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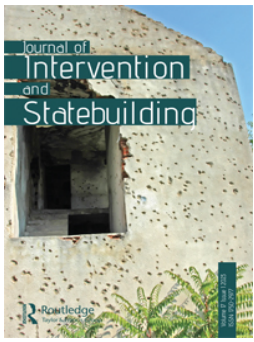
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An Impenetrable Knot of Blended Conflicts? The National Identity Constraints of European Integration in the Western Balkans

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ABSTRACT

Hampered by serious problems within some countries of the region and in their relationship with the European Union, the European integration process in the Western Balkans has been uneven and protracted. Existing deep-seated problems have so far escaped sustainable solutions, in part because of the mismatch between EU expectations and individual countries' capabilities. We conclude that managing integration by managing conflict and vice versa is the only credible alternative to the continuation of policies that prolong a situation, which will otherwise remain volatile and vulnerable to exploitation by other actors, including Russia and China.

KEYWORDS

Western Balkans; European union; integration; national identity; blended conflict

At the end of June 2022, almost four months into the war in Ukraine, the European Council granted Moldova and Ukraine official candidate status, some three months after the two countries had submitted their official applications. This was in stark contrast to developments in the Western Balkans where progress towards European (and transatlantic) integration has been significant but remains uneven more than two decades since the June 2003 Thessaloniki Summit when the European Union (EU) confirmed the potential candidate status of the then five Western Balkan states.

The five countries that were confirmed as potential candidate states for EU membership in 2003 were Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the then Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and the then State Union of Serbia and Montenegro (dissolved in 2006). Kosovo, at the time, was still recognised by all EU member states as a province of Serbia. Slovenia, by contrast, was already negotiating its membership and joined the Union in 2004. Since then, Croatia joined the EU in 2013, while Albania (2014), Montenegro (2010), North Macedonia (2005), and Serbia (2012) became official candidate countries. Official membership negotiations started for Albania and North Macedonia in July 2022. The EU granted Bosnia and Herzegovina candidate status in December 2022, while Kosovo remains a potential candidate country. At the same time, Slovenia (2004),

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Croatia (2009), Albania (2009), Montenegro (2017), and North Macedonia (2020) have also become members of NATO.

This integration process has progressed at very different speeds across the countries of the region and has seen significant delays stemming, among others, from perceived, and in some cases actual, lack of progress in democratisation and institution building, in tackling corruption and organised crime, and, in the case of Kosovo and Serbia, in normalising their relations. The causes and effects of these delays mean that serious problems remain within the Western Balkans and in their relationship with the EU.

The 2020 Zagreb Declaration reiterates that not all is well in the region and that whatever positive track record may exist is easily offset by the continuing stagnation on a number of key issues, including in the field of the rule of law and socio-economic reforms that are particularly significant for the integration process. In the declaration, EU leaders emphasised, for example, that.

[f]urther and decisive efforts need to be devoted to reconciliation and regional stability, as well as to finding and implementing definitive, inclusive and binding solutions to partners' bilateral disputes and issues rooted in the legacy of the past, in line with international law and established principles, including the Agreement on Succession Issues. (Council of the European Union 2020, 3)

At the same time,

[t]he EU and the Western Balkans partners recognise that results in the fight against corruption and organised crime are essential for the region's political and socio-economic transformation and for regional stability and security, which are in the best interest of their people. Stronger efforts and a solid track record are needed in these areas. (Council of the European Union 2020, 5)

The same shortcomings were echoed in the Commission's October 2022 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, which noted that despite

the progress made, strong political will to establish a track record of reform implementation has yet to be demonstrated. Progress towards fulfilling the economic accession criteria has been too slow to substantially narrow the economic gap with the EU. Political and institutional resistance to change continues and negative developments have been observed in some countries. These pertain, for example, to an increasingly hostile environment for civil society, freedom of expression and freedom of the media, and attempts to exercise undue influence and political interference on the judiciary. (European Commission 2022, 8)

The fact that progress on the above issues has remained limited more than a decade-and-a-half after the endorsement of the Thessaloniki Agenda for the Western Balkans requires not only a search for solutions but above all a better explanation of the causes of this stalling. Moreover, understanding why progress has been possible in some countries but not in others is helpful in assessing whether there is a credible path forward for the future European integration process in the Western Balkans and what it might look like in relation to different countries in the region.

