographical, economic, and political space. As a key power in the region, the EU will continue to make it more difficult for other external powers to reshape the logic of integration. However, in the last two years, the differing pace of the EU trajectories of individual WB countries has complicated the outlook for the region in important ways. The EU has, for example, retreated from its long-standing attempt to preserve regional equilibrium under which the WB countries would advance toward the EU as a group. It aimed to avoid creating new political cleavages by preserving regional balance and accommodating sensitivities, particularly in relation to Serbia, the region's largest state. Further, the EU's growing emphasis on merit-based differentiation has accelerated the progress of the most advanced candidates,

creating a widening gap between Montenegro and Albania on the one side and Serbia and the rest of the region on the other.⁵ While Montenegro is making good progress toward closing membership negotiations by early 2027, Albania received a positive Interim Benchmark Report on the Rule of Law, paving the way to closing its first negotiating chapters.⁶ This deepening divide has already generated new bilateral and regional tensions, including with Croatia as EU member state and Serbia. Belgrade – and to a lesser extent Zagreb – may seek to slow and spoil progress for Montenegro.⁷ In Bosnia, under the current accession methodology, the EU holds little to no influence to shape the logic of the country's decision-makers. Lastly, momentum toward the EU did not develop a mechanism to overcome bilateral disputes and blockages, such as the deeply entrenched Bulgaria-North Macedonia stalemate.⁸

THE REGIONAL DYNAMICS OF RIVALRY, SECURITY, AND COOPERATION

The Western Balkans (WB) remain an important security concern for Europe rather than a settled or peripheral issue. Although the prospects for interstate conflict or state collapse have significantly declined in the last decade, the security environment in the region continues to be shaped by unresolved conflicts, persistent rivalries, and the instrumentalization of ethnic issues. At the same time, all WB countries have a shared interest in joining the European Union.

In this context, the post-conflict settlements agreed in Bosnia and northern Kosovo, which froze ethnic divisions rather than resolving underlying sovereignty and governance disputes, still shape affairs between neighbors – even as their governments have developed regional economic and cross-border cooperation. In the framework of externally driven European initiatives such as the so-called Berlin Process, some notable progress in trade and labor mobility agreements has been achieved in recent years.

3 See: European Union Force in BiH: Operation ALTHEA: <https://www.euforbih.org/index.php/en/>.

4 Věra Stojarová and Jiří Němec, "From Russia with Love: The Night Wolves in Republika Srpska," *Sage Journals* Vol. 40, Issue 1, February 23, 2026: <https://doi.org/10.1177/08883254261423528>.

5 Wouter Zweers et al., "Albania's EU Accession Sprint: Balancing Momentum, Reform, and EU Scrutiny," *Clingendael Policy Brief*, December 3, 2025: <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/albanias-eu-accession-sprint-balancing-momentum-reform-and-eu-scrutiny>; "Albania closes its first three negotiating chapters," *European Western Balkans*, July 15, 2026: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2026/07/15/albania-closes-its-first-three-negotiating-chapters/>.

6 Nikola Xaviereff, "EU Enlargement in Transition, Montenegro at the Frontline," *Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI)*, April 21, 2026: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/eu-enlargement-in-transition-montenegro-at-the-frontline-235862>.

7 Bronwyn Jones, "EU billions expose a two-speed Western Balkans," *Euractiv*, July 27, 2026: <https://www.euractiv.com/news/eu-billions-expose-a-two-speed-western-balkans/>.

8 Jan Nowinowski, "Waiting for Godot: Prospects for resolving the Bulgaria-North Macedonia dispute," *OSW Commentary*, March 26, 2026: <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2026-03-26/waiting-godot-prospects-resolving-bulgaria-north-macedonia>.

