



THE FUTURE IS COOPERATIVE!? **PERCEPTIONS AND REALITY** **FROM THE WESTERN BALKANS**

Dr. Mentor Beqa



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Tel: 00355 4 22 509 86

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*"In an interconnected world,
it is time to recognize a simple truth:
solidarity is self-interest."*

UN SECRETARY GENERAL ANTONIO GUTERRES

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1. INTRODUCTION

The dramatic change in the European security architecture after Russia's aggression against Ukraine has brought back to the fore the strengthening of the security mechanisms in the Western Balkans, which is widely seen as one of the most vulnerable regions when it comes to the Russian subversive interventions. The United States and the European Union have increased their presence in an attempt to resolve the conflicts inherited from the past, while urging for more intra-regional cooperation, including security cooperation.

In this policy paper we investigate:

- the current state of security cooperation in the Western Balkans and;
- the support of the general public in the Western Balkans for security cooperation.

METHOD

The paper is divided in four sections. In the first section, we attempt to conceptualize cooperative security as a form of cooperation that promotes stability and principled based cooperation to establish confidence building mechanisms and collectively tackle threats such as transnational organized crime, cyber threats, climate change and environmental degradation, border control, pandemics, etc. In the second section we review the state of security cooperation in the Western Balkans, the mechanisms in place and if those qualify as 'cooperative security'. In the third section, the paper analyzes findings from surveys conducted in Albania and the Western Balkans countries about the perceptions of security threats from the general public and their attitudes toward deeper regional security cooperation. In the final section, the paper provides some policy recommendations that could help policymakers build on positive perceptions of the public across the Western Balkans to intensify regional security cooperation.

We have used data provided mainly by the fourth edition of the Albanian Security Barometer (2022) conducted in Albania by the Center for the Study of Democracy and Governance, SecuriMeter 2022, a regional survey from Regional Cooperation Council, and 2022 Western Balkans Regional Survey of International Republican Institute's Center for Insights in Survey Research.

KEY FINDINGS

- There is an obvious discrepancy between popular perception in the Western Balkans about the need for regional security cooperation and the actual state of cooperation among the countries of the Western Balkans. While surveys show strong public support for regional security cooperation, many obstacles prevent the intensification of security cooperation.
- Surveys show especially strong support in dealing with common challenges such as combatting organized crime, terrorism, the natural disasters and of cybercrime. Albanian Security Barometer shows that 79.6%, of the respondents think that Albania should develop closer cooperation with all Balkan countries. Securimeter, as well, found out that 70 percent of the public in the Western Balkans supports some sort of regional security cooperation.
- The majority of respondents in Albania see the lack of cooperation between the countries of the Western Balkans as an obstacle to dealing with security challenges. Albanian Security Barometer found out that 72.3% of the respondents think that relations between the Balkan states are currently affected by the lack of cooperation.
- Citizens of the Western Balkans seem to attribute the responsibility for tensions and conflicts, to leaders, political parties and politicians in general. This is confirmed independently by ‘Albanian Security Barometer’ and ‘2022 Western Balkans Regional Survey’ of the International Republican Institute’s Center for Insights in Survey Research.

2. COOPERATIVE SECURITY

2.1 CONCEPTUALIZING COOPERATIVE SECURITY

Cooperative security is an empirical and normative concept at the same time; empirically, it tries to describe the reality of cooperation between countries in the field of security, normatively, to create the image of a world where the conflicts are managed and resolved peacefully. It is inspired by liberal principles that see the world as an arena of cooperation among and between countries made possible within the framework of a rules-based international system. In 1994, former Australian Foreign Minister, Gareth Evans, described Cooperative Security as connoting "...consultation rather than confrontation, reassurance rather than deterrence, transparency rather than secrecy, prevention rather than correction, and interdependence rather than unilateralism".¹ In a broader sense, cooperative security may be defined as "sustained efforts to reduce the risk of war that are not directed against a specific state or coalition of states",² taking place when countries have developed a sense of a common future. Early examples of multilateral cooperative security systems include the Concert of Europe, the League of Nations, and the United Nations. In such cases, the notion is used interchangeably with "Collective Security — a political and legal obligation of member states to defend the integrity of individual states within a group of treaty signatories", - the case of UN - and "... Collective Defense - the commitment of all states to defend each other from outside aggression", - the case of NATO...³

¹ Evans, G. (1994). Cooperative Security and Intrastate Conflict. *Foreign Policy*, 96, 3–20.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/1149213>

² Mihalka, M. (2001). Cooperative Security: From Theory to Practice in Cohen, R. Mihalka, M. *Cooperative Security: New Horizons for International Order*, The Marshall Center Papers, No. 3, 29.
<https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA478928.pdf>

³ Cohen, R. (2001). From Individual Security to International Stability in Cohen, R. Mihalka, M. *Cooperative Security: New Horizons for International Order*, The Marshall Center Papers, No. 3, 3.
<https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA478928.pdf>

2.2 COOPERATION AS SELF-INTEREST

Richard Cohen, a leading author on cooperative security research, considers these attempts to define and shape the concept of Cooperative Security generally reflecting ‘a liberal/idealistic view of the future of world security’⁴. Cohen seeks to “operationalize” the idea, offering an original model integrating four rings of security, in addition to collective defense and collective security. Of these four rings, the new elements of this Cooperative Security model are a common commitment to Individual Security and to Promoting Stability. This conception does not include necessarily a commitment to shared values instead starts from the premise that “solidarity is self-interest”⁵. Under such conception, cooperative security looks both ways, inward and outward, ensuring the security of member states, but most importantly promoting stability and ‘principled based cooperation’ abroad. The central question in this case is ‘not who we should defend ourselves against, but who we need to cooperate with in order to address particular issues’⁶. Within such framework, classical threats and new threats such as climate change and environmental degradation, coping with large flows of refugees and migrants, pandemics, arms control, transnational organized crime, cyber threats, are to be addressed.