This is the task that the contributions preceding our conclusion take on. Drawing on the work of Hansen and Wæver (2002), the three author teams examine the impact of national identity on the policies that the seven states that emerged from the dissolution of Yugoslavia (Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia) have pursued in relation to their European integration (or lack

thereof). The authors use Hansen and Wæver's three-layered theoretical framework to examine the conceptualisation of nation, state, and Europe, and how differences in the understanding of each concept shape these states' foreign policies towards the EU (see the introduction to the Special Issue, Keil and Stahl 2023). All three of the empirical contributions are structured around a three-layered analysis: what is the relationship between nation and state in those countries, what is the state-nation relationship towards Europe, and finally how this dynamic of relationships translates into actual foreign policy towards the EU integration for each country.

Looking at the countries' foreign policy through that prism offers an in-depth understanding of the drivers of their foreign policy, and allows the authors to identify incompatibilities between concepts, intentions, and actual foreign policies. The authors adopt a historically-informed perspective on the evolution of differential foreign policies, which, in turn, is useful for the detection of triggers of policy change. Being able to identify such change is important for anticipating and preventing the eruption of latent conflicts into crises in a region that comprises relatively young, and still contested and unstable states, who all aspire to join the EU (at least in terms expressed in their membership applications). However, European integration is not the only available strategic foreign policy choice at a time of continuing Russian influence in the region and a growing Chinese presence. This raises the question of how long the EU will be the preferred partner for co-operation for the non-EU Western Balkans countries. Multiple delays, demoralisation of the local population towards the EU policies and values, and growing frustration have started to push some Western Balkans countries away from the EU. The outcome of a shift away from the EU would have unpredictable consequences for regional stability.

In this conclusion, we begin with a summary of the main findings in each of the preceding three contributions. We draw freely on the material presented there and add some of our own insights into this overview. Having established this baseline, we offer some further analysis of our own, focusing on specific aspects that we consider particularly important in understanding the dynamics of EU integration in the Western Balkans in the context of Hansen and Wæver's theoretical framework. First, we examine the dynamics of internal, external, and transboundary contestations of state and nation. Second, we reflect on the different options that the current non-EU member states in the region have to achieve greater congruence between their national identity and their foreign policy including the possibility of greater alignment with Russia or China. We end with some brief observations on the policy implications for the EU and argue that the interlinking of integration and conflict management is the only way to escape continuing policies that only prolong a stalled and potentially volatile situation.

The state of affairs: National identity and foreign policy in the Western Balkans

Bojinović-Fenko, Keil, and Šabič (2023) analyse the state-nation concept in Slovenia and Croatia and examine the impact of Europeanisation on the concept. They argue that both states are *Kulturnationen*, i.e. countries where statehood is strongly rooted in the nation that pre-dates it. In that sense, the state-nation concept is limited to members of the same culture and the same ethnic origin. However, the way in which the two

countries came to this state-nation identity is different. Slovenia has been – in an ethnic sense – a relatively homogenous territory for many centuries and therefore this identity has been formed more naturally, and fairly peacefully. This was not the case in Croatia, though, where the state became more ethnically homogeneous during and after the break-up of Yugoslavia, through the military victory in the so-called Homeland War and domestic policies of ethnic cleansing. At the same time, however, this domestic consolidation of the nation stands in contrast to the external incongruence of state and nation. Because the consolidation of the Croatian state was forged through war, there is a very strong and emotional connection between the Croatian nation and the Croatian state, while the Slovenian concept to nationhood is a relatively more open one.

The different ways in which the state-nation concept was formed in Slovenia and Croatia, shaped also a different trajectory in their foreign policy, at least in the beginning. Slovenia used the strong economic relations it had with Western European states even before the dissolution of Yugoslavia to present itself as a small, but inherently European state. It placed itself naturally in the European family and distanced itself from the violent post-Yugoslav space. Croatia, however, initially othered Europe as an actor that failed to protect Croatia at the time of need. This perception of Europe in combination with Franjo Tuđman's authoritarian government and human rights violations against minorities resulted in a strained relationship between Croatia and Europe. This changed only after the death of Tuđman in 1999 and the defeat his party suffered in the parliamentary elections of 2000, signifying the re-orientation of the country's foreign policy towards Europe. Since then Croatia has had a strong European focus, which has been reflected in practice by domestic reforms aiming to consolidate democratic governance, rule of law, an open market economy, and the normalisation of relations with the other former Yugoslav states. However, because of the strong and emotional connection between the conceptions of nation and state and because of their external incongruence, relations with post-Yugoslav states remain tense, especially with Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Croatian policies at times are openly irredentist.

