Assistant Prof. Gordan Akrap
Hybrid Warfare Research Institute
& University North
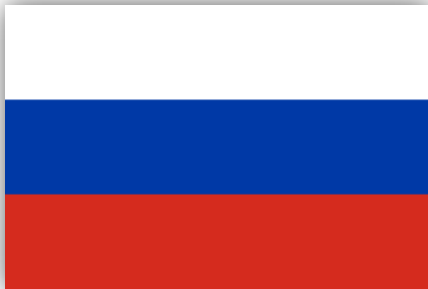**Luka Blaić,** mag.rel.int. at diplo.

INTRODUCTION

Russia's second armed aggression against Ukraine[1] (February 24, 2022) had a strong and negative impact on numerous human activities at different levels. In a strategic sense, it led to the need to redefine the existing supranational (primarily at the level of Euro-Asia) security infrastructure and architecture, reorganize and optimize existing energy supply routes and create new ones that enable their real diversification, in-depth analysis of the capabilities of modern democratic societies and states for effective (primarily preventive) measures for dealing with future crises. The EU should make a detailed and complete objective analysis of the development of Russia's aggressive activities and potential from the 2000s until today. The signals pointing to radicalization and the growth of aggressiveness can be recognized in time with the aim of preventing and dissuading future crisis instigators from their aggressive intentions. The process is known as LI-LL (Lessons Identified – Lessons Learned).

This process must be applied to other geopolitical areas that a potential attacker(s) can use with the aim of causing crises and destabilizing that area in order to divert attention and direct the preventive capacities of defense systems to secondary and/or even tertiary targets, inserting information noise (disinformation, misinformation) into communication channels, disrupt (canceled or slowed down) the decision-making process and gained time to carry out the fulfillment of its primary strategic goals. One of the key instruments that such an attacker must develop is the ability to acquire a state of information supremacy in the target area to fulfill the set goals and tasks by planning and conducting information operations of influence. In this context, it is necessary to analyze in detail the malicious activities that Russia has been planning and carrying out on the territory of the countries known as WB6 for a long time, and which were especially intensified before and after the second Russian armed aggression against Ukraine in February 2022.

Instruments of Russian influence in WB6

Russia, as a result of long-term planning, and later implementation, of numerous activities in the area of WB6, but also at the level of the European continent, has created the conditions for the use of various vectors that can be used as an instrument in offensive malicious operations. The identification of these vectors is the first prerequisite that must be done to create the conditions for planning primarily defensive activities, and later preventive and deterrent measures with the aim of preventing future malignant actions. Considering the organization, history, composition,

functionality, role, and capabilities of the WB6 states, Russia is trying to achieve several goals simultaneously with its actions:

1. To achieve control over political processes (such as elections, referendums) at the national and supranational (Euro-Atlantic integration) level within the framework of the countries included under the name WB6 (encouraging the creation and helping the development of primarily populist and radical political groups, regardless of whether they are on the political left and/or right).

2. Take over supervision and control (to the greatest extent possible) over the information and communication processes of those countries with the aim of creating information supremacy (infodemic[2] and infoxication[3] are just the means he uses in that process).

3. Taking control and supervision over business processes (with an emphasis on the energy and financial sectors and all other sectors connected with them, which can help Russia achieve its goals and tasks).

4. Strengthening influence in social activities that have a high level of acceptability and connection (with regard to the impact on the population) among the target audience with a special emphasis on the Serbian Orthodox Church and on sports activities that are characterized by very high viewership and impact on the population.

5. Creating conditions for control and supervision of the process of causing social crises, unrest, protests,

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[2] Information overload of the existing information environment with numerous information contents of different levels of importance and meaning.

[3] Poisoning of the exisring nformation environment with information of damaged integrity, with numerous disinformation contents that are more difficult to recognize in the state of the infodemic.

violence, extremism in targeted areas and among targeted audiences, either directly or indirectly.

6. The transfer and attempt to realize its goals and tasks at the level, primarily NATO and EU, through indirect action with the help of realized instruments of power from the WB6 states.

7. Engaging persons who are in some possible way (business and/or private) connected with the Russian Federation and are within the reach of the Russian intelligence community (either directly or indirectly) in order to use them (some openly, some covertly) to articulate their interests towards different target audiences (public, media, politics, professional, business, academic, social, security, military).

The methods used by Russia are also known from numerous examples, especially hybrid ones, of conflicts and wars:

- By undermining trust in existing state and social institutions and organizations, their direct and indirect dissolution and by offering other models of action that are under their control.

- By introducing divisions (polarization processes within society and the state) to manage the same societies more easily and to control and manage the crisis that it itself created.

- Strong action in the field of redefining existing and creating new national/local identities, which introduces an additional element on which it bases its activities (primarily encouraging and strengthening inter-ethnic conflicts) which tries to divide and destabilize the target society and the state.

- By calling and encouraging the organization of premature/extraordinary political processes such as elections or statements on issues that divide societies.
- By spreading media influence through a network of first local and then national media (electronic, TV, radio) which help in various ways and which, in return, non-objectively and without restraint spread the information content that Russia creates with the aim of deceiving the public; in connection with this, it is necessary to emphasize the attempt to influence the legislative framework, which enables non-sanctioning of those activities in the public media space that are punishable in modern democratic states).
- Through the media activities of the local diplomatic and consular missions of the Russian Federation, the engagement of a large number of active trolls and bots who, acting on social networks and spreading messages on mobile applications for communication, distribute numerous contents of a (dis)informational nature in the languages of different nations.
- Encouraging the entry into institutions and organizations (companies, states, business systems) of persons loyal to Russia, regardless of their (in)experience, due to which the development and reputation capacities of that society and state bear negative consequences both on the national and international level.
- Taking over control and supervision over the intelligence and security systems of a country that is either indirectly or directly attacked and placed under its control in order to control processes within that country but also at the international level, especially if it is a NATO allied country;
- Encouraging corruption and organized crime (OK), strong association of leading fan groups (in Serbia) with OK,

while at the same time bringing accusations about the "criminal state" and its connection with OK into the public media space.

Russia has successfully branched out a network of people and organizations close to it in the territory of Serbia and achieved significant influence on decision-making processes in domicile/national institutions and organizations of society and the state that are ready to expand and protect Russian national interests. People who support Russia do so for several different reasons:

1. Material,
2. Political,
3. Worldview/religious,
4. Ideological, and
5. A combination of two or more of the above.

In the following, we will briefly describe the processes (social, political, informational, security) that determine the reality and future of WB6 countries.

Republic of Serbia

The Republic of Serbia has very developed and intensive relations in numerous areas with the Russian Federation. However, these relationships are demanding and complex at the same time. At the institutional level as well as at the level

of persons holding numerous different positions in Serbia (at the level of the state, local and regional administration and self-government, business, energy and financial sectors, political organizations, media, Serbian Orthodox Church...). One of the reasons for such a connection is certainly the issue of Kosovo's membership in UN (and recognition by wider international community), which Russia blocks as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. On the other hand, it is an issue that Serbia does not want to articulate the case of recognition of the Russian annexation of Crimea, which would lead to consequences on the possible status of Kosovo. Therefore, Serbia has been trying to sit on several chairs at the same time for many years. On the one hand, it has a very low level of acceptance of the common European foreign and security policy (about 6-7%), especially in relation to Russia, it participates in joint military exercises with Russia and Belarus, while on the other hand it has numerous activities with the NATO alliance in the military domain, sells ammunition needed by the Ukrainian armed forces to fight against Russia (through a third party). This is just one example of Janusism[4] of today's leadership of the Republic of Serbia. Namely, President Vučić uses the politics of the 90s to strengthen his position in Serbia and secure the favor of the international community (IC) and the Serbian population. By radicalizing the political and social scene in Serbia, Vučić positions himself as a moderate political option that is "a guarantor of a stable Serbia" and can be a factor of future stability in WB6. On the other hand, through the Serbian media scene, which he almost completely controls, he dictates the topics and their narrative, through which he further radicalizes society by constantly dramatizing and scaring the public with "the evil West that wants to take Kosovo away from us."

