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by **Vanessa Tinker**

Will the Ensuing Conflicts in the Western Balkans Undermine EU Integration Efforts

Since Russia's attack of Ukraine in late February 2022, the EU has stepped up efforts to speed up accession talks with Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. The EU regards the integration of the Western Balkan states more critical than ever in maintaining Europe's security, not only due to the ensuing war in Ukraine, but also because the unresolved conflicts in the Western Balkans continue to pose as a threat of becoming flashpoints on its borders. By speeding up efforts, the EU also seeks to offset Russia's power hold in the region and potential of exploiting unresolved conflicts. Along with Russia, the EU views China's increased interest and engagement in the region unsettling. For these reasons, EU leaders and their counterparts in the Western Balkans have worked to strengthen their partnership to reshape the geopolitical balance in the region.

Already before Russia initiated war in Ukraine, the prospects of all six Western Balkan countries gaining full membership in the EU seemed bleak. Western Balkan countries became disillusioned with modest progress made since the first initial accession talks in 2003 due to issues within the EU and in the region itself. Western Balkan countries found themselves struggling to implement the EU's strict economic, political, and rule of law reforms. To revamp the accession process, the EU, in 2018, developed the Enlargement Strategy for the Western Balkans offering a practical strategy supported by EU engagement that indicated the possibility of accession as early as 2025. However, efforts were undermined when the decision to open negotiations on Albania and North Macedonia's accession were postponed in 2019, despite recommendations from the European Commission and European Parliament. Not only did this damage the EU's credibility in the region, but it also fueled nationalistic rhetoric and left a power vacuum that third-country powers such as China and Russia have sought to fill.

However, the EU's former impasse with the Western Balkan countries is now recognized as dangerous with Russia's ensuing war in Ukraine. To show the EU is serious about revamping and accelerating accession talks with Western Balkan states, Albania and North Macedonia finally held their first inter-government accession conferences and BiH received its official candidate status in 2022. The

EU has provided concrete signs that that it is ready to find ways to improve cooperation in the areas of migration, cybersecurity and diplomatic ties.

In return, they expect full solidarity from its Western Balkans partners, to deliver on key reforms, and fully align themselves with the bloc's foreign policies. This has proven difficult for Serbia, whose President Aleksandar Vucic has attempted to play both sides – arguing that Serbia wants to join the EU on the one hand while maintaining and strengthening ties with Russia on the other. Despite pressure from EU leaders, Vucic has refused to condemn Moscow for its war in Ukraine.

Despite EU's recent efforts to accelerate the accession process of the Western Balkan states, several roadblocks remain, the two primary ones being between Kosovo and Serbia and within Bosnia and Herzegovina. Concerning Kosovo and Serbia, the question remains whether the two countries will be able to reach a normalization agreement that has the enormous potential of stabilizing the region tainted by a history of ethnic conflict. In the case of BiH, it remains to be seen if the country's new candidate status will provide it with enough momentum to meet major reform requirements or whether divisive nationalist politics will continue to persist. In light of recent events, the outlook currently seems bleak. What remains needed is greater coordination, engagement, and commitment between EU and Western Balkan leaders.

Bosnian Serbs celebrate forbidden holiday

Despite a court ban, Bosnian Serbs came together 9 January 2023 to celebrate Republika Srpska Day, marking the 31st anniversary of the entity's founding. Celebrations in the past have been celebrated in Baja Luka, the de-facto capital of the Republika Srpska entity. However, this year, the event took place in the Serb-majority East Sarajevo. The event brought together an estimated 2,500 participants including Bosnian Serb police officers, student representatives of the institutions of Republika Srpska, and reportedly 20 members of the pro-Kremlin bikers club Night wolves, along with members of other radical and extremists groups such as the Wagner group, although their attendance was never verified.