In terms of actual policies towards EU integration, the two countries present many similarities. Both states perceive themselves as fundamentally European, in terms of history, culture and values and both came to regard EU integration as an essential objective of foreign policy. As a result, good relations with EU states became a priority. Similarly, good neighbouring relations with the former Yugoslav states and the demonstration of support for their EU integration turned into another priority of Slovenian and Croatian foreign policy. In their latter role, both states aspired to distance themselves from their Balkan identity and firmly position themselves as Central European states acting as a bridge between Europe and the Balkans. What this shows in terms of state-nation concept is that both states project themselves as European states that offer support to the other Western Balkans states without, however, identifying themselves as such.

The Croatian and Slovenian experience stands in stark contrast to that of Serbia and Montenegro. Džankić, Mladenov, and Stahl (2021) demonstrate how different the constellation of national identity has been for these two countries and how this has affected their foreign policy vis-à-vis the EU. Through the prism of how meanings of state, nation, and Europe interact in these two countries, they explain why Montenegro's European course has been initially faster and smoother than the Serbian one.

Similar to Croatia and Slovenia, Serbia is a *Kulturnation*. The nation is tightly coupled to the state as well as to kin that resides outside the borders of the state. The Serbian image of the nation, formed through myths and a deeply rooted sense of historical sacrifice and victimisation is a complex amalgam that comprises Serbia as a state, Serbs inside and outside that state, and territories that are perceived historically as Serbian even though they are no longer populated by (a majority of) Serbs, such as Kosovo. The formation of the Montenegrin nation, on the other hand, was more fluid, with Montenegrin national identity shifting between a Serbian and a Montenegrin one until the country's independence in 2006. Since then Montenegro has been defined more in civic terms, and this, in turn, has been reflected in its pro-European foreign policy.

Although for both countries European integration is a priority, Montenegro has been able to move relatively faster towards this end – partly because the country's European orientation predated its independence, and partly because Montenegro, once independent, swiftly recognised the asymmetrical relationship between itself and Europe in the accession process. Furthermore, its elites were willing to comply with EU accession conditionality, including by implementing the necessary domestic reforms. At the same time, Europe has been projected as an ideal worth pursuing and a safe haven, which contributed to increasing the support of the general public for European integration. Yet, in our view, Montenegro's progress towards the goal of EU membership is also quite shallow. While the country may have opened 33 of the 35 chapters (compared to Serbia's 22), it has only closed three so far (compared to Serbia's two). Montenegro's institutions remain fragile and as a state it is weaker and less functional than Serbia, which makes it more vulnerable to external influence. It remains to be seen whether elite and popular enthusiasm for European integration, and EU support, will be sufficient to overcome these problems.

Serbia, by contrast, faces a much more complicated set of relationships between its collective understanding of state, nation, and Europe. There are still pending issues of normalisation and reconciliation, especially with Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which go to the heart of the Serbian national identity, and which includes both people and territory beyond the borders of the country. Thus, these unresolved issues continue to exercise a destabilising effect on the region as a whole and its relations with the EU. Moreover, in contrast to Montenegro, and partly because of a very different construction of the Serbian self throughout history, the country has yet to recognise the asymmetrical dynamic of the accession process. Both of these sets of issues, in turn, profoundly constrain Serbian foreign policy towards Europe, something that is not always fully appreciated in Brussels. What is on offer – normalisation of relations with Kosovo in exchange for integration – does not (yet) match what is considered acceptable within the electorate. While there are some indications that the Serbian state-nation concept is not as fixed and unchangeable element of its identity as it may appear, change in ways that might more easily accommodate a solution of the so-called Serbian question in the region and closer alignment with Europe will neither be quick nor easy. In fact, one might argue, such change, especially if forced and rushed, carries the risk of potentially counter-productive effects that could further destabilise the country, the region, and the relations with the EU.

In the final contribution, Koneska, Huskic, and Krasniqi (2023) focus on North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. They investigate how contested statehood and

nationhood impact these countries' foreign policies towards the EU and assess how the intensity and trajectory of these contestations increase or weaken their prospects for accession. From all the countries that emerged as a result of the disintegration of Yugoslavia, these three cases present the ones with the most severe incompatibilities between the concepts of nation, state, and Europe. In all three countries, collective national identities as well as the meaning of state and nation are challenged both internally and externally, destabilising the discourses on Europe and the countries' policies towards Europe.