Serbia still sees itself as the victim of the Yugoslav Wars. Since the breakup of Yugoslavia, the government in Belgrade has maintained a negative attitude to the West while attracting Russian and Chinese support for Serbia's assumed territorial integrity and regional dominance. Serbia's participation in the bestowal of military honors upon deceased war criminal Ratko Mladic underlines that Belgrade deals with the past by living in the past. Its economy, however, is still strongly geared toward and dependent upon the EU's single market. Belgrade continues to view the protection of ethnic Serb minorities in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Montenegro as its primary regional task. Under the illiberal rule of populist President Aleksandar Vucic, Serbia continues to provide political and economic support to separatist structures in Bosnia's Republika Srpska and rejects recognizing Kosovo's independence.⁹ Similarly, while Serbia formally acknowledges Montenegro's statehood, identity issues still shape Belgrade's view of a country where tensions between Serbs and Montenegrins – who comprise 32.93 percent and 41.12 percent of its population, respectively – still persist and are subject to religious and symbolic manipulation by Belgrade's government.¹⁰

The number of ethnic Albanians who live in North Macedonia and Montenegro make Albania the other dominant WB nation with sizable ethnic populations across its borders. However, given its distinct history – it has no legacy related to the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s and already became a NATO member in 2009 – Albania has played a more stabilizing role in the region. Under its longtime socialist leader Edi Rama, who has served as prime minister for over a decade, Tirana recently decided to make EU integration its main strategic goal. Out of kinship with Kosovo Albanians, Tirana advocates for Kosovo's independence, yet it maintains dialogue with Serbia on regional issues. All this makes Albania an important regional power with considerable influence in several neighboring countries. Importantly, however, it has decided to concentrate its political focus on state-building and seize the EU enlargement opportunity.¹¹

Latent conflict potential is posed by new political alliances such as defense cooperation among Croatia, Kosovo, and Albania; Serbia's substantial defense expenditure; and the fragility of Bosnia and Kosovo, especially in the context of how Russia's war on Ukraine war may end.¹² Yet, renewed great power competition will increasingly constrain local actors. Rather than being treated as an autonomous regional actor, Serbia will have to accommodate external bargaining, particularly where its actions are perceived to undermine European interests or regional stability.¹³ The recent visit of Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to Belgrade is an indicator of President Vucic's attempt to reassure his European partners of Serbia's relevance and partial alignment with Brussels – despite it resulting in a **smaller spectrum in which to hedge** its moves among Western, Russian, and Chinese interests.¹⁴

GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION: THE CHANGING ROLES OF THE UNITED STATES AND CHINA

During the post-Cold War period, the Western Balkans were among the main arenas of transatlantic cooperation in which Washington provided hard security and Europe projected normative and institutional power through EU integration. Now, due to growing differences between the approach of Washington and European capitals to international security and the decline of the Western liberal order, this consensus is under strain. International institutions such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and Council of Europe no longer enjoy the same degree of political consensus and support, thus undermining the support of international law and multilateral cooperation. All things equal, the countries of the WB will have to navigate the world through a series of **ad hoc agreements** in which national interests and **transnational bilateral relationships** take precedence over liberal and multilateral normative frameworks.¹⁵

9 "Relaunching the Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue," International Crisis Group Report No. 262, January 25, 2021: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/rpt/europe-central-asia/kosovo/262-relaunching-kosovo-serbia-dialogue>.

10 Montenegro Statistical Office, "The 2023 Census of Population, Households, and Dwellings": <https://www.monstat.org/eng/page.php?id=1758> (accessed April 3, 2026).

11 Wouter Zweers et al., "Albania's EU Accession Sprint: Balancing Momentum, Reform, and EU Scrutiny," Clingendael Policy Brief, December 2025: https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2025-12/PB_Albanias_EU_Accession_Sprint.pdf.

12 Republic of Albania Ministry of Defence, "Albania, Croatia, and Kosovo sign joint declaration on Defense Cooperation," March 22, 2025: <https://www.mod.gov.al/eng/newsroom/1805-albania-croatia-and-kosovo-sign-joint-declaration-on-defence-cooperation>.

13 Maja Bjelos, "Zelensky's Belgrade Visit Tests Serbia's EU-Russia Balancing Act," *Balkan Insight*, August 10, 2026: <https://balkaninsight.com/2026/08/10/zelenskys-belgrade-visit-tests-serbias-eu-russia-balancing-act/bi/>.