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[4] Janus is one of the Roman deities known as the "God with two faces", a symbol of duplicity.

Duplicity is visible in numerous state institutions and companies. Let's take the example of the intelligence community of Serbia. From time-to-time, very strong media treatment was given to the arrest of persons that relate to the Russian intelligence community (as well as the American one). On the other hand, president Vučić appointed Aleksandar Vulin as the head of the main intelligence agency, who is proven to be very close to Russia and Russian political views. Russia has created important strongholds in Serbia: in the intelligence community, the media, the economic system, through the presence of paramilitary and parantelligence structures such as the Humanitarian Center in Niš, numerous non-governmental organizations, in political life with an emphasis on radical groups that are ready to initiate and conduct street protests and riots (which was particularly evident by organizing riots in Serbia in July 2020). Russia and the pro-Russian media, which are still loyal to Vučić, were particularly involved in the wave of protests in Serbia under the name "Serbia without violence", manipulating with information on the number of protesters, their goals and demands. It was precisely the concept of the "Serbian world" (which is a euphemism for the creation of Greater Serbia, which was one of the ideologies that started the wars that caused Yugoslavia to fall apart in blood) that arose and was modeled after the concept of the Russian world.

After the aggression against Ukraine, Russia is intensifying its overt and covert activities in Serbia. They also use Serbia as a source for spreading a lot of disinformation to neighboring countries. They use almost the same communication channels as they did during the COVID-19 pandemic, when they actively worked to reduce the vaccination of the population (especially with vaccines that do not come from Russia), relentlessly spreading numerous conspiracy theories, strengthening divisions in society, and encouraging the population to protest in the

streets. Even today, the public media space of Serbia is mostly dominated by narrative[5] which justifies the Russian aggression, exaggerates Russian capabilities, denies Russian crimes and aggression, and accuses Ukraine of being a neo-Nazi creation. They go so far as to be one medium[6] on the day of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, published the text on the front page: "Ukraine attacked Russia". They use very similar vocabulary and symbols as they used, when they communicated with the newly elected democratic Croatian government in the 90s of the last centuries, justifying the aggression against Croatia. It is especially necessary to emphasize that the Sputnik and RT media systems continue to function unhindered in Serbia, spreading numerous cases of disinformation. Which is then taken over and spread by the media network at the national and local level in Serbia, Montenegro and BiH, and in this way tries to maliciously influence the target audiences in those areas. The messages they send are dominated by strong anti-Western narratives, the Slavic and Orthodox brotherhood of Russians and Serbs is constantly encouraged, and support is given to the realization of the concept of a Russian and Serbian world.

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[5] The messages being sent are: *Russia, alone, is at war against the entire NATO alliance and not against Ukraine; Russia had to act preemptively because NATO and the USA were preparing an attack on the Russian Federation; Russia cannot lose the war against Ukraine, because Russia is also a nuclear power; The Russians have not yet activated all their capacities, and when they do, they will reach the Danube; Russia is not using its best troops and most powerful weapons, because it is protecting the people in Ukraine; Ukraine should be denazified; Ukraine did not exist as a country until the collapse of the Soviet Union; More than 50% of Russians live in Ukraine; The war in Ukraine is a war between two fraternal Slavic peoples; Zelensky and his government are only Western puppets; The Ukrainian people needlessly suffer huge human sacrifices; By sending weapons to Ukraine, NATO is fighting Russia to the last Ukrainian; Ukrainian troops are on the brink of destruction, so foreign western mercenaries and soldiers from the NATO alliance are now at war; Poland wants to attack and occupy western Ukraine and Belarus*. From the above examples, it is clearly visible that this is disinformation of Russian origin, the aim of which is to demonize Ukraine and glorify Russia.
[6] Informer, 24.2.2022.

Regarding the economic and financial capacity and stability of Serbia, it must be said that Serbia is facing numerous challenges. Without foreign direct investments, without financial assistance from EU funds, Serbia would have a very difficult time maintaining the current level of (in)stability of its own state finances.

The Republic of Croatia has a consistent policy towards Serbia. As per other WB6 states. Croatia is extremely interested in democratization, stabilization, de-radicalization and the positive democratic development of these societies and states. If such a situation is achieved in the southern and eastern neighborhood of Croatia, that area will cease to be a source of numerous security challenges that can negatively affect the stability, security, and democratic order not only in Croatia but also in the EU. The example of the migrant crisis of 2015, as well as later, admittedly smaller but equally intense migrant waves, has shown us, how sensitive and vulnerable the area is regarding numerous security challenges (in this case, in conjunction with state policy and organized crime).[7].

Croatia has many open issues with Serbia. From the issue of the missing (during the Homeland war for Independence) persons (data on which are in special funds and collections of military documents in Belgrade), territorial disputes on the Danube, compensation for captured, tortured and murdered Croatian citizens who ended up in Serbian concentration camps, democratization, deradicalization of society and the state, freedom of the media and judiciary, respect for human and

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[7] Serbia lobbied in numerous countries, especially the so-called of the Third World, which recognized Kosovo's independence, to withdraw that recognition. In return, they abolished the visa regime with those countries. In this way, the number of migrants who arrived in Serbia on their way to the EU increased.

minority rights, acceptance and adherence to the EU's foreign and common policy, respect for the principles, beliefs and value system around which the EU was built. Serbia is also requested to recognize independence of Kosovo and stop malicious and harmful actions against other countries: Kosovo, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Serbia needs to work hard to reduce tensions (primarily between different ethnic groups) that have been persistently created in the Serbian media space for decades.

The political games[8] that President Vučić organizes with political election processes in Serbia with the aim of delaying and refusing to make decisions related to the imposition of sanctions on Russia are certainly not in favor of Serbia's European path or its stabilization. Russia has visibly stepped up its activities in Serbia (where it has important strongholds in the Serbian Orthodox Church, part of the academic community gathered around the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, the media, and in the military system and the Serbian intelligence community).

Russia has no intention to stop simultaneously holding Serbia in a "fraternal embrace", by which it tries to be of help to Serbia (given its membership in the UN Security Council) but also to bind the current political elite by threatening it with radical measures that Russian supporters from different spheres of society can carry out on the street. Thus, Serbia is at the same time a partner and a victim of Russia and its malicious actions towards the societies and states of the countries covered by the name WB6.

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[8] Organizing early elections from time to time, often poublic apperances and offciial statements describing „extremely diffciult and challenging situation for Serbs like never before in history", are just a fuel to already quite hard political, social, financial, economical and insecurity of Serbian society.

Croatia is aware of the importance that Serbia has in WB6. But it should be said that Serbia does not have as much importance as Serbia attributes to itself. Numerous stabilization and democratic processes within WB6 can take place without Serbia. However, the intentions that Serbia projects in that area, which it shows through the concept of the Open Balkans, do not inspire confidence. In Croatia, the prevailing opinion between experts is that the Open Balkans was designed as a concept that tries to replace the Berlin process and position Serbia and Albania as key actors in WB6. The Open Balkans is not an inclusive and integrating concept, which is why it cannot bring sustainable and stabilizing activities that should help the democratization and stabilization of societies and states on their way to the EU. The concept of the Serbian world has more and more problems and challenges faced by its creators. The key challenge for Serbia lies in the fact that its role model, the Russian world, is disintegrating before Serbian eyes, which inevitably leads to the disintegration of the concept of the Serbian world. And thus, the importance and role that Serbia assigns to itself. Aware of this fact, the planners of Russian and pro-Russian information influence operations by spreading numerous half-truths (essentially disinformation) in the media space of Serbia to maintain "Orthodox ties" and maintain influence in WB6 by acting through the institutions of the Serbian state, the SPC, the non-governmental sector and the media.