In the case of North Macedonia the predominant view is that it is a *Kulturnation*. This view, however, is problematic as it excludes the significant Albanian population the country includes and other minorities, leading to an internal contestation of the state. Externally, the country has faced, until recently, three main challenges to its national identity – Greece contested its post-independence constitutional name, Bulgaria has denied that its language was distinct, and the Serbian Orthodox Church has denied recognition of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. The church dispute goes back to the 1967 declaration of autocephaly by the Macedonian Orthodox Church and remains unresolved as of today (Marusic and Zivanovic 2019). The long-standing disputes with Greece over the country's name and with Bulgaria over the status of its language led to an external contestation which brought about both symbolic and tangible challenges for the country and the realisation of its foreign policy, especially concerning membership in regional and international organisations, including NATO and the EU (Casule and Krasimirov 2017; Lowen 2019). The name dispute with Greece was resolved in 2018 allowing North Macedonia to join NATO in March 2020, three days after the official start of its accession talks had been confirmed by the EU's Council of Ministers in March 2020. However, the agreed name North Macedonia does not enjoy popular support within the Macedonian population as it seen as a betrayal of the Macedonian nation. Matters have become even more complicated following Bulgaria reiterating its position that North Macedonia's EU accession should not go ahead unless the latter rescinds claims to its own (i.e. non-Bulgarian) history, culture, and language (Georgievski 2020). This adds another problematic layer to the already brittle foundations on which North Macedonia's national identity rests.

The state-nation concept in Bosnia and Herzegovina remains equally highly contested as in North Macedonia, but for somewhat different reasons. The ethno-territorialisation, the extensive de-centralisation and the division of power according to ethnicity has led to a disassociation between state and nation. The identification with the Bosnian state has largely been limited to Bosniaks, while Bosnian Croats and especially Bosnian Serbs remain more closely attached to their neighbouring kin-states in terms of national identification. This internal challenge is mirrored by the external challenges to the country's territorial integrity. Although they have diminished over time and are no longer part of official government rhetoric, irredentist claims to Bosnian territory from both Serbia and Croatia are still seen as threats by Bosniaks. The potency of such threats is heightened because of the simultaneous internal challenges to the very idea of the Bosnian state as it is currently constituted. These multiple identity challenges in combination with systemic and endemic corruption, weak institutional capacity, which is dominated by the respective ethno-nationalist approaches on how the state should be run, have turned Bosnia and Herzegovina into a dysfunctional country (Kartsonaki 2016). Finally, although EU integration is projected as a top foreign policy priority, it is debatable whether this is an actual goal of the elites, whose interests would probably be damaged through the

strengthening of the rule of law and the consolidation of state institutions as stipulated in the EU accession process.

Similar to Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, and North Macedonia, Albania is also seen as a *Kulturnation*. The Albanian understanding of the state-nation concept has evolved in the last two decades allowing for nation and state to be regarded as separate units. As a *Kulturnation*, not all Albanians are part of a single state. Apart from Albania, there are Albanian minorities in Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, while there is a majority in Kosovo. A greater Albania that would have united all of these Albanian populations with that of Albania only briefly existed during the Second World War. Following Kosovo's gradual and internationally conditioned emergence after 1999 as an independent state of its own, the traditional nationalist idea of one nation-one state has turned into the idea of one nation-two states. This has, on the one hand, given rise to two competing unification nationalisms – Greater Albania and Greater Kosovo – and, on the other, to the idea of (Albanian) national unification in Europe. EU integration, thus, is an acceptable goal for all ethnic parties in Kosovo. Nonetheless, more than a decade since its unilateral declaration of independence, Kosovo's foreign policy remains in its infancy (Lika 2023). Kosovo has yet to normalise its relations with Serbia and achieve UN membership, maintaining the country's external sovereignty challenges. This creates a complicated legal and political setting, which greatly inhibits the materialisation of its foreign policy objectives, including in relation to the EU integration process.

Thus, in all three of these countries that Koneska, Huskic, and Krasniqi (2023) examine – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia – the state-nation concept is challenged by an incompatibility between political and national borders and persisting inter- and intra- ethnic tensions. Although, European integration is high on the foreign policy agenda, opposing political goals and ethno-national interests impede the materialisation of a coherent foreign policy towards the EU. Despite the pro-EU discourse and popular support for EU integration, political elites in these countries have failed to overcome the challenges posed by the contested state-nation constellations and their incongruity with the EU accession process. As disagreements prevail over the accommodation of problematic issues, the actual progress towards EU accession remains in a stalemate.