2.3 NATO AND EU

Although the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) is the world's largest regional security-oriented intergovernmental organization, NATO has become the world's best example of a Cooperative Security organization, remaining a Collective Defense system, to the extent that it focuses on external threats, acting as a Collective Security organization, when restoring international stability as in Bosnia Herzegovina and in Kosovo, and promoting stability abroad through the network of partnerships. Cooperative Security is one of the overall strategic objectives for partnerships set in the 2010 Strategic

⁴ Cohen, R. (2001). “From Individual Security to International Stability in Cohen”, 4.

⁵ Secretary-General António Guterres of the UN Antonio Guterres. <https://www.ungeneva.org/zh/news-media/news/2020/09/un-chief-appeals-global-solidarity-general-assembly-warns-covid-dress> accessed, 2022.

⁶ Kemp, W. Krumm. R. (2021) “Restoring European Security. From Relationship Management to Principled Cooperation” Vienna: FES Regional Office for Cooperation and Peace in Europe. 29. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/wien/17733.pdf>

Concept and updated in the 2022 Strategic Concept.⁷ NATO maintains a broad network of partnership relations, with Euro-Atlantic countries and beyond. Over two decades, NATO developed Partner relations with over 40 countries. These are grouped in different regional frameworks: the Partnership for Peace (PfP)/Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC), the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI). Partners who do not belong to any of the three formal frameworks are known as Partners across the Globe (PatG).⁸ As it is stated in the news Strategic Concept “partnerships are crucial to protect the global commons, enhance our resilience and uphold the rules-based international order”.⁹ While EU member countries deepen the integration in security and defense sectors, the EU has become an active player in managing conflicts, promoting security and stability in its neighborhood and around the world. The EU and NATO have enhanced their cooperation leading to the development of a broad range of tools to provide greater security sharing a common vision of how they will act together against common security threats. Both EU and NATO play an indispensable role in maintaining security and promoting stability in the Western Balkans.

⁷ https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf, accessed 2022.

⁸ <https://lc.nato.int/operations/military-partnership/nato-partnership>, accessed 2022.

⁹ https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf, accessed 2022.

3. SECURITY COOPERATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

3.1 EXTERNALLY DRIVEN COOPERATION

The Western Balkan countries are connected to NATO and EU with multiple threads. Three countries (Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia) out of Western Balkan Six are members of NATO, Serbia and Bosnia are part of PfP (Partnership for Peace) program, while Kosovo aspires to be NATO member. A similar situation is present in relation to European Union: Montenegro, Serbia, North Macedonia and Albania are in accession negotiations, meanwhile the status of Bosnia e Herzegovina and Kosovo is to be decided in the future. Although relations between the countries of the Western Balkans “are determined by unresolved issues from the past, very intense regional security dynamics, as well as projections of the interests of global powers”, regional cooperation is seen as a step toward the construction of “a kind of security community in the region.”¹⁰ The presence of NATO and EU has contributed to incentivize the implementation of a web of regional mechanisms (despite the ownership) that could facilitate security cooperation among the Western Balkan countries. A myriad of initiatives, some institutionalized with fully functioning secretariats and headquarters, and some limited on the level of projects, have been launched by or with the support of the EU.¹¹ The focus of EU financed mechanisms was to incentivize a regional approach in dealing with common security challenges (transnational organized crime, terrorism, natural disasters, environmental degradation, illegal migration,) and institutionalize the cooperation based on this framework. This multi-frontal engagement of the EU in fostering regional security cooperation created “the perception that this was a more externally driven project, rather than a necessity that internally derives from the region itself”.¹² The EU perceived the necessity to increase the ownership of security cooperation initiatives by transforming the

¹⁰ Djukić. P. Obradović. D. (2020) “The Fate of the Western Balkans Regional Security Subcomplex - The Necessity of Regional Cooperation” Security Science Journal, 1:2.

<http://www.securityscience.edu.rs/index.php/journal-security-science/article/view/27>, accessed 2022.

¹¹ Emini. D. & Marku. D. (2019), “Regional Security Cooperation in the Western Balkans”, Skopje: Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis”. <https://idses.org.mk/en/portfolio/regional-security-in-the-western-balkans-the-role-of-the-berlin-process/> accessed 2022.