14 Una Hajdari, "Zelenskyy's Balkan fumble," *Politico*, August 12, 2026: <https://www.politico.eu/article/volodymyr-zelenskyy-s-great-balkan-fumble-serbia/>.

15 Mark Carney and Alexander Stubb, "Prepare for a world of ad hoc coalitions," *The Economist*, July 8, 2026: <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2026/07/08/prepare-for-a-world-of-ad-hoc-coalitions>.

The United States: An American About-Face

The United States played a decisive role in ending the Yugoslav Wars and had long provided bipartisan support to the Euro-Atlantic integration of the WB; now, it is reorienting its policy toward business-driven transactionalism. Its current strategy is to secure mutually beneficial partnerships with the Balkan countries that it once regarded as recipients of liberal peacebuilding, connecting geopolitical interests with investment opportunities such as energy deals, building transport corridors, and outsourcing AI data centers.¹⁶ Such activities are largely undertaken by individuals and organizations close to the family of US President Donald Trump who rely on America's hegemonic presence and leadership to secure access to the region's permeable governance and weak institutional systems. Washington's politics of quick gains and private interests means that the United States is effectively replacing its liberal footprint with **illiberal transactionalism**, risking the opening of more space for internal and external actors with revisionist tendencies.

This shift in the US approach to the region has already changed facts on the ground in Bosnia. There, Republika Srpska leader Milorad Dodik, a long-standing opponent of Bosnia's multiethnic state and a target of US sanctions, succeeded in exploiting the Trump administration's transactional approach for personal advantage.¹⁷ Given the ideological shift in Washington, Dodik recast the OHR as a colonial vestige of the liberal interventionist era. Drawing on MAGA rhetoric and the growing rift between Washington and Europe, he used illicit funds to lobby for the lifting of US sanctions and to pressure then-High Representative Christian Schmidt to resign – in effect **defunctionalizing the OHR**.¹⁸ In return, US companies were promised access to potential infrastructure development in Bosnia related to building the Southern Interconnection Gas Pipeline and gaining a monopoly over future gas deliveries.

For Serbia and Albania, their initial embrace of President Trump has generated problems. Although the leaders of both countries sought to offer investment opportunities for political and economic gain, they have failed to make inroads into Trump's inner circle

where the real power lies – for example, with the family of his son-in-law, Jared Kushner. In aiming to present the Kushner family with business opportunities through murky legal schemes and untransparent models, both Albania's Prime Minister Rama and Serbia's President Vucic wanted to make use of their weak institutional surroundings to shape a new political relationship with Washington. For its part, Kosovo went even further: then-President Vjosa Osmani signed the charter of Trump's Board of Peace on behalf of Kosovo without consultation with the government to secure US support of her re-election.¹⁹ In the end, it didn't help.

*Washington's
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For a region long dependent on US diplomatic leadership, security guarantees, and support to democratic reforms, Washington's rejection of liberalism in favor of commercial deals – for private family interest but masked under conservative neo-national politics – will challenge the EU's liberal institutional transformation efforts. Along with the serious damage done to the transatlantic alliance, it is a part of a larger shift representing the end of the liberal peacebuilding era. US national interest in the Western Balkans no longer

16 US Department of State, "Report to Congress on United States Policy to Promote Regional Stability and Prosperity in the Western Balkans," May 23, 2026: https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/United_States_Policy_to_Promote_Regional_Stability-Accessible-HRC1399683.pdf.

17 Jasmin Mujanović, "Investment, Not Aid: A Chance to Reset US-Bosnia Relations?," *Just Security*, February 12, 2026: <https://www.justsecurity.org/131240/investment-not-aid-chance-reset-us-bosnia-relations/>; Ana Otasevic, "US changes its tune on the Balkans," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, June 29, 2026: <https://mondediplo.com/2026/07/03/balkans>.

18 Julian Borger, "Europe and US on collision course over next high representative for Bosnia," *The Guardian*, June 30, 2026: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jun/30/europe-us-high-representative-for-bosnia>.