Summing up, all states of the former Yugoslavia project themselves as inherently European and present EU accession as a priority in their foreign policy agendas. The progress they made, however, varies significantly among them for a number of reasons. One of the reasons is the incompatibility most countries face at the state-nation level. With the exception of Slovenia that had a fairly homogenous, geographically concentrated population, all other countries face identity challenges. State borders do not coincide with the Croatian, Serbian and Albanian idea of the nation, the Montenegrin identity is fluid and to an extent still in the making, while the Macedonian identity is contested both internally and externally. In Bosnia and Herzegovina there is barely any overlap between nation and state, since the majority of the Croat and Serb populations still refer to their neighbouring kin states in terms of nationhood. Croatia managed to overcome the challenges faced by this incompatibility and was able to join the EU in 2013. Montenegro has also made significant progress on that aspect, although lacking in other sections inhibit its EU course. The rest of the countries, though, still face deep identity challenges that obstruct their European course. This is also reflected in, and exacerbated by, a differentiated audience approach adopted by Western Balkan leaders, who put on an EU-compatible demeanour

in Brussels, while pandering towards nationalist sentiments at home. It is often the case that domestic public rhetoric and policies towards minorities do not correspond to European standards, policies adopted remain on paper, or are dominated by ethno-nationalist practices. Subtle or explicit territorial aspirations that would damage the territorial integrity of neighbouring states also violate the letter and the spirit of international law on sovereignty and intangibility of borders posing another obstacle to the process of EU integration.

Internal, external, and transboundary contestations of state and nation

Across the Western Balkan region and the individual countries within it, state and nation are contested at three levels: internal, external and transboundary. The intensity of these contestations varies across countries and across time, but it has remained a constant presence for the past quarter century. Internally, state and nation are intensely contested in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia. The resulting fragility of both states and the continuing ethno-national polarisation of societies, while more obvious in Bosnia and Herzegovina than in North Macedonia, is deeply problematic. It has almost paralysed foreign policy processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina and exposed volatilities in North Macedonia, despite the progress made of late. Comparatively speaking, these challenges are less pronounced in Croatia where Serbs, while in a minority, have enjoyed the benefits of Croatia's EU membership. Similarly, in Montenegro the very idea of a Montenegrin identity continues to be challenged by some elements of the Serb community in the country (Jenne and Bieber 2014), while Albanians feel marginalised socially, politically, and economically (Boga and Wolff 2011).

Yet, state and nation are not only challenged internally. One of the legacies of the violent disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, and the much longer history of state-building and nation-formation in the Western Balkans, is the incompatibility of political and ethno-national boundaries. Although no longer pursued by violent means, irredentist claims persist, often overlapping with secessionist aspirations, as part of greater nationalist agendas. To varying degrees, elements within the politically organised Albanian, Serb, and Croat communities continue to challenge the legitimacy of their neighbouring states. It has been impossible, to date, to put these issues to rest. In fact, it is far from clear whether the promise of accession is strong enough to dampen revisionist nationalist aspirations for long enough to facilitate membership. But even then, experience shows that EU integration has been a less-than-perfect solution to resolve similar issues elsewhere, as is evident from the protracted situation in Cyprus, the resurgence of Catalan secessionism, and the re-opening of the Northern Ireland question in the context of Brexit. Thus, EU membership does not preclude the continuation of rhetoric that feeds nationalist sentiments and keeps latent conflicts alive.

Perhaps most challenging, however, are the transboundary contestations in which ethno-nationalist projects threaten the integrity of borders in the post-Yugoslav space. The most pronounced ethno-nationalist projects in the Western Balkans include visions of Greater Serbia, which continue to destabilise Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, and of Greater Albania/Kosovo challenging the territorial integrity of North Macedonia, Serbia, and Montenegro. These transboundary contestations create a web of interconnected potential triggers for violent conflict that would not only destabilise the