It should be noted that the European integration processes of the WB6 countries has to be evaluated on an individual level with regard to the fulfillment, compliance and sustainability of the defined criteria, i.e. benchmarks determined by certain negotiation chapters. Possible concessions and the creation of exceptions will have a strong negative impact on the negotiation processes of other countries that truly want to enter the EU and are ready for this democratic step forward. Any relativization of

negotiation and open issues and possible giving of easy promises will have a negative impact on the negotiation process itself, which will not result in the expected positive results. Serbia faces serious challenges that it should have already solved, if it wanted to be able to build a free, democratic, deradicalized and liberal society and a state that does not pose a threat to neighboring or other countries.

Republic of Kosovo

The political and security situation in Kosovo changed significantly, in a negative sense, after the Kosovo government did not respond to Serbian political provocations in a timely or effective manner. Namely, the invitation sent by Serbia to the Serbs in Kosovo not to participate in the local elections in Kosovo (April 2023) was one of the turning points to which the Government of Kosovo did not react in a timely manner or properly. Instead of showing patience and prudence, they accepted Vučić's bait, held elections, announced the results, and tried to impose them by force (although the elections were according to the turnout results legal, they are not legitimate). Serbia took the risk of boycotting the elections, expecting exactly this kind of action by the Kosovo Government. Thus, Serbia, from a defensive role and the culprit for numerous attempts to destabilize Kosovo, became (as a perception) a victim of the reckless policy of the Government of Kosovo. That the Government of Kosovo gave up holding the elections and postponed them until the conditions for that were met, initiated the process of implementing the

Brussels Agreements regarding the then existing political groupings in the municipalities in the north of Kosovo.

The efforts of the EU and the US with the aim of stabilizing Kosovo and achieving wide international recognition of Kosovo, primarily within the EU, would most likely yield positive results for Kosovo. On the other hand, they would lead to the fact that Serbia is facing a pre-emptive action in view of the signed Brussels agreements and the negotiated frameworks, which would most certainly lead to additional negative social and political processes in Serbia.

It was an illusion to expect that the international community would accept the completely illegitimate results of the election process. On the other hand, the strong negative influence that the Serbian Orthodox Church, the intelligence community of Serbia and official Belgrade has among Kosovo Serbs, is ignored. Especially considering the expected loss of Russia in Ukraine, the strong weakening of Russia's position and role in international relations (regardless of its permanent membership in the UN Security Council) and the negative consequences for the development of the concept of the Serbian world.

It is noticeable that neither Russia nor Serbia are trying to exert a strong negative informational influence on the representatives of the international community (IC) in Kosovo (both civilian and military structures). Russian malicious media activities in the Albanian language do not significantly differ from those in other languages. They are neither as frequent nor as intense as those in the Serbian language. Given the fact that the Albanian language is the official and most used language in Kosovo, Albania, and the parts of northern Macedonia, which are mostly inhabited by citizens of Albanian nationality, disinformation in the Albanian language is also distributed to those areas through various media. Most of such information of damaged integrity

(or disinformation) is distributed through the media network from the territory of Albania[9]. The messages, that are sent do not deviate from the messages listed in the chapter on the Republic of Serbia[10].

Lately, after the Government of Kosovo has been exposed to criticism from the West regarding its activities (previously described), the Russian Sputnik in the Serbian language is intensifying the publication of (dis)information and its tendentious interpretation emphasizing the beginning of the political and economic isolation of the Government of Kosovo by its partners[11]. In the process of stabilization of Kosovo, the authorities will have to make strong efforts to effectively deal with the organized crime (OC) operating in Kosovo or having their origins in Kosovo. As with the processes of religious radicalization of parts of the population.

Croatia is one of the EU member states that recognized Kosovo's independence. Also, Croatia is aware that Kosovo needs to solve numerous internal challenges in future. It is necessary to reorganise local elections at north Kosovo unconditionally. If the Serbs refuse to go to the elections again, it is necessary to start the process of applying the Brussels Agreement with the existing representatives. If necessary, adaptation of the Kosovo legislative framework to the realities of the Brussels Agreements should be undertaken. The mere initiation of the process of applying the Brussels Agreements by the Kosovo authorities will affect the processes of stabilization of Kosovo, reduce the potential malicious influences within information environment

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[9] https://birn.eu.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Russian-state-sponsored-disinformation-narratives-in-Albania.pdf, https://euronews.al/en/studies-disinformation-remains-a-problem-in-albanian-language-media/

[10] See footnote 5

[11] https://lat.sputnikportal.rs/common_kosovo-i-metohija/

(current situation opens for the spread of pro-Serbian and pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives).

Serbiawill conditionally accept political reality based on the existing agreements. If Serbia accepts Kosovo's independence, in return Serbia should be helped in the economic and financial sense for the expected confrontation with strong pro-Russian and radical Serbian narratives and activities. Croatia has repeatedly and publicly expressed its interest, as a country, that has gone through a difficult path towards EU membership, it si willing and able to help other countries from the WB6 area on their way to the EU. Croatia emphasizes the necessity of an individual approach to solving issues related to the possible enlargement of the EU based on the fulfillment of clearly and transparently set negotiation frameworks.

Republic of Montenegro

Montenegro is in an extremely unenviable situation. Partly due to the weakness of the previous administration, which was personalized in the form of former president Milo Đukanović, partly due to some decisions, that were made without information preparation activities[12] (the proposal for the Law on Freedom of Religion from 2019, which gave the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Republic of Serbia a strong reason to organize anti-government, that is, anti-

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[12] A whole series of activities that needed to clearly, unambiguously and completely explain to the resident population, as well as to the interested international community, the goals and reasons for passing such and such a law with an emphasis on a step-by-step approach.

Montenegrin, demonstrations that ultimately led to a change of government in Montenegro). Regardless of the recent results of the presidential and parliamentary elections, Montenegro is currently in the status of a "trapped state". Influence on state and government decisions, and on social and political processes are made outside of Montenegro. Primarily in Serbia. This is a significant problem that Montenegrin society is still not able to face, fully openly. Public knowledge and the prevailing narrative in the public still boils down to the fight "for and against Milo Đukanović".

An additional problem is the fact that, in the case of non-kinetic aggression against Montenegro, Serbia and the Russia are strongly connected and complementary with their activities. Numerous pro-Serbian and pro-Russian circles-of-influence operating in the territory of Montenegro do not deny this at all. If there will be a change in the legislative framework which will allow Serbs, who have lived in the territory of Montenegro for some time, to easily acquire Montenegrin citizenship, it is easy to imagine a situation in which Montenegrins, the bearers of state sovereignty, will be a minority in Montenegro compared to the number of Serbs who deny that sovereignty. Of course, Serbs will not deny it completely, but will insist on the introduction of dual sovereignty. That is, highlighting the Serbs as one of the two sovereign peoples of Montenegro and their numerical increase, which will guarantee the permanent victories of the Serbian-Russian bloc in the elections, and, if necessary, making decisions in referendums.

Because of the strong Serbian-Russian influence operations, full and open involvement of the Serbian Orthodox Church as a political actor, denial of the right to existence of a national autocephalous Montenegrin Orthodox Church, Montenegrin society became seriously and deeply divided. In addition to other

problems, that the society faces (the influence of organized crime political and financial corruption, financial instability, economic crisis), Montenegro has become a country in which there is a need for the rapid normalization of social and political processes. De-radicalization (primarily religious and political) and strengthening integration processes is a necessity. The media scene of Montenegro is almost entirely based on pro-Serbian and pro-Russian propaganda machinery. Both in the ownership and in the editorial activity.

The social and political instability of Montenegro, its radicalization, especially in the Greater Serbian direction (supervised and managed by Russia), represents a challenge not only for the Republic of Croatia, but also for the NATO alliance, considering Montenegro's membership in that alliance. Some of the messages used to overthrow the previous government (led by DPS) could not have been well received in Croatia. Namely, the messages "Montenegro is the Serbian Sparta" (which often appear in the Montenegrin and Serbian media) and "Dubrovnik is the Serbian Athens" (which the Serbian academia and part of the social community consider as a part of Serbia) remind us of 1991, when these messages dominated in the public media space and when the aggression against southern Croatia was carried out from the direction of Montenegro.