¹² Marciacq, Florent. “The European Union and the Western Balkans after the Berlin Process Reflecting on the EU Enlargement in Times of Uncertainty.” FES South East Europe. 2017. Accessed 2022. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/13948.pdf>

Stability Pact into a Regional Security Council (RCC) in 2007 which gradually “became an ‘umbrella’ of regional initiatives in the Balkans covering various fields such as economic and social growth, infrastructure and energy, justice and internal affairs, cooperation for greater security and improving the quality of human resources.”¹³ A new approach to internal security governance and capacity-building hosted by RCC was introduced in 2017, - the IISG (Integrative Internal Security Governance), integrating three pillars: the WBCTi (Western Balkans Counter-Terrorism Initiative), actions related to counter-terrorism and preventing and countering violent extremism; the WBCSCi (Western Balkans Counter Serious Crime Initiative): actions related to fighting serious organised crime; the WBBSi (Western Balkans Border Security Initiative), actions related to border security. This security cooperation patronized by the EU created a short living perception about the future of cooperative security in the Western Balkans making analysts and researchers to claim that “the region has transformed from a consumer (of European security) into a security provider”¹⁴ and that ““it is hard now to imagine the renewal of inter-state armed conflict” because “diplomats, policemen, soldiers, and others brought about the transformation from conflict to peace through their everyday practices.”¹⁵

3.2 BACK TO THE BASICS

The unprovoked aggression of Russia over Ukraine has shattered the European security architecture provoking ‘non-imaginable’ tensions in the Western Balkans. Bosnia and Herzegovina was at the brink of a renewed war and the tensions still remain high, while Serbia increased its pressure over Kosovo provoking rebellious behavior among local Serbs in Kosovo and positioning its army around the Kosovo border. The arms purchase by Serbia – often accompanied by nationalist rhetoric – is perceived as endangering “the fragile trust in a region where conflicts remain unresolved”.¹⁶ Serbia is seen by many

¹³ Emini. D. & Marku. D. (2019), “Regional Security Cooperation in the Western Balkans”, 5.

¹⁴ Klemenc. J. Hrabálek. M. & Đorđević. V. (2021) Regional security cooperation revisited: the Western Balkans as the future security provider, *European Security*, 30:2, 285-304, DOI: 10.1080/09662839.2021.1872545

¹⁵ Stojanović Gajić, S., & Ejđus, F. (Eds.). (2018). *Security Community Practices in the Western Balkans* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315608082>

¹⁶ Marković, Andrej; Perović, Jeronim, (2021) “Undermining Trust: Rearmament in the Western Balkans”, *CSS Analyses in Security Policy* 282.

<https://www.researchcollection.ethz.ch/bitstream/handle/20.500.11850/477494/CSSAnalyse282EN.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y>, accessed 2022

regional leaders and independent analysts as a proxy of Russia.¹⁷ The interstate conflict, what one year ago seemed ‘unimaginable’, now is broadly perceived as a possibility to deal with. This has pushed United States, the EU, Great Britain to rethink their strategy of engagement in the Western Balkans. The United States is leading the process of reconciliation between Albanians and Serbs by bringing Albania closer to Serbia in an effort to find a lasting solution between Kosovo and Serbia centered on mutual recognition.¹⁸ Finding the appropriate solution for unresolved conflicts in the Western Balkans, such as in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, remains a central piece of US and EU strategy in order to maintain the fragile stability and limit the influence of Russia. The United States, European Union, Germany, France and the United Kingdom, all have appointed special representatives for Western Balkans in an unprecedented attempt to give a solution to the protracted conflicts in the Western Balkans.¹⁹ While all the attention has been focused on political elites and little attention is given to popular perceptions on security issues in the Western Balkans. However, an analysis of the surveys conducted in Albania and the rest of the Western Balkans bring up very interesting insights which can help policymakers better understand the situation and formulate policies in accordance with the general public expectations.

¹⁷ <https://lapsi.al/2022/09/04/analiza-janusz-bugajski-ballkani-i-hapur-projekt-i-serbise-per-te-perfituar-rusia/>, accessed 2022.

¹⁸ <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/balkans-debrief/balkansdebrief-what-is-the-future-of-kosovo-serbia-relations-a-debrief-with-ambassador-christopher-hill/>, accessed 2022.

¹⁹ <https://www.dw.com/sq/scholz-dhe-macron-d%C3%ABrgojn%C3%AB-k%C3%ABshilltar%C3%ABt-n%C3%AB-prishtin%C3%AB-e-beograd/a-63021859>, accessed 2022.

4.1 THREAT PERCEPTION

Albanian Security Barometer (ASB), now in its fourth edition, reveals very interesting findings about threat perceptions and the disposition of the Albanian society for furthering security cooperation in the Western Balkans. When comparing the findings of ASB with the findings of SecuriMeter2022, a survey measuring the perceptions of the citizens the Western Balkans Six, we can identify similar perceptions and preoccupations. ASB shows there is an increase among the Albanian citizens perceiving the war with other countries as the second most serious threat (immediately after corruption) to security with 30.2% of the interviewees (figure 1).²⁰