19 Nen Si, "Vjosa Osmani Supports U.S. Strikes Against Iran: 'The Hour of Freedom Has Come,'" *euronews Albania*, March 3, 2026: <https://euronews.al/en/vjosa-osmani-supports-u-s-strikes-against-iran-the-hour-of-freedom-has-come/>.

supports EU accession policy and related reforms. This will further impact the political calculus of WB leaders who have largely embraced President Trump's transactional approach in pursuit of political backing and investment. Such an approach will benefit the region's semi-authoritarian leaders and weaken civil society, independent media, and the impact of the EU's norms and integration process. Critically, as the United States transforms into a more transactional and less predictable diplomatic partner, the outstanding territorial and ethnic issues across the WB may also become subject to bargain, which risks **questions of ethno-territorial engineering** being raised.

China: A Business Partner with One Pillar Country

As a relatively new player in the WB, China has leverage over the region through its opposition to the international independence status of Kosovo and undermining of the OHR in Bosnia through its role in the UN Security Council related to the continuation of the EUFOR peacekeeping mission.²⁰ Unlike Russia, it is not directly disturbing the EU integration process, but it attempts to embed itself in the region's economies to open a backdoor for the access of Chinese companies to the bloc's single market.

In its intention to weaken the dominance of Western liberal governance and decrease the global role of the United States, China – like Russia – needs Serbia as its crucial vector in the WB. Driven by its interest in accessing European markets, Beijing has sought to complement its Belt and Road Initiative with the so-called Middle Corridor, a trade and logistics network across strategically relevant countries in the WB.²¹ China began developing an ecosystem of such large-scale infrastructure projects, including rail- and highways, energy, and telecommunications, by embedding itself in transport lines. It linked Chinese-owned Greek ports to the EU internal market via Serbia and North Macedonia, where it had initial success in winning tenders on a large highway project, with a view to constructing a high-speed rail corridor linking Athens to Belgrade and Budapest.

Serbia, the most developed market among potential future entrants to the EU's single market, is China's central pillar in the region. In 2024, the two countries signed a special partnership agreement, including a Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Current bilateral trade exceeds USD 11 billion, making China Serbia's largest non-EU trading partner.²² This relationship is further complemented by military cooperation, including the sale of Chinese FK-3 air defense systems. In contradiction to its own self-declared strategic goal of EU membership, Serbia also deepened cooperation on security and intelligence sharing with China under the Global Security Initiative and widely deployed Huawei digital surveillance technology across the country.²³ However, in 2024, the tragic collapse of a canopy at the Novi Sad train station – part of the Chinese-funded Belgrade to Budapest railway project – killed 16 people. The event increased anti-Chinese business sentiment across the region and spurred the investigation of multiple corruption schemes within Chinese networks.²⁴ Still, Beijing remains the only stable vector in the balancing act that is Serbia's foreign policy, as confirmed by new investment of more than EUR 1 billion that was signed during President Vucic's visit there in May 2026.

All in all, China – like Russia and, increasingly, Türkiye, which is becoming a key investment power – competes for presence in the WB. In doing so, it undermines the liberal normative framework that, impacted by the withdrawal of the United States, is no longer the only model in town. Yes, Erdogan's Türkiye holds no revisionist aspiration toward the region. Yet, the transactional nature of third power interaction and the spillover of Russia's war on Ukraine without a US liberal backstop may cause territorial revisionism to arise in the WB, especially in Bosnia and Kosovo as the two most fragile countries. With the international liberal model in retreat, the Western Balkans may need to accept a novel form of peace that is coercive and deinstitutionalized.

20 Tatyana Kekić, "Serbia secures nearly €1 bn in new Chinese investments," *Intellinews*, May 27, 2026: <https://www.intellinews.com/serbia-secures-nearly-1bn-in-new-chinese-investments-445185/>.

21 Valbona Zeneli, "Chinese Influence in the Western Balkans and Its Impact on the Region's European Union Integration Process," Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), June 23, 2023: <https://www.iwm.at/blog/chinese-influence-in-the-western-balkans-and-its-impact-on-the-regions-european-union>.