The holiday is controversial because 9 January 1992 marks the date Bosnian Serbs proclaimed Republika Srpska as an independent Republic of Bosnia and Herze-

govina. The proclamation triggered the beginning of the Bosnian war that lasted from 1992 to 1995, resulting in an estimated 100,000 deaths, and a genocide in Srebrenica. Despite the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court for former Yugoslavia declaring the killing of more than 8,000 Bosniaks by Bosnian Serb forces in Srebrenica a genocide, Bosnian Serb officials, and neighboring Serbia continue to reject this claim. A large part of Serbian society, including the current Serb Republic separatist President Milorad Dodik, continue to glorify convicted war criminals such as former Serb General Ratko Mladic and former Serb political leader Radovan Karadzic, both found guilty by international courts of genocide in Srebrenica and for overseeing the three year siege of Sarajevo. To offset attempts by Bosnia's Serbs to deny genocide took place in BiH, outgoing head of Bosnia's Office of the High Representative criminalized genocide denial and the glorification of war criminals. Nevertheless, the Serb Republic separatist President along with other Bosnian Serb leaders have refuted its existence. In response to the recent celebration of "RS day" the current Office of High Representative Christian Schmidt condemned the unconstitutional celebration and expressed grave disapproval of the blatant disregard for the Constitution of BiH, the rule of law, and open contempt for decisions and the authority of the BiH Constitutional Court, as well as the disrespect for the powers and decisions of the Constitutional Court of BiH.

President of the Bosnian Serb entity Defends awarding Putin with a medal of honor

Alongside of the controversy surrounding the celebration of the National Day of Republika Srpska 9 January 2023, the President of the Bosnian Serb entity Milorad Dodik awarded Russian President Vladimir Putin the highest medal of honor for being "the most honest guarantor of peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina". The President faced an immediate backlash after. BiH Presidency member, Denis Becirovic, during a meeting with EUFOR Commander in BiH, Anton Wessley, strongly condemned Dodik's decision referred to as an "immoral act", representing a "civilizational shame" that demonstrates he is one of Putin's puppets set to destabilize the Western Balkan region. Additionally, two members of the European Parliament called upon the EU's legislative body addressed to 27 governments of the European bloc to sanction Dodik and his associates as the US and UK did last year for undermining the country's territorial integrity. The Ukrainian ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Vasily Kirilich, also

called this decision "an award from one terrorist to another." Dodik has sense then attempted to justify his decision and has argued that it had nothing to do with the war in Ukraine but rather for Putin's unwavering support for RS.

China's growing influence in the Western Balkans

For the past decade, China has emerged as an influential power in the Western Balkans, causing a major geopolitical shift in Europe. China has sought to improve its position in several key areas including energy and infrastructure. However, in recent years, China has sought to widen its scope of activities that have extended well beyond the economy and interaction with state institutions. China and Russia have been able to gain a foothold in the region due to the EU's former geopolitical impasse as illustrated in the delays in the EU accession process and the developmental gap with the rest of Europe. This in turn left a power vacuum that has enabled external, non-Western actors such as China and Russia to position and insert themselves in the region to carry out their long-term goals. The war in Ukraine however demonstrated the need of the EU to revamp and accelerate integration efforts of the Western Balkan countries to thwart possible spillover as well as avoid Russia and China's further entanglements in the region. Although the EU remains the leading economic partner in the Western Balkans, with 70 % of total foreign direct investment and 81 % of exports, China has succeeded in portraying itself as a strategic investor who does not intervene in internal political affairs or concern itself with corruption or labor laws. According to the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), China invested €32 billion in the region in 2009-2021. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents a key example of China's increasing economic presence in the region that has provided the country with access to critical land and maritime routes. China's position has also been helped by providing loans and investments that has created dependencies, even debt-traps, for the six Western Balkan states. More recently, this has come to the light, casting fears of China's potential power hold in the region, and concerns regarding environmental protection, human rights violations, and the promotion of the authoritarian model, all of which undermine the EU accession prospects for the Western Balkan states.