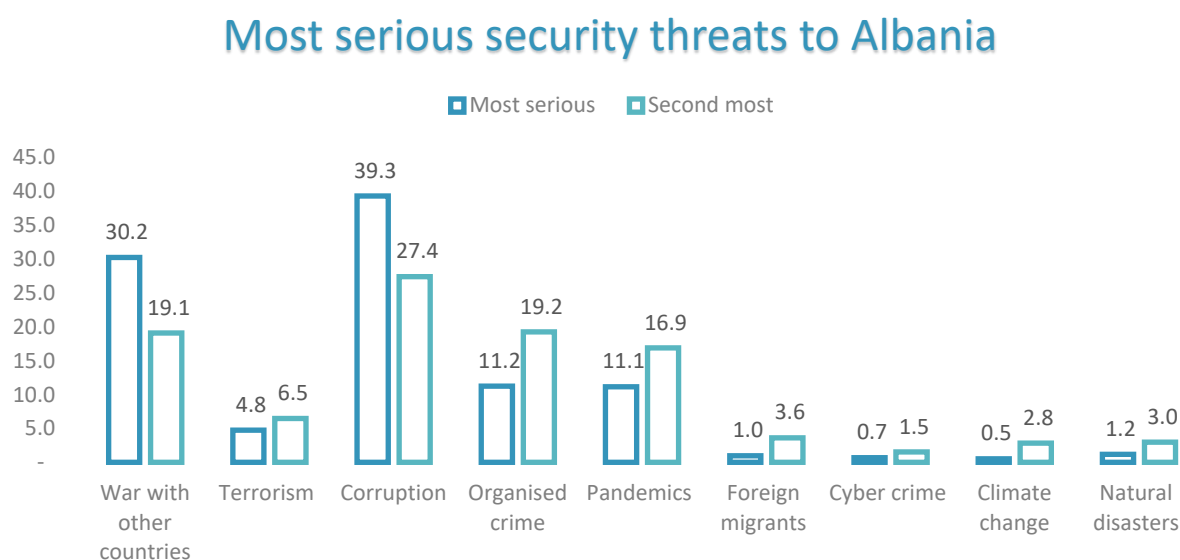


Figure 1. Graph 6 of the ASB shows the most serious security threats to Albania

SecuriMeter2022, similarly, reveals that war or political instability is now seen as having a negative impact on citizens' feeling of security by many more respondents than in the last

²⁰ Dymishi. A. (2022). *Albanian Security Barometer: National Survey 2022*. (Report No. 4) Center for the Study of Democracy and Governance, 24.

<https://csdgalbania.org/albanian-security-barometer-2022/>

round, 44% now, 22% in 2021 (figure 2).²¹ Russia's unprovoked aggression against Ukraine seems to have had a profound influence on citizens' perception on the order of threats toward the security of the countries of the Western Balkans.