Russia and Serbia are in the process of capturing the institutions of Montenegro for their own needs. This process is both a goal and a means at the same time. The goal is to take long-term control over all processes in Montenegro (education at all levels, sports, religious activities, civil society, identity questions, the media scene), and the means to try to influence processes at the international level through this control (it should be taken into account that Montenegro has gone the furthest of all the WB6

countries in the process of EU membership negotiations, it has opened all negotiation chapters).

Montenegro must continue its path of building relations with Croatia on the principles that were established until recently. Denial of Montenegro's negative role in the aggression against Croatia, repetition of Greater Serbian rhetoric that is often heard from Belgrade, possible ignoring and non-prosecution of war crimes against Croats, attitude towards the Croat minority in Montenegro, open territorial issues on Prevlaka as well as ownership of a former military training ship "Jadran" will be the focus of Croatia and future relations with Montenegro. In addition to the fact that these issues will mostly be tried to be resolved on a bilateral level, there is a possibility, in the event of a negative impact of Serbian-Russian influences on their resolution, that Croatia will protect its own interests, but also the principles on which the European community, defined in the EU Treaty, is based, through EU institutions. Also, it is quite likely that Croatia does not support the Open Balkans process, which is exclusionary. In contrast to the Berlin process as well as the European political community, which in turn needs to continue to be built and developed.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a complex social and political entity defined by a whole series of agreements known as the Dayton-Paris Peace Accords (signed at the end of 1995). These documents successfully stopped the war

and imposed peace on the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the last two decades, BiH has shown numerous weaknesses and dysfunctionalities. All the time, it was faced with al lot of and serious challenges that distanced it from any meaningful and sustainable form of political, social, national, ethnic, and economic stability. Bosnia and Herzegovina's plural society, and its leading political elites, did not share a common vision of political unity, which made it impossible to establish a sustainable political community that was supposed to contribute to the stability of society. A special problem was (as it continues to be) the question of the legitimacy of individual election results at the state and cantonal level, which made any stabilization processes difficult, as well as finding constitutional solutions created with the patronage of the international community.

The political elites have not been able to reach an agreement on any significant issue, while in the intellectual scene nationalist, national, civic, and "civilian" worldviews are constantly clashing. It was precisely under the label of "civic" organization of the state that the process of majorization of one nation over others and the unconstitutional assumption of control and supervision over state institutions (and thus also at the level of society, public business sector) was hidden. The results of political processes carried out in countries, which have many open questions regarding ethnic and religious positions must simultaneously have electoral and political legality and legitimacy. Without full legitimacy, it is difficult to build a sustainable society and build state institutions at all decision-making levels.

Thanks to the activities of the current High Representative of the International Community (OHR), Bosnia and Herzegovina is on the way out of the political, social, economic and security crisis.

It ceased to be the most vulnerable country in the WB6 area[13]. Already at the beginning of his mandate, the new High Representative (OHR) was faced with serious challenges, especially in the context of the decisions made by his predecessor shortly before leaving office.[14] With those decisions, the room for maneuver for the new OHR was significantly narrowed for negotiation and decision-making. However, the decisions, that the new OHR bravely made, with the support of key Western countries, indicate that it is possible to reach political solutions for the constitution of government at all levels in BiH. That process, in turn, represents the foundation for the sustainable functioning of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a very complex society and state. Due to the numerous open issues that arose from the war in BiH, and the impossibility of their effective and sustainable solution, it is necessary to make strong efforts to stabilize, de-radicalize and lead inter-ethnic and intra-ethical relations to the goal: the development of a democratic society and a state with three constitutive and equal nations with all other communities living in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The consequences of the decisions of the OHR, which return the electoral process to the fundamental, Dayton-Pariz peace accords, show that the new/old political elites at the level of the Parliamentary Assembly of the State and the Republic of Srpska and the Federation of BiH, which have both legality and legitimacy, are aware of their responsibility for the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina. As soon as the SDA[15] (which slightly overshadowed the positive results with its threatening and

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[13] https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/russias_footprint_in_wb_executive_summary_30-04_v2-2.pdf

[14] https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/bih-ohr-valentin-inzko/31366972.html

[15] https://www.sda.ba/

radical rhetoric) was thrown out of the post-election coalitions[16], the conditions for building institutions were created. Government institutions at all levels were established very quickly and positive processes were initiated. The authorities organized at the level of the state of BiH and at the level of the Federation of BiH show their pro-Western face, ready to carry out the necessary activities.

A special challenge for the functioning of BiH is currently found in two political groups: the SDA and Milorad Dodik. The SDA is having a hard time coming to terms with the fact that it is not part of the state government, that it does not have its own representative in the state presidency, and that it no longer has the strength it had until recently. At the same time, the leading figures of the SDA are facing numerous accusations of illegality, crime, and corruption activities. The consequence of such actions may be further stratification of SDA.

Milorad Dodik, the president of Republika Srpska, with his statements, decisions made by the bodies of Republika Srpska according to his dictation, continues to cause concern among the representatives of the international community. These activities are against the short-term and long-term interests of both Republika Srpska and BiH as a state. Despite many public statements in which Dodik said that Republika Srpska will organize the secession from BiH, that will not happen. He himself is aware of that. However, his public expression, his behavior, especially now in relation to Russian officials after the Russian aggression against Ukraine, is sometimes difficult to explain with publicly available data. Dodik, who is characterized as a person, for whom economic-financial issues are more important than ethnic-national-religious ones, sometimes

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[16] Based on election results

becomes more radical in his speech than his political opponents in Republika Srpska.

The representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church in BiH have a special place and role in the radicalization of the public narrative in the Republika Srpska. Bishop Jefrem of Banja Luka stands out as a person, who tries to exert a strong influence on Dodik and his circle of people in order to protect the interests of the Serbian Orthodox Church (and thus also indirectly of the Russian Orthodox Church).

Dragan Čović, the current president of the Croatian National Assembly, understood the transience of time and the current situation. He initiated processes that should soon lead to his full withdrawal from politics. This is evident from his performances and the candidacy of other persons for different positions at the level of the state and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although he is often acused for that, Čović's actual ties to Russia are irrelevant. Especially after the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

However, Russian influence on BiH is not negligible. Using the structure of the Serbian Orthodox Church, numerous media, civil society organizations, individuals and organizations, Russia is trying to destabilize Bosnia and Herzegovina. One of the directions was an attempt to stop and/or slow down the process of establishment of government at various levels after the elections. Given that BiH already has numerous open issues related to ethnic-religious issues, strong Russian disinformation is trying to add "fuel to the fire" and further destabilize BiH. In this context, it is necessary to look at Dodik's soloing in the media. In this way, Russia is trying to undermine the OHR institution and prevent further stabilization of BiH. It is trying to bring the BiH processes in the UN Security Council, where it

would use its position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council to show itself (primarily to its public) as a global political force, that can impose its own views on others (primarily the USA and the UK). Namely, the long-term goal of Russian (and pro-Russian) malicious activities in BiH was to maintain the status quo. That is, failure to solve numerous issues that prevented the stabilization of society and the state. What has now been prevented by the decisions of the OHR, which began to return the election principles and rules to the original settings of Dayton and annul the decisions of some former OHR, that, by interfering in the election processes, made them non-transparent and illegitimate.

Russia intensified its malicious information and influence operations, after it invaded Ukraine. These activities are led by certain media, which indiscriminately redistribute Russian disinformation content originating from Russian and pro-Russian media. As well as the announcements of Russian political officials and representatives (of various embassies). Interesting analysis[17] of methods, models, numbers, and effectiveness of the distribution of numerous disinformation content in, primarily online media, was created in 2019. Although it was written before the Russian aggression against Ukraine, it can serve as an interesting analytical template for a comparative presentation of the results of Russian disinformation activities after February 2022.