22 Jacob Mardell, "China's Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans," Bertelsmann Stiftung, March 1, 2020: <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/our-projects/germany-and-asia/news/asia-policy-brief-chinas-economic-footprint-in-the-western-balkans>.

23 Sharinee Jagtiani, "Deep Down in the Stack: China's Entrenchment in Serbia's Technology Landscape," German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF), June 5, 2025: <https://www.gmfus.org/news/deep-down-stack-chinas-entrenchment-serbias-technology-landscape>.

24 Ivana Rudinac, "A Year and a Half After the Novi Sad Tragedy: Who Drives China-Backed Infrastructure in Serbia?," ChinaMed Project, June 16, 2026: <https://www.chinamed.it/observer/a-year-and-a-half-after-the-novi-sad-tragedy-who-drives-china-backed-infrastructure-in-serbia>; Michal Makocki and Zoran Nechev, "Balkan corruption: the China connection," European Union Institute for Security Studies, July 18, 2017: <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/alerts/balkan-corruption-china-connection>; Bojan Stojkovski et al., "China in the Balkans: Controversy and Cost," *Balkan Insight*, December 15, 2021: <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/12/15/china-in-the-balkans-controversy-and-cost/bi/all-balkan-countries/all-balkan-countries-politics-and-society/>.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In a shifting international landscape that is shaped by bargaining among great powers and competition over the strategic choices of smaller states, the Western Balkan (WB) countries will pursue their own agendas. In this era of post-liberal transatlantic relations, as US engagement shifts into a mercurial and coercive foreign policy of transactional economic interest, the relations of Balkan leaders with various external powers will often contradict EU norms and governance standards. On its end, Russia continues to act as a spoiler to Euro-Atlantic integration, even as its ability to influence the region has weakened. In this context, novel forms of hybrid destabilization of the future of peace and security in the WB require the continued attention of EU leaders. The rise of China and a volatile global order in which the appeal of liberal values is decreasing will shape a new balance between the liberal normative and transactional forms of cooperation among regional actors in the WB, third powers, and the EU.

Regarding EU integration, the region's strategic commitment to it has resulted in a two-speed accession path. On one side are the frontrunner Montenegro and Albania, the so-called WB2. On the other are the remaining WB4: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia. The result is a complex heterogeneous region that has moved beyond the singular reference it presented in the aftermath of the Yugoslav Wars. In regional affairs, Serbia still has the will and means – albeit with less leverage – to instrumentalize identity issues in Bosnia, Montenegro, and Kosovo, keeping regional rivalry alive. The EU will need to put more effort into resolving functional problems in Bosnia and Herzegovina and finding a solution to the impasse between Belgrade and Pristina. Therefore, Germany, as the centerpiece of the EU and in convergence with other European countries, should deepen its involvement in the region in the following ways:

- **Deny third power influence:** Germany should continue to push Russia out of decision-making over the future of Bosnia and limit Moscow's space for hybrid actions in the WB, particularly regarding the future of Kosovo and Montenegro. It should develop proactive engagement toward the United States within the Quint to avoid initiatives that go against liberal multi-ethnic norms and EU integration.²⁵

- **Differentiate the enlargement approach:** Together with like-minded EU states, Germany should task the European Commission to further upgrade the pre-accession strategy by developing options to postpone bilateral vetoes to the end of the accession negotiations process.

- **Develop a sui generis EU accession roadmap for Bosnia and Kosovo:** For these two countries, which are furthest away from membership, Germany should initiate a discussion to develop a tailored plan that would allow them to start opening negotiation chapters – thus enabling them to take advantage of pre-accession benefits.

- **Strengthen the EU's response to hybrid threats:** EU member states and the leadership of EU institutions should support regional partners in countering hybrid threats and rethink their strategy toward Serbia.

- **Drive investment and integration beyond the 2023 Growth Plan for the Western Balkans:** Germany should help develop a new financing mechanism to further increase the appeal of EU integration. It should design large-scale investment plans – related, for example, to AI research and connectivity – as well as a step-by-step partial accession to the single market.

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²⁵ The Quint is an informal decision-making group consisting of the United States and the so-called Big Four of Western Europe: France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom.



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