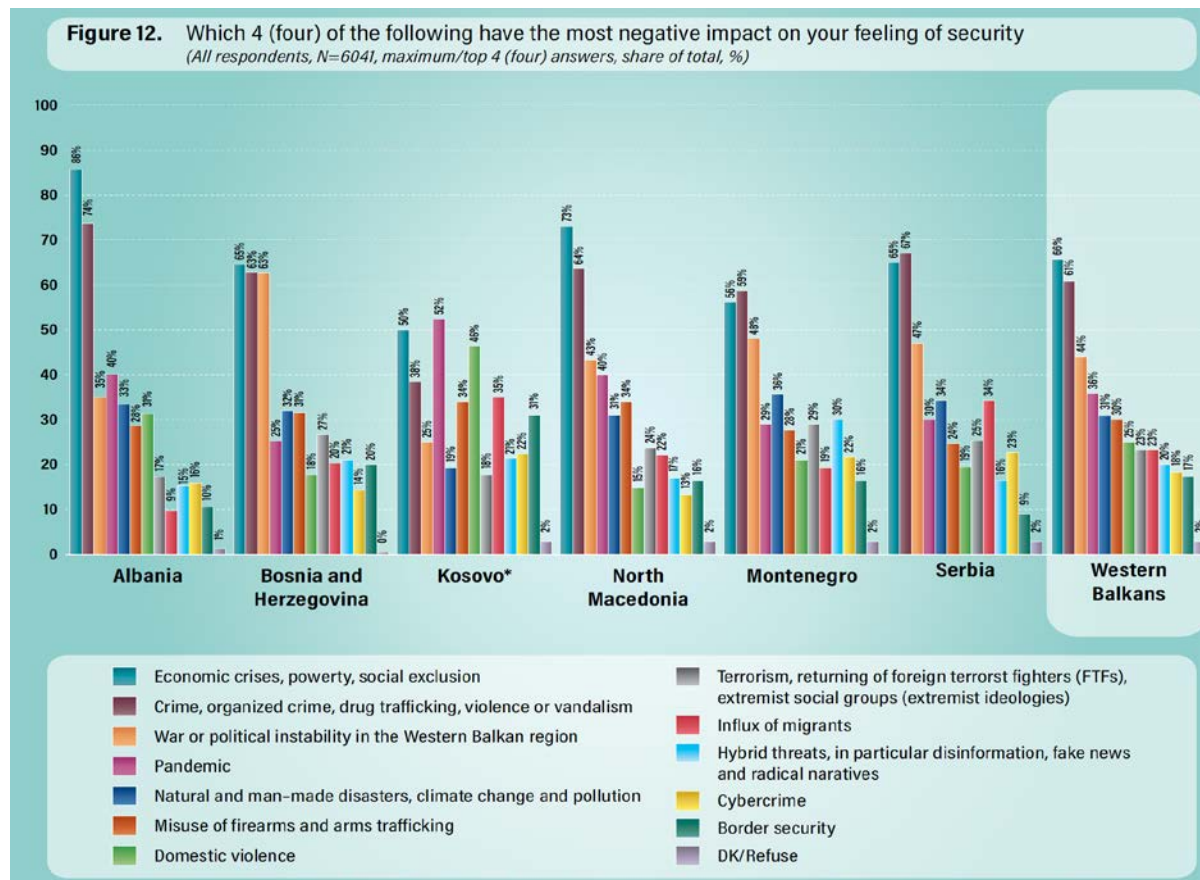


Figure 2. Graph of Securimeter showing the perceptions of the citizens of the Western Balkans about most pressing security issues.

If we refer ASB, the majority of the interviewees, 58.7%, think that a war between Russia and the West is possible, while 36% think that the war will not expand to involve other countries.²² The majority of Albanian citizens 63.1% of respondents consider Russia as a threat to the security of Albania, while only 19% think that China is a threat. Despite dramatic improvements of political relations between Serbia and Albania, Serbia is viewed to pose a security threat to Albania by a large majority of respondents. 66.8% think Serbia is a threat comparing to Greece by only 4.8%.²³ Although we don't have comparable data

²¹ ACIT Centre & Finance Think. (2022) *SecuriMeter2022–Public Opinion Survey on Security*. Regional Cooperation Council, 28.

<https://www.rcc.intA/pubs/141/securimeter-2022>

²² Dymishi. A. (2022). *Albanian Security Barometer: National Survey 2022*, 27.

²³ Dymishi. A. (2022). *Albanian Security Barometer: National Survey 2022*, 28-29.

collected from Serbia, another survey shows similar feelings among Serbian society. According to an IRI (International Republican Institute) survey Serbian society identify Albania as the less favorable country followed immediately by Croatia and United States. Only 20% of the Serbian respondents show highly or somewhat favorable opinion about Albania, while 80 percent have negative perception with 40% showing highly unfavorable opinion (figure 3).²⁴

The graph below shows the results of the survey to the question “Please tell your opinion on each of the following countries?”

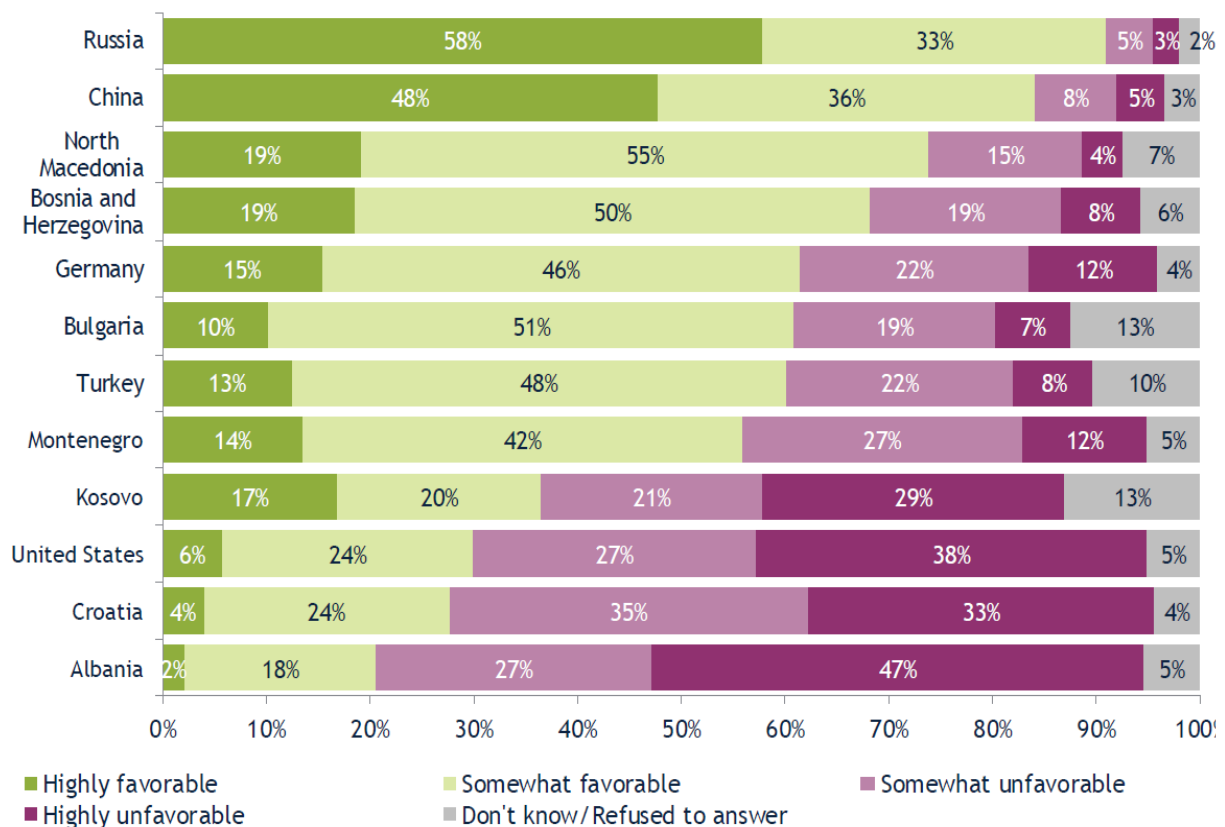


Figure 3. 2022 Western Balkans Regional Survey showing the opinion of Serbian society