Currently, a serious process is taking place in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Russian-Serbian-Turkish efforts are trying to permanently tie Bosnia and Herzegovina to Russian energy sources. In same time Croatia is trying to reduce malicious consequences in cas that this project is going to be realized.

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[17]https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2019/05/Disinformation_in_the_online_sphere_The_case_of_BiH_ENG.pdf

Croatia is aware of the importance of the real diversity of energy supply routes that can guarantee permanent approach to the different energy resources, and thus economic, social, and political sovereignty.

Croatian position is clear. Croatia is particularly interested in the stability, security, sustainability, territorial integrity, functionality and self-sustainability of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Relations between Croatia and BiH have had numerous challenges. A certain number of questions are still open as a consequence of not defining common policies in BiH towards abroad. Croatia hopes that in the foreseeable future these open issues will be resolved to the mutual satisfaction of the two neighboring countries that share a common border of just over 1,000 km. Croatia will also continue to support the ethnic Croats living in Bosnia and Herzegovina in activities to protect their constitutional rights as a constitutional and equal people with an emphasis on their remaining on the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Croatia will also continue to support the work of OHR and the international community in BiH. While advocating for the de-radicalization of society and the state, finding minimal common points between different ethnic communities in order to build a sustainable state and social structure. Croatia can also be a constructive factor in talks with individual representatives of Republika Srpska with the aim of stabilizing and de-radicalizing public expression and creating sustainable base for future stability of BiH.

Republik of North Macedonia

North Macedonia, after successfully overcoming the internal crisis instigated by Russia, by accepting the Prespa Agreement, de-escalated internal tensions and somewhat stabilized its internal conditions. However, North Macedonia is still an area where Russia carries out numerous disinformation activities trying to exploit the aforementioned goals. This is shown by the results of a study that was recently published in North Macedonia[18]. The study shows that it is difficult for Russia to change its modus operandi (e.g. the use of different profiles on social networks and online media) regardless of the diversity of target groups, the diversity of countries and societies, and the diversity of cultural heritage. The topic that is particularly emphasized, as in other countries with similar national-religious determination, is the creation and maintenance of "Slavic-Orthodox brotherhood". They use the challenges with which Sj. Macedonia faces on its way to the EU to bring additional, especially inter-ethnic, divisions into society and destabilize the country. A special challenge for the stability and integrity of the Macedonian public media space is Russian and pro-Russian malicious activities in the Bulgarian and Serbian media space, through which the Russians spread a lot of disinformation.[19].

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[18] https://mia.mk/en/story/presentation-of-study-on-russian-propaganda-influence-and-disinformation-in-north-macedonia,
https://euronews.al/en/study-reveals-russian-influence-through-propaganda-in-north-macedonia/
[19] https://meta.mk/en/the-social-media-as-a-lever-for-spreading-authoritarian-propaganda/

Croatia has the same position towards North Macedonia as it does towards Montenegro and Albania. Those countries are members of the NATO alliance. The attitude does not differ from the attitude towards Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo on their possible path towards Euro-Atlantic integration. Croatia is supporting the road of N. Macedonia towards EU membership. tTe European route of N. Macedonia should not have been slowed down, or even stopped because of individual position of some countries that are backed by Russian milcious influence. N. Macedonia is an important country for the stability of the WB6 area due to the complex Macedonian-Albanian relations, the border with Kosovo, Albania, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece (countries that each have their own special relationship to North Macedonia and to its territorial integrity and sovereignty as well as to national historical and cultural heritage). That is why the engagement, mostly by the US and partly by the EU, is in stabilizing that situation and prevention by deterring attacks on N. Macedonia achieved good results so far.

Republic of Albania

Albania is the most stable country and society of all the countries covered by the name WB6. Perhaps this fact arose from another fact: Albania is the most ethnically homogeneous country of all WB6 countries. Therefore, the question of the existence of internal tensions caused by ethnic and religious differences is significantly smaller, almost non-existent. Because of that, there is no tension that calls into question its state, legal and political

legitimacy. However, Albania is still faced with a threat to its democratic functionality caused by OC, both national and transnational. Albania was the other key foundation of the Open Balkans project, which it launched together with Serbia. That project was supposed to replace the Berlin Process. Conceived as a non-inclusive process, which hides various policies and pretensions in the background, it was supposed to prevent the realization of the inclusive Berlin process. Therefore, the international community, realizing its background, especially in the context of strengthening the idea of creating a Serbian world modeled on the Russian world, launched initiatives to stop that negative project. However, Albania realized this and announced its withdrawal from the project[20] which surprised Serbian President Vučić[21] (thereby he lost one of the rare trump cards in international relations that he could have used in his performances before his own public).

As already written in the section on Kosovo, the Albanian media environment is also a target of Russian disinformation activities related to Russian aggression against Ukraine. The largest amount of information of damaged integrity written in the Albanian language was published in the Albanian media space. However, objective analyzes indicate that Russian disinformation policies do not have a strong foothold in Albania because the Albanian population is oriented towards the USA and the EU more than towards the "fraternal Slavic and Orthodox states". This, in turn, should not prevent the undertaking of preventive and deterrent defensive activities, which also include the media space in the Albanian language[22] can and should protect against

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[20] https://euronews.al/en/did-pm-edi-rama-unilaterally-decide-to-end-open-balkan-initiative/
[21] https://balkans.aljazeera.net/teme/2023/7/15/pocetak-kraja-otvorenog-balkana
[22] Given that the Albanian language is also spoken in Kosovo and Sj. Macedonia which are, especially Sj. Macedonia is a more fragile state, it is

numerous malicious influence operations that can try to destabilize the country on its way to the EU. But also, as NATO allie.

Croatia and Albania have very well-developed relations in all spheres of cooperation in accordance with common interests. Croatia and Albania jointly became members of the NATO alliance on April 1, 2009. The Republic of Croatia and Albania offered their help and cooperation on its way to the EU.

EU and WB6 – challenges and prospects

The EU does not have a unified position toward WB6. Even the name WB6 itself is not accepted by all EU member states because it deviates significantly from their policy. Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain did not recognize Kosovo's independence. That is why the abbreviation WB5 is closer to these countries than WB6. In any case, we will continue to use the abbreviation WB6 in this paper. Although there is general agreement at the EU level that the countries covered by the name WB6 should be integrated into the EU[23], there are differences in the approach towards each country. They are caused by different individual interests of the existing EU member states. The interests are of such a nature that they practically encroach on the identity and sovereignty issues of individual states (as in the case of North Macedonia and Kosovo). These are differences that are difficult to bridge with

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possible for a malicious hybrid attacker to use the Albanian media space to create and distribute misinformation towards other areas, i.e. countries where ethnic Albanians live.

[23] „At the EU-Western Balkans Summit held in 2003 in Thessaloniki, the EU reaffirmed that the future of the Western Balkans is within the EU. In June 2022, EU leaders expressed their full and unequivocal commitment to the EU membership perspective of the Western Balkans and called for acceleration of the accession process"23. Izvor: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/enlargement/#Balkans

(quick) diplomatic activities. They need to be solved at the level of the entire EU and integrated with other instruments available to the EU (but also to the NATO alliance, given that most EU countries and several from WB6 are members of the NATO alliance).

The countries covered by the name WB6, although neighboring, are very different. They differ in numerous elements that hold a society and state together. These are countries where many different peoples and nations live mixed and together. Different ideologies, religions, cultures, and customs meet each other in these countries. These are countries with different political arrangements. They have different economic potentials, or shortcomings that prevent their further development. Almost all of them are dependent on international financial aid (primarily Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina). They have numerous mutual, as well as internal, open issues for which the existing political and social elites are unable to offer sustainable solutions. It should be taken into account that two countries (Kosovo and Montenegro) unilaterally introduced the euro as their national currency. It is precisely this strong dependence on the financial aid that the WB6 countries receive from the EU (at the EU level as well as at the level of individual EU members), direct investments in their economy, intensive trade relations with the EU member states (but also between them) that represents a large negotiating capital which EU should be willing and able to use in the processes of stabilization, democratization and de-radicalization of WB6 states and societies.