immediate region but also have a detrimental impact on EU security. Transboundary contestations and the antagonistic policies they give rise to, can be put aside for a time, as demonstrated in the September 2020 Washington-mediated agreement between Belgrade and Pristina. Yet, even such a temporary fix is neither cost- nor consequence-free. The normalisation of economic ties, which the 2020 agreement focuses on, may be a first important step towards a more comprehensive normalisation of relations between the sides – which has been the explicit objective of the EU in its mediated dialogue since 2011 – but it makes such an outcome far from certain. To the contrary, while economic ties have been shown to contribute to stabilisation, there is little evidence of ‘spill-over’ effects resulting in further political progress (Kemoklidze and Wolff 2020). Moreover, the 2020 agreement does not offer substantially more in terms of economic normalisation than the EU-facilitated dialogue process, but, simply and problematically, decouples economic from political normalisation. While Serbia’s commitment, in the Washington agreement, to move its embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem was at the time heavily criticised as running counter to the EU’s policy on this issue, that move never happened. By contrast, following Israel’s recognition of Kosovo’s independence, the government in Pristina decided to move its embassy to Jerusalem in March 2021. Rather than adding question marks, from Brussels’ perspective, about the extent to which Serbia is willing to comply with EU strategies and policies, this raises concerns over Kosovo’s willingness to do so.

Congruence between national identity and foreign policy: Different options for non-EU members

Within the broader discussion of how the state-nation contestation within and across the Western Balkan countries affects their EU foreign policy choices, we must not forget to consider the availability, and viability, of alternative choices. Russia and China are the predominant alternative partners in this context based on capability and their strategic relationship with the EU (as opposed to other players in the region, such as Turkey and the United Arab Emirates).¹ China, especially through its Belt and Road Initiative and related platforms like the 17 + 1, has significantly increased its presence in the Western Balkan region over the past decade but so far remains predominantly focused on economic relations, viewing the Western Balkans, and South Eastern Europe more generally, as key entry points into the EU market (Vangeli 2017; Pavličević 2018). Russia, by contrast, is economically less heavily engaged in the region and pursues more of a political agenda by supporting authoritarian tendencies and resisting closer Western integration. However, the progress that countries such as North Macedonia and Montenegro have made recently concerning their NATO membership and the fact that, apart from Kosovo, all non-EU member states have now accession negotiations under way demonstrates the limited success of Russia in this regard. Even if continuing Russian and increasing Chinese influence in individual countries in the region may raise the prospect of future Trojan horses within the EU, neither Russia nor China at present offer a comprehensive alternative to further European integration and eventual EU membership.

Moreover, while state-nation contestation dynamics in each of the Western Balkan countries clearly reflect, and shape, a degree of public ambivalence towards European integration and thereby constrain EU foreign policy choices for governments, both

Russia and China constitute equally (if not more) contested options. Where EU and Russian engagement may come with political conditionalities attached, China's so far has been relatively free of such strings. Yet, despite rhetoric to the contrary, Chinese projects do not always have win-win outcomes, as evident, for example, in spiralling national debt levels in Montenegro as a result of Chinese loans for a highway construction project, environmental damage in Montenegro and Serbia due to alleged low Chinese operational standards, and major corruption scandals over the construction of two highways in North Macedonia (Van Der Putten et al. 2016). Any fundamental re-orientation away from the EU, thus, would entail political costs for the elites.

The Western Balkans clearly retain an EU integration perspective. The EU remains the most influential external actor in the region, and the one with the longest track record of engagement in the post-Cold War period. From a geopolitical perspective, one could argue that the Western Balkans are firmly within an EU sphere of influence and that the Union is well-positioned to defend its preeminent role there. Yet, this must not lead to a neglect of other external actors with interests in the region. In an increasingly geo-politicised world and more confrontational positions assumed by actors like Russia, China, and the EU, the Western Balkans are but one geographical region where these actors compete for influence. This does not preclude further progress on the EU integration agenda but in the context of persistent state-nation contestations it adds a further layer of complexity that does not make pro-EU foreign policy choices foregone conclusions either, especially if external actors do not aspire to positive gains (as China does) but only act as spoilers (as Russia does).

Policy implications for the EU: Integration management as conflict management?