Despite all of these, the Western Balkans citizens show similar concerns about security threats. Securitymeter shows that of the four top problems identified in the previous round of Security Barometer affecting the sense of security in the Western Balkans—economic crises, poverty and social exclusion remains the top concern, while organized

²⁴ International Republican Institute’s Center for Insights in Survey Research (2022). 2022 Western Balkans Regional Survey, 93.

<https://www.iri.org/news/iri-western-balkans-poll-shows-support-for-pro-western-institutions-persistent-ethnic-tensions-and-commitment-to-the-open-balkan-initiative/>

crime, drugs trafficking, violence, or vandalism comes second.²⁵ ASB shows that corruption has been identified as the most serious and second most serious security threat by most of the citizens that were interviewed: 39.3% think that corruption is the number one security threat, while 11.2% of citizens identified organised crime as the most serious security threat, with another 19.2% which think of it as the second most important threat. A smaller percentage of the citizens view pandemics, terrorism, foreign migrants, natural disasters, climate change, and cybercrime as a threat.²⁶ Albanian Security Barometer shows that the large majority of the respondents, 86.4% say that they are concerned for their future personal security as a result of the overall developments in Albania, and slightly less but still the largest majority 84.5% are concerned for their future personal security as a result of the international developments.²⁷ SecuriMeter reveals a pessimistic trend in the region, since the share of respondents who expect their personal security situation to improve over the next year has decreased to only 17% of the respondents, while the share of those expecting it to get worse has also increased to 20%.²⁸

4.2 SUPPORT FOR REGIONAL COOPERATION

Albanian Security Barometer reveals a general supportive disposition of Albanian society for cooperative security. This can be related to a general perception that allies are seen as crucial to Albania's security. 88.5% of the respondents think that Albania cannot guarantee its security without the support of allied countries.²⁹ In this regard, the majority of respondents feel that Albania has to intensify security cooperation with allies. Most of the citizens think that Albania should give top priority to its relations with the United States, 70.1%, while 16.7% say with Germany and 6.9% with Turkey, followed by minor percentages with Italy 2.7%, and UK 1.7% (figure 4). Otherwise, most of the respondents, 37.4%, think that at this moment Turkey offers Albania's the best relations, about the same percentage, 36.4%, think that the USA does so, 15.1% say Germany, 8% say Italy, 1.8% UK and 0.8% France.³⁰

²⁵ ACIT Centre & Finance Think. (2022) *SecuriMeter2022–Public Opinion Survey on Security*, 28.

²⁶ Dymishi. A. (2022). *Albanian Security Barometer: National Survey 2022*, 27.

²⁷ Dymishi. A. (2022). *Albanian Security Barometer: National Survey 2022*, 25.

²⁸ ACIT Centre & Finance Think. (2022) *SecuriMeter2022–Public Opinion Survey on Security*, 24.

²⁹ Dymishi. A. (2022). *Albanian Security Barometer: National Survey 2022*, 34.

³⁰ Dymishi. A. (2022). *Albanian Security Barometer: National Survey 2022*, 33.

Opinion on the countries Albania should give priority in its foreign relations

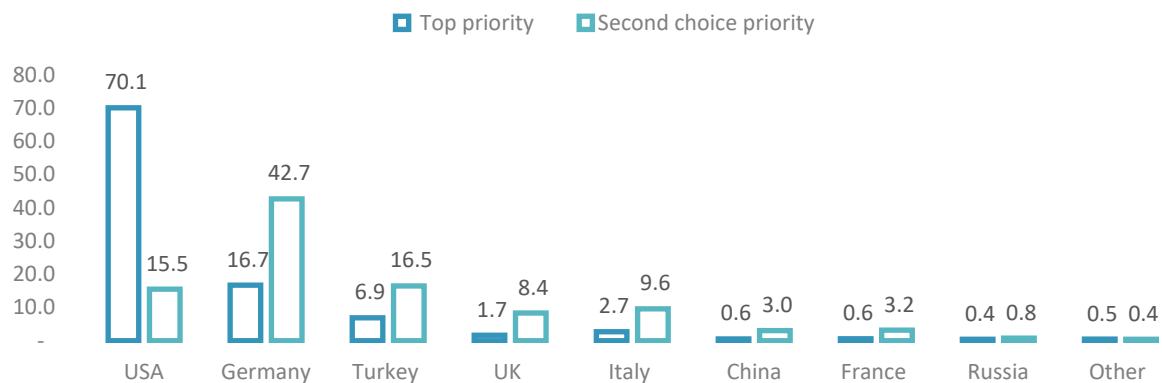


Figure 4. Graph 21 of the ASB shows the perception about the countries Albania should prioritize its foreign relations

While this is a traditional disposition of Albanian citizens, what is intriguing about the data provided by ASB is the significant support of the respondents for regional cooperation in security matters. This seems to be related to the perception that the majority of respondents, 72.3%, think that relations between the Balkan states are currently affected by the lack of cooperation.³¹ 79.6%, of the respondents think that Albania should develop closer cooperation with all Balkan countries, while nearly two third of the respondents, 74.4%, are of the opinion that the stability of the Balkans would benefit from a greater cooperation between Albania and Serbia (figure 5).³²

³¹ Dymishi. A. (2022). *Albanian Security Barometer: National Survey 2022*, 36.