The enlargement of the EU is a very complex and demanding process in which the candidate countries for EU membership as well as the already existing EU members simultaneously participate. Namely, the EU itself must be ready for enlargement (in the political, economic, institutional sense; just like the

candidate country). The first step should be the desire of that country to enter the candidacy process and that it is ready to accept and fulfill the numerous criteria necessary for future EU membership[24]. Regarding the WB6 countries, public opinion polls, as well as the attitudes of social and political elites that influence decision-making processes in individual countries, give us interesting results.

According to the published results of public opinion research in the WB6 countries in relation to the tendency to join the EU, different results were obtained. At least 73.3% of the population of BiH supports the accession of BiH to the EU[25] (the majority of those who do not support the accession to the EU live in the territory of Republika Srpska and are ethnic Serbs). The survey of public opinion in Serbia, in a similar period of time, obtained slightly different results: about 44% of Serbia's citizens support membership in the EU, while about 42% oppose EU membership[26]. In Montenegro, almost 78% of the population voted for joining the EU[27]. According to data from 2021, about 97% of Albanian citizens support Albania's membership in the EU. In N. Macedonia, about 49% of the population supports EU membership, while 34% of them expressed skepticism towards EU membership[28]. The vast majority of Kosovo residents support the Euro-Atlantic integration of Kosovo (in November 2021, 91%

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[24] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/accession-criteria-copenhagen-criteria.html, https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2020/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans/3-china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans-different-strings-attached/

[25] https://www.aa.com.tr/ba/balkan/istra%C5%BEivanje-dei-ja-73-3-posto-ispitanika-podr%C5%BEava-ulazak-bih-u-eu/2945206

[26] https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/svijet/velika-anketa-u-srbiji-pitali-ljude-jesu-li-za-eu-ili-priblizavanje-moskvi-rezultati-su-malo-koga-iznenadili-15320992

[27] https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/montenegro/istra%C5%BEivanje-javnog-mnjenja-gra%C4%91ani-jo%C5%A1-sna%C5%BEnije-podr%C5%BEavaju-pristupanje-eu-0_me

[28] https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2023/2/9/u-sjevernoj-makedoniji-raste-skepticizam-prema-eu

of the population supported membership in the EU, while 89% of them supported membership in the NATO alliance[29]).

Although in-depth analyzes of the oppinion polls were not carried out, based on the existing data, it can be reasonably assumed that the Serbs, as an ethnic community, are significantly less inclined to EU membership (and show greater skepticism in relation to it) compared to other peoples living in the WB6 area. This kind of public opinion research is one of the essential tools that can be helpful to decision makers about which, when and how to use the vectors of action toward WB6 target audiences. Namely, the numerous differences of the WB6 societies and countries, point to the necesity to design and implement adapted processes that will guide the affected societies on their way to the EU (of course, those that express a desire for it, because no one should be forced to enter the EU, or any another association if they don't want it).

Surveys must offer credible, reliable and complete answers to key questions: does the population want to be part of the EU; are they ready to adapt their own societies and countries and accept the European system of values, principles and beliefs; what are the reasons for which EU membership is an advantage for them and for which they are not inclined to support EU membership; what disinformation policies have an impact on decision-making process regarding these issues? The results of public opinion polls carried out in this way simultaneously recognize the areas of vulnerability of the respondents and their exposure to disinformation policies aimed at creating divisions and stopping (or slowing down) the process of joining these countries to the EU.

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[29] https://www.iri.org/news/kosovo-citizens-show-strong-support-for-western-institutions-despite-kosovos-slow-progress-towards-eu-integration/

The aforementioned data can also explain the significantly different attitude that individual countries have towards the sanctions imposed by the EU on Russia after its aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. States where Serbs have decision-making possibility as well as co-decision-making have not declared sanctions against Russia. These same countries (that is, the population that nationally identifies as Serbs) have a strong negative feeling towards their possible membership in the NATO alliance. Serbs are, for the most part of them, one of the key vectors of influence that Russia uses in creating, promoting, and maintaining its own interests in WB6.

On the other hand, we should not forget the existence of interests that some other countries have in this area. Turkey, as the Ottoman Empire, ruled this area for several centuries, either as a whole or in some part of it. Turkish influence is still significant in the area of WB6 today. It manifests itself through the activities of the population of the Islamic religion, which arose/remained in this area precisely as a result of the Ottoman conquests. The fact that Turkey decided to give its consent to Sweden's entry into the NATO alliance tells us how important EU membership is to Turkey. Especially in the situation it is in now (serious challenges in the economy and the financial situation of the country) emphasizing one condition: Sweden has undertaken to support the entry of Turkey in the EU. Today, the Turkish influence is followed by the influences of other countries where Islam has the status of state religion. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE invest considerable resources in various social activities related to the expansion of their influence (both economic, financial, political, cultural and religious).

China's strong economic-financial-information activity should not be ignored either. In this area[30], but at the level of individual relations with countries, China continues its activities with which it has successfully organized its presence and influence in Africa (primarily East and Central). China does not directly intervene in the political (except when it comes to Taiwan and the relationship of the domicile state towards Taiwan) and religious life of the population. However, with their financial-economic-informational activities, which in countries where there are no clear rules of business processes, as is the case in the EU, encourage corruption at all levels. Such activities gradually lead to the creation of debt slavery of these countries. The affected countries must get out of it with the help of the EU[31].

As already mentioned, in WB6, numerous, and sometimes sharply opposed, interests of various actors on the international scene meet and clash each other. From individual countries to communities such as the EU, NATO, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Very simple questions are often asked in the public that are not easy to answer: do the WB6 countries have a European future? Should these countries be offered a European perspective? If the answer is positive, should we talk about the dates of possible accession, or should the dates be conditional on fulfiling all established criteria? Should the criteria be adapted to individual candidate countries? Are we ready to ignore (or give way in the negotiation process) the fulfillment of criteria and the process of democratization and de-radicalization of society and the state, insisting on respect for fundamental human rights and freedoms, independence and freedom of the media and the judiciary, respect for the rights of minorities,

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[30] https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2020/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans/3-china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans-different-strings-attached/

[31] https://www.bilten.org/?p=37687, https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/RW20_03/RW_EU_response_to_China_HR.pdf

honest and full confrontation with ideas and ideologies that led to conflicts, violence, and wars? Should we ignore all of it, or certain parts in the negotiation process? And all under the pretext that certain (malicious) states, such as primarily Russia, do not gain significant influence on the affected societies and states? Do we want to sacrifice quality for the sake of quantity, and by accepting unprepared states and societies, and in the short and long term bring the EU into a possibly demanding and challenging situation of facing again the issues we did not resolve in the accession negotiation process? And which risks will turn into serious threats to the stability, funcionality and security of the EU?

The challenges that WB6 societies and countries are facigng with are extremely demanding. Solving these challenges requires total commitment and determination. Primarily by decision makers. Avoiding facing those challenges, ignoring them, and in some cases even encouraging them (by candidate countries) must be clearly recognized by the EU. It must not be ignored and neglected before and during the negotiation process. There should be no doubt at all that the challenges these countries are now facing (in the negotiation process) will come to light again and have a strong negative impact on the EU. If they are not resolved during the negotiation process. There may be an additional imbalance that already exists in the EU due to the actions of individual states in accordance with their own interests, which negate the content of the treaty on the functioning of the EU.

In addition, a possible waiver of the already agreed principles of the negotiation processes would certainly have a negative impact on the negotiation processes with Turkey[32], Ukraine,

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[32] How important EU membership is to Turkey, especially in the current very demanding economic and financial crisis, is shown by the fact that one of the

Moldova, and Georgia. The selective application of different principles and their change during the negotiation process to different states has a negative impact on the EU's reception. So that such changes, which would benefit to some of them, could be sought by other countries. That is, the application of different standards, which would be specially adapted to them in accordance with their requests. This puts the EU in a situation of possible additional strong internal destabilization, and the loss of its influence and importance in the international community, which the EU has been persistently and painstakingly building for decades. We are of the opinion that there are currently no reasons why the established negotiation criteria would be diluted for the needs of the WB6 countries, all to reduce the maneuver space for Russia and its malicious actions on and towards the WB6.