The states that emerged from the break-up of Yugoslavia are still relatively new. With the exception of Slovenia and Croatia, their transitions to consolidated democracies are far from complete. Incompatible configurations and conceptualisations of state and nation continue to have a negative impact on both the consolidation of democratic institutions and the formulation and implementation of a coherent, pro-integration European foreign policy in word and deed. Underlying problems include the fact that state institutions have been captured by corrupt, rent-seeking elites, exacerbated in some cases by rigid power-sharing arrangements that reflect and entrench ethno-nationalist divisions and reinforce patterns of corrupt exchanges between relatively unaccountable elites (Prelec 2020). Benefitting from a seemingly stable status quo, change becomes both undesirable and unattainable. Despite popular support for EU integration and the public pronouncements of political elites expressing their commitment towards this end, efforts at meaningful progress continue to fall short.

The goal of the EU in the Western Balkans is to complete a transition process that has stalled for more than a decade now and achieve the accession of the remaining countries in the Western Balkans. Yet, noble as this goal may be, EU efforts to achieve it are, in part, to blame for the fact that these countries have remained in the same limbo of stable instability. As Džankić, Mladenov, and Stahl (2021) observe in this special issue, the West is deeply unaware of deep-rooted identity conflicts, and this is reflected in the EU policies and expectations towards the Western Balkans. The EU continues to

underestimate the complexity of the situation and maintains unrealistic expectations of what is possible and how fast. The resulting EU policies may well backfire in the future when popular support for EU integration further diminishes or when other, equally or more attractive offers, such as from Russia or China become viable.

As long as the majority of the populations in the Western Balkan countries still support EU accession, there is still the prospect that the process of EU integration will transform their countries domestically, enhance the rule of law and combat corruption, strengthen freedom of speech and other human rights, and consolidate viable state institutions. That said, and even with further incentives in the form of greater educational and employment opportunities, there are signs that public support towards the EU has started to diminish. The population becomes increasingly tired of the apparent superficiality of EU strategies and policies that mainly seem to serve the target of security and stability for the EU rather than the actual improvement in the living conditions of the citizens of these countries (Kartsonaki 2020). As the ideal of Europe gradually becomes discredited, even the current level of mostly pragmatic support for integration may not be sustainable.

All this indicates that the Western Balkans remain a zone of a latent blended conflict. Blended conflict is a multi-dimensional conflict that involves multiple, overlapping conflicts between different internal and external conflict parties (Malyarenko and Wolff 2019; Kartsonaki 2020). These conflicts display intense internationalisation, with a high degree of external actors' penetration to the state and/or the whole region. Finally, these conflicts have created, and are sustained by a protracted and complex instability that is typical of fragile states. They have few prospects of achieving self-sustaining peace and instead exhibit an ever-present danger of further escalation within and beyond state borders.

Although the Balkans are not a place of violent conflict anymore, the blended nature of the legacy of the war remains. The deep-rooted identity crisis and the contestation it creates for the state-nation constellation extends beyond the borders of any one state in the region. The presence and activities of external actors like the EU, China, Russia, and the US in the context of complex war legacies and internal, external, and transboundary challenges to conceptions of state and nation across the region create a system of interactions where actions in one state inevitably have effects on other states. Some of these effects may be more benign, such as the resolution of the name dispute between Greece and North Macedonia or the agreement on economic normalisation between Serbia and Kosovo. Yet, even here questions remain. Tensions between Kosovo and Serbia have resurfaced again with a vengeance over the implementation of aspects of the normalisation agreement since the autumn of 2021. The concessions that Bulgaria demanded from North Macedonia to allow the opening of accession negotiations in July 2022, requiring Skopje to accept a constitutional amendment recognising the existence of a Bulgarian national minority, have re-opened fundamental challenges to North Macedonia's state-nation concept.

Others, such as the tightly contested parliamentary elections in Montenegro in August 2020, accusations of external interference, the protracted negotiations on government formation that followed, and the disputes, including over the status of the Serbian Orthodox Church, highlighted the danger of contagion and diffusion of unresolved problems that the region has yet to come to terms with. These problems, tied to state-nation contestations and European foreign policy choices, create further opportunities for external influence from beyond the region and thus sustain the foreign penetration in the Western

Balkans that has been salient in the region even before the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The latter is particularly obvious in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. While Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro aligned with EU sanctions against Russia, Serbia has not so far.

Moreover, local efforts to achieve greater intra-regional integration have stalled of late and laid bare, once again, existing divisions within and between countries. The Open Balkan initiative, championed by Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia, remains confined to these three countries. While Kosovo had initially agreed to join as part of the US-brokered economic normalisation deal, no actual agreement has been signed to implement Kosovo's membership in this initiative. On the contrary, Kosovo appears openly hostile to it and instead favours improvements to the Central European Free trade Area (CEFTA). In Montenegro, the presidency and the government are at odds with each other over the value of Open Balkan, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina's frequently deadlocked political system no agreement has been reached either.