³² Dymishi. A. (2022). *Albanian Security Barometer: National Survey 2022*, 36.

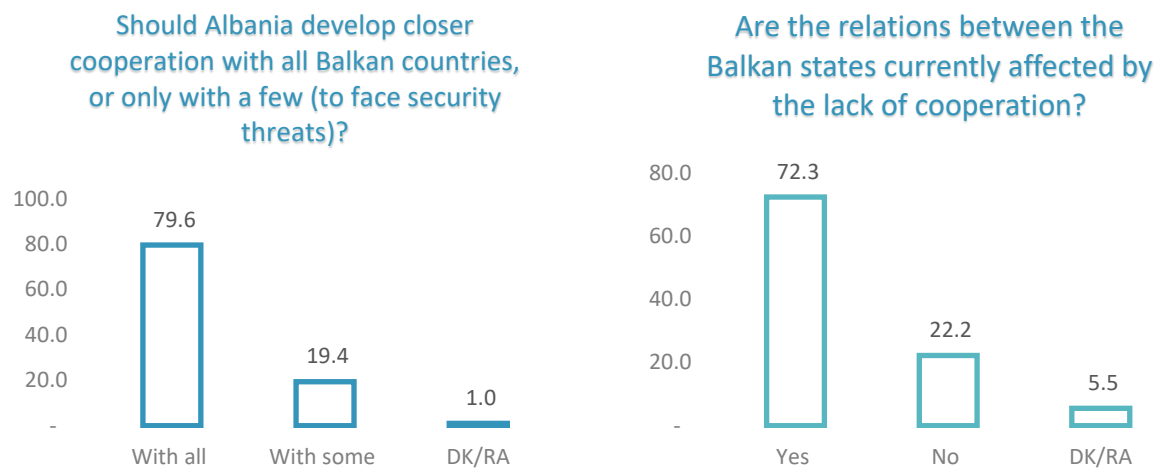


Figure 5. Graphs 26 and 27 of the ASB show a perceived concern about the lack of cooperation and support for future cooperation.

Albanian respondents make politicians responsible for the prevention of reconciliation and peace building in the Balkans. Most of the respondents, 42.5%, think that the politicians who benefit from perpetuation of the conflict are responsible. Another 28% think that big powers meddling prevents such reconciliation and peace building. However, there are 16.2% of the respondents think that the peoples of the Balkan feel insecure about each other, and such insecurity prevents them from getting closer together.

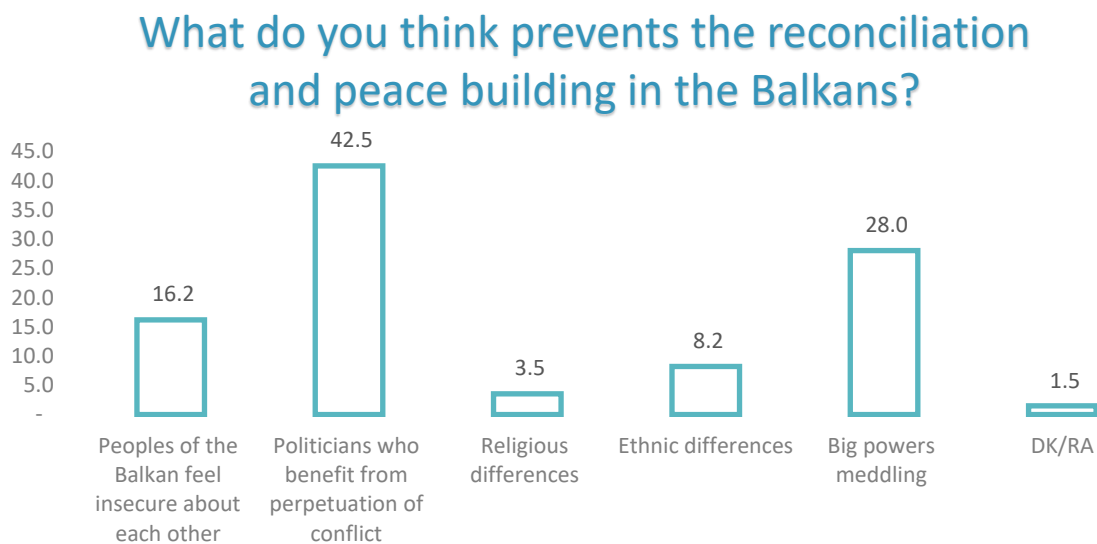


Figure 6. Graphs 30 of the ASB on the factors that impede reconciliation and peace building in the Balkans.