We have to face these threats to the stability and security of WB6 in another way. By strengthening pro-European feelings in the population of WB6, truthful and complete information pointing out all the advantages, but openly also the bad consequences of accession to the EU such as the migration of highly educated staff and part of the population to "older" EU member states. There are numerous positive examples of countries that have become EU members on a short-term, and especially on a long-term basis. It is necessary to work clearly and transparently to strengthen the role of civil society, taking care to ensure that these activities are not used for the malicious and interests of certain political factors at the local and regional level.

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conditions that Sweden had to promise in the context of obtaining Turkey's consent for Swedish membership in the NATO alliance is a public expression of support that Sweden will give to Turkey in its accession to the EU.

We should not be enslaved by prejudices. All advantages as well as challenges should be clearly communicated. One should avoid, in constructive communication, the language of political correctness that avoids identifying challenges, analyzing cause-and-effect relationships, and fully searching for solutions of the challnges. The population should not be offered dates on possible access, because access should be linked to the dependence of the transformation of society and the state in accordance with the accesion criteria. Action should be taken to stop negative projects such as the Open Balkans and encourage the Berlin and Brdo-Brijuni processes.

At the same time, numerous open bilateral issues between the WB6 countries should be persistently resolved, as well as the resolution of open issues that these countries have with existing EU members. With the fact that open issues with EU members should not go in the direction of abuse of the accession process with the aim of achieving unacceptable political solutions.

The EU participates in several processes that the WB6 countries want to be encouraged to make faster changes and meet the set criteria for accession to the EU. The Berlin process, the Brdo-Brijuni process, the Open Balkans (which was practically extinguished because it was understood as a process by which Serbia and Albania wanted to dominate that area, (dis)integrate it in accordance with their interests, ignoring the interests of other countries from that position) and the European political community is the most important. Special emphasis should be placed on the latest initiative of French President Macron on the launch of the European Political Community (EPC). It must not replace or take over the role of institutions that already exist (such as the Council of Europe). It should also not be an excuse or reason to deny the right of WB6 countries (as well as other countries that are in the negotiation process with the EU) to join
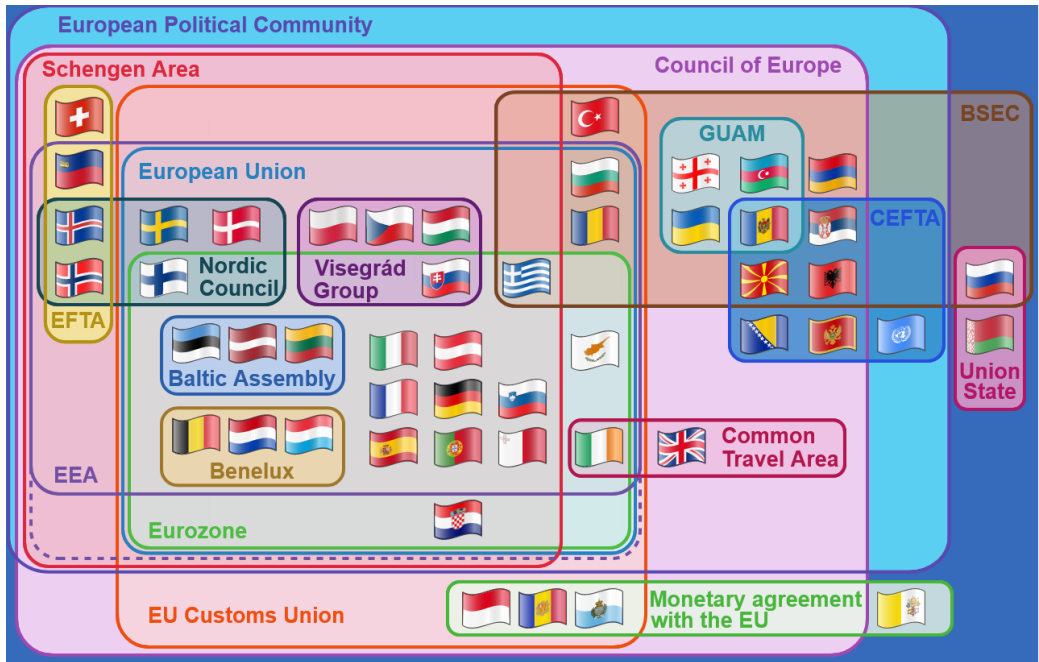
the EU. This community should be a forum where EU member countries, candidate countries, as well as those that do not want to be EU members but have deserved to be EU members through their democratic system (eg EFTA members), can openly communicate all the advantages and disadvantages of EU membership. EPC should show candidate countries how to behave and consume EU membership, how to communicate challenges, how to cooperate and how to build common capabilities and opportunities, how to build democracy, a safe and stable society, and state institutions that will serve their citizens.

China's "One Belt One Road" initiative has completely different goals and is built on completely different foundations. Which are not necessarily useful for all stakeholders of the process.

An additional reason why Ukraine should be given all the necessary help in defense against Russian aggression lies in the fact that the victory of Ukraine will affect the realization of the concept of the Russian world. Ukraine's victory will reduce its negative potential and possibly lead to its collapse. In such a way, the concept of the Serbian world, which Serbia designed based on the concept of the Russian world, will be affected. Serbia's negative potential in "creating internal and exporting" instability to its environment will be reduced. Serbia will be forced to really face itself with the challenges it has been suppressing for decades. This process should not be guided by short-term but long-term solutions. If Serbia (and this also applies to other countries that want to become a member of the EU, but are unable to honestly and completely face numerous challenges) does not identify and recognize all its vulnerabilities and weaknesses that prevent its democratization and deradicalization, and as such enters the EU , these vulnerabilities and weaknesses will continue to be the target of malicious

attackers. Who will be able to successfully use them to promote their own goals and further destabilize society and the state. But this time, societies and countries that are members of the EU. This is not something that the EU should allow itself.

The following picture[33] shows us all the complexity of relations and various integration actions on the European continent:

In facing the numerous challenges that burden and slow down the European future, the WB6 should use the key strategic determinants that Croatian politics recognized and articulated with the aim of creating, becoming independent, winning and democratizing the Republic of Croatia in the period from 1990-

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[33] https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6a/Supranational_European_Bodies.svg

1998. There are three key determinants (stratagems) of this strategy[34]:

1. The rule of continuous interaction and communicative openness.
   a. Advocating, explaining, making available to the general public (at the national and international level) one's own positions, decisions, actions, consequences related to the negotiation process.
   b. Acquaint the target audience with all the consequences of the negotiation process and possible accession to the EU.
   c. Creating communication strongholds in business, social, and media circles with the aim of providing objective information about the access process and its development with all the consequences.
   d. Pointing out the necessity of harmonizing the policies of the candidate country with EU policies, pointing out the fact that it is not about "some administration over there that makes decisions against the will of the member states" but about a process where all member states have an essential role in the process of making them.
   e. Recognizing and identifying actors who will try to negatively influence the negotiation process through their actions.
   f. Identifying individuals, groups, organizations, legal entities that are aware of the reality and that can serve in the fight against disinformation that the stakeholders of this process will face.

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[34] Miroslav Tuđman, Gordan Akrap: Strategijske odrednice dr. Franje Tuđmana 1990.-1998. (u procesima stvaranja, obrane i oslobađanja Hrvatske); ppt prezentacija, IPA Split, 3.8.2023.

2. Strategic problem solving, i.e. recognition and prioritization.
   a. Recognition of priorities that all parties should effectively face in the negotiation process; identifying the real bearers of negative activities both on the national and international scene is of key importance in the realization of this stratagem.
   b. Recognition of priorities affects the determination of the sequence of activities as well as cause-and-effect relationships in the realization of other stratagems.
   c. Recognition and engagement of all those who can help in the processes of democratization and de-radicalization of society and the state that is in the negotiation process.