The challenge for the EU in the Western Balkans, therefore, is twofold. On the one hand, the integration process of the remaining non-EU members poses several challenges on its own, both of a technical nature (related to the complexity of the adopting of the *acquis communautaire*) and of a political nature (including, among others, enlargement fatigue in EU capitals and corresponding enlargement disillusionment in the Balkans). On the other hand, this integration process is embedded in a latent blended conflict whose management, let alone settlement, requires a level of engagement and commitment that will be increasingly difficult to muster, not only in Brussels but also in the Western Balkans region itself.

Without a significant change in the domestic politics of the Western Balkan countries and in the EU policies towards them and the region as a whole, the prospect of sustainable stabilisation and a gradual settlement of the latent blended conflict seems as elusive as EU integration. State-nation contestation will continue as long as these countries are governed by elites who consolidated their power in the aftermath of the Yugoslav wars and who draw their legitimacy and authority from the invocation of ethno-nationalist sentiments which challenge conceptions of state and nation within and across boundaries and thrive on their physical and ideological incompatibilities. Identity may be fluid and malleable in the *longue durée*, but each generation regards their perceived identity as fixed and perennial. A change that would reconcile existing state-nation incompatibilities requires systematic and multi-layered efforts from political elites and civil society, willing to alter the narrative around conflictual identities and the othering among and against each nation. To sustain such efforts will require incentives and a realistic appreciation of the time and resources necessary to bring them to fruition.

There can be no doubt that recent EU efforts have a very mixed track record in this regard. Slow and incremental as it may have been, the EU maintained a level of progress in its management of the EU integration process. The prospect of EU membership continues to provide a positive incentive for domestic reform. In the absence of viable alternatives to European integration, this remains an important tool for the EU as much as for pro-European, reform-minded forces in the Western Balkans. At the same time, however, after some two decades of integration management this may not be sufficient to accelerate the pace of progress. Positive incentives are more powerful if they are accompanied by a credible threat of withdrawal in the absence of viable alternatives.

Nevertheless, laying down clear criteria for a permanent closure of the prospect of EU membership would be a bold and risky move on the part of the EU and one that could trigger a resumption of conflict in the region, which, from the start, would be internationalised and bear serious risks of violent escalation. The credibility of any such threat would, therefore, depend on linking integration management and conflict management in more explicit ways, making progress in the former dependent on positive steps regarding the latter. At the same time, such positive steps would need to be attainable within a realistic timeframe. For this to be possible, political elites in the Western Balkans need to appreciate that accession negotiations with the EU are highly asymmetrical – they are not only about timelines, transition periods, and levels of support, but also about the substance of what is required by the *acquis*. In turn, the EU needs to realise that the accession of the remaining Western Balkan countries represents by far the most complex challenge in several decades of enlargement to date. The deep-seated problems in the region and its individual countries have so far escaped sustainable solutions, in part because of mismatched expectations of who can achieve what in which timeframe and with what resource commitments.

Such a perspective is not only essential in the EU-Balkan relations, but also within the region. As the authors of this Special Issue have shown, state-nation contestations that have plagued the region for a long time cannot be resolved overnight, especially not if the relevant sides are unable to appreciate each other's difficulties. Here the EU can play a constructive role, as it has done in the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue since 2011. The Serbia-Kosovo issue is at the very heart of multiple overlapping state-nation contestations, and it is one of the few remaining levers that Russia has in the region. Facilitating further progress on normalisation will be a meaningful link between integration management and conflict management that would also increase the policy options for the EU itself in relation to Kosovo. Managing integration by managing conflict and vice versa is the only credible alternative to the continuation of a set of policies by all sides that simply prolong a situation, which will remain volatile and vulnerable to exploitation. Without this alternative contested nations and states remain contested, and their institutions continue to be weak, keeping aspirations for EU membership rhetorically alive, but failing to make the necessary adjustments that would turn aspirations into reality.

Note

1. One could also consider the US as an alternative partner to Europe, especially when it comes to security arrangements. However, the US and NATO are better seen as complementary to EU integration. Moreover, the US interest in the Western Balkans has significantly waned over the past decade, notwithstanding its brokering of the 2020 agreement on economic normalisation between Serbia and Kosovo.

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