3. Neutralizing the opponent by isolation[35]
   a. Recognizing and identifying the real opponents of the negotiation process both at the national and international level.
   b. The ultimate goal is not to underestimate or force an individual pretender to membership, but to identify the opponents (and their vectors of attack) of that process, which with their destructive action can negatively affect not only

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[35] When we talk about the opponent (or opponents) of the enlargement and accession negotiation processes, we are talking about a situation where the majority of the population of a particular country has expressed a preference for joining the EU. While a minority of the population, especially guided and manipulated by certain malicious interests, uses different methods and means (including and violent) in order to slow down or stop that process. We repeat that no one should be forced to enter the EU. The EU is a community of states that have voluntarily decided to share part of their sovereignty with other member states, connect, integrate their knowledge, abilities and opportunities with other EU states, and gather around the same system of values, beliefs and principles of living in a free democratic world.

the accession process but also numerous other democratic processes in that country. But also at the EU level.

c. Define, and organize the implementation of strategies that should be used in the fight against the opponent's strategies.

d. Only democratic methods and means may be used in these and other activities.

e. Isolate the adversary/adversaries at the national and international level, clearly and publicly describe them, connect them with their malicious and harmful actions as well as the vectors, means and methods they use in this malicious action.

The following fact should be clearly and unequivocally communicated to all target audiences in orer to avoid making a strategic mistake and replacing theses:

- Membership in the EU is not and should not be a goal. Membership must be understood as a means to achieve the ultimate goal that society and state are facing with: democratization, de-radicalization, freedom of movement of people, goods and services, gathering with the aim of integrating knowledge, abilities and opportunities both on an individual and collective level, at the level of physical and legal persons, strengthening one's own resistance and resilience to future/emerging risks and threats by acting through established mechanisms of assistance, cooperation and recovery, and numerous other advantages that EU membership entails.

Conclusion

 In May 2019[36] We published "Analysis - European Union and the Western Balkans: opportunities, challenges, solutions". Even today, we stand behind the claims that describe all the complexity and demandingness of the numerous challenges that WB6 is burdened with:

> *Currently, the ability to design relevant policies and consistently implement the necessary social transformations is questionable. This is crucial if one wants to really consolidate the democratic order and develop a market economy. However, the dynamics of the transformation are burdened by the problems of the historical legacy - the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia in the whirlwind of war and military operations initiated by Milošević's nationalist regime, which decisively determined the relations between the newly formed neighboring states (except Albania). Economic stagnation, as one of the most significant problems in the countries of the Western Balkans, is mostly not solved, or it is done in the wrong way or with the wrong, professionally, and morally immature people. By abusing and manipulating feelings of national identity, political actors have been in power for decades, consolidating the partitocratic way of governance.*

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[36] https://zagrebsecurityforum.com/analysis/id/1077

Because of all this, it can be said that the countries of the Western Balkans are an example of underdeveloped democracies, devastated and divided societies, weak economies, oases of organized crime, which is why, and what is completely visible from the political and economic processes in the last year, they represent an easy target for Russia, China and Turkey, which increasingly aggressively want to expand their influence in that area.

WB6[37] is an area, that should be high on the list of international (but at the same time internal) issues that the EU institutions must effectively deal with. The EU, with its various instruments at its disposal (primarily financial assistance instruments, business and other investments, support programs, knowledge exchanges, cooperation with other institutions at the EU level as well as at the level of the member states, cross-border development projects) can significantly influence stabilization of the WB6 area. Returning to the settings of the Berlin Process[38], giving support to the European political community is a necessity.

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[37] Source of picture: https://eng.cepsmn.org/a-new-momentum-for-progress-in-the-western-balkans/wb6-3/
[38] Source of picture: https://www.dw.com/hr/zapadni-balkan-ima-koristi-od-berlinskog-procesa/a-58147352

This is not just about the possibility that someone else (Russia, China, Turkey, Arab countries) will "enter" that area and slowly but surely take control over it. It is about the fact that the WB6 area (that is, the narrower areas of the Balkans) is known to be politically and security very unstable, because it is exposed to numerous different and mutually opposing political forces. This is one of the reasons why it is difficult to find a universally acceptable solution that can be applied to all WB6 countries at the same time. Through gradual integration (on an individual level after meeting the set criteria), the WB6 member states can and should become EU members in order to reduce the long-term crisis potential, which is high if the WB6 states do not accept the European system of values, beliefs and principles. In this way, the level of external and security threats that exist within the EU will decrease. Future migrant crisis (and there will be even more of them as climate change worsens, especially in the area of Africa and Central Asia and the Middle East) will be easier to manage if that area is connected by institutional ties with the EU. The level of internal conflicts will decrease and space will be created for the economic progress of the more developed EU member states: and then we can expect a repetition of the process of moving highly skilled workforce from the new EU member states to those in which the standard is higher. The issue of security and stability of Southern and Southeast Europe is directly related to issues of stability and security of the WB6.

In this sense, it is necessary to encourage the adaptation of public change towards EU integration, strengthening the

influence of the non-governmental sector and civil society, encouraging sustainable investments, clearly showing all the many benefits that the new EU members have gained through their membership, depoliticization and building an educational system that will be inclusive, true, relevant and integrative, encouraging media freedom, human rights, independence of the repressive and judicial system. It is necessary to constantly work on the de-radicalization of societies and states, and especially on preventing media discourse that can be used in political activities to gain certain political points but which divides society and the state. And thus makes it an easier target for various malicious disinformation activities of the adversary.

In this way, it will simultaneously be easier and simpler to face the numerous security challenges that the WB6 is already facing today, as well as those that this area will face, which will have their origin in malicious actors such as Russia today. And tomorrow someone third.

The issue of a safe, stable and sustainable future of this area is directly related to educating and creating responsible political elites who must face their own problems, honestly and decisively, and solve them in direct cooperation with their neighbors, partners, friends and multinational organizations such as, primarily, the EU. Building stable societies, honestly and completely solving the accumulated ethnic problems, confronting the real reasons for the violent breakup of Yugoslavia, creating a culture of dialogue and cooperation, by strengthening the awareness of belonging to the EU regardless of religious and ethnic differences, is a

model that should be followed when facing all the challenges that have shaped this area for several centuries.

Russia primarily creates disinformation in the Serbian media space and mercilessly spreads it to other media spaces, both in the area of WB6 and beyond. There are numerous examples that point to this Russian-Serbian connection[39]. The fight against this form of malicious influence operations must be carried out on an integrated level by strengthening the capabilities of the entire society, by creating and strengthening society's trust in state institutions at the national and international level, by permanent education, by developing one's own capabilities to protect (established and clearly defined) value systems, principles and beliefs on which a particular community is based. A key role in this process can be played by civil society together with the media, which should return to responsible quality journalism. It is also necessary to undertake a number of institutional and development activities that will bring large technology companies under control and supervision in that segment where they can appear as negative multipliers of malicious information operations of influence (because the primary thing for technology companies is the creation of material wealth in relation to the truth and long-term sustainable society) due to the different priorities of the state and technology companies[40].

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[39] https://zagrebsecurityforum.com/analysis/id/2089,
https://zagrebsecurityforum.com/analysis/id/2091,
https://zagrebsecurityforum.com/analysis/id/2090,
https://zagrebsecurityforum.com/analysis/id/3098,
https://zagrebsecurityforum.com/analysis/id/3099,
https://zagrebsecurityforum.com/analysis/id/3103,
https://zagrebsecurityforum.com/analysis/id/3106,
https://zagrebsecurityforum.com/analysis/id/3107,
https://zagrebsecurityforum.com/analysis/id/4183

[40] The priority of the state should be the common good of all residents, while the priority, especially of large technology companies, is the creation of monopoly status and increase of profit.