This perception is widespread among the citizens of other Western Balkan countries as evidenced by 2022 Western Balkans Regional Survey, International Republican Institute's (IRI), Center for Insights in Survey Research (CISR). 75 percent in Bosnia believe that

parties and leaders are responsible for tensions among different ethnic groups, 69 percent in Montenegro, 60 percent in North Macedonia and 40 percent in Serbia.³³

The graph below shows the results of the survey to the question “Who would you say is most responsible for existing tensions between different ethnic groups?”

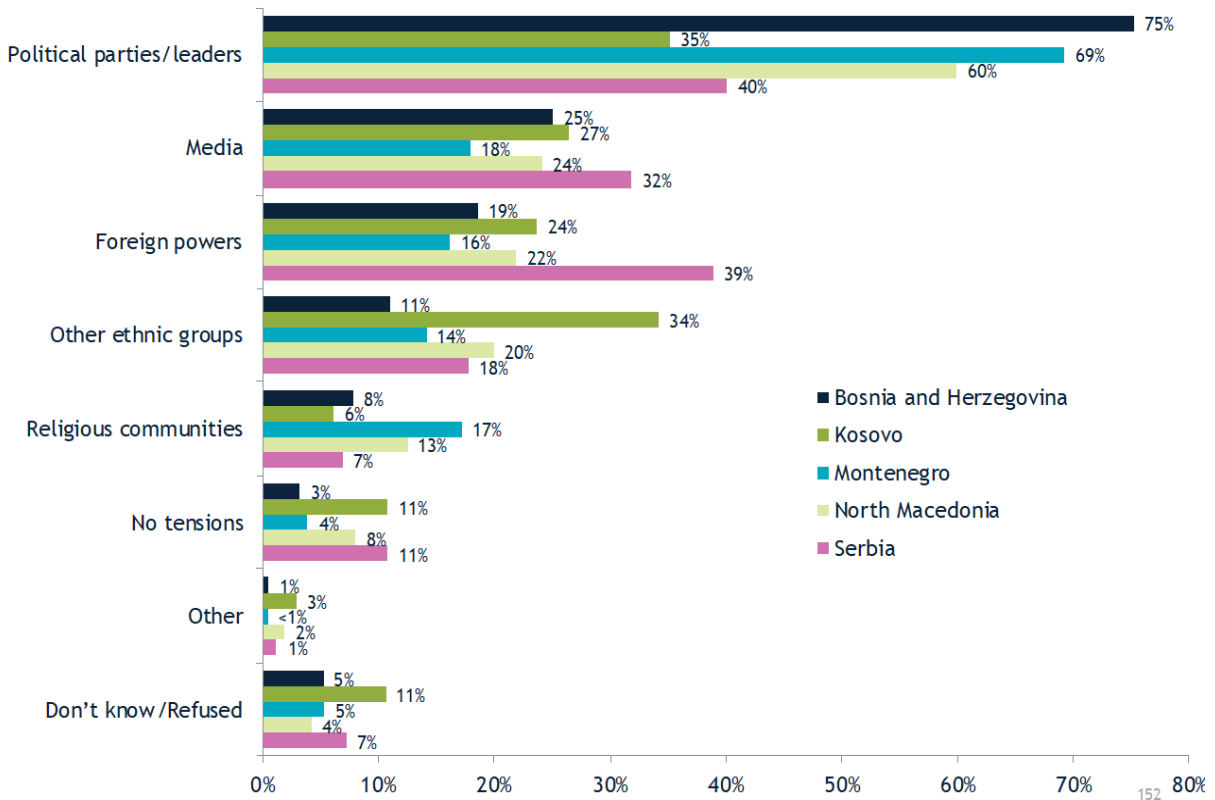


Figure 7. 2022 Western Balkans Regional Survey, International Republican Institute’s (IRI), Center for Insights in Survey Research (CISR) shows a widespread perception that leaders are responsible for tensions.

The logical consequence of such perceptions is the support of the majority of the respondents for regional cooperation, especially in sectors that contribute to the wellbeing of the societies. According to the ASB, Albanian respondents think that Albania should cooperate more closely with the Balkan countries. 63.1% think that such cooperation should be focused on combatting organized crime, 16.2% think of terrorism, 10% think of the natural disasters and 6.5% of cybercrime. According to the Securimeter, 70 percent of Western Balkan citizens agree more regional cooperation is needed, especially when it comes to complex security problems that governments of all economies and other actors need to tackle – “such as serious and organised crime, financial crime, terrorism, migrants’

³³ International Republican Institute’s Center for Insights in Survey Research (2022). 2022 Western Balkans Regional Survey, 152.

influx”.³⁴ The support for deeper regional integration seems not to be limited only to sectorial cooperation but even to a broader cooperation. IRI’s poll found strong support for the Open Balkan Initiative. A majority of people polled in BiH (68%), Montenegro (66%), North Macedonia (61%), and Serbia (75%) all support the initiative, with Kosovo as the outlier with only 42% support. Albania was not included in the survey.³⁵

³⁴ ACIT Centre & Finance Think. (2022) *SecuriMeter2022–Public Opinion Survey on Security*, 94.

³⁵ International Republican Institute’s Center for Insights in Survey Research (2022). *2022 Western Balkans Regional Survey*, 132.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Peace and stability in the Western Balkans are still fragile. Russia's unprovoked aggression against Ukraine has exacerbated the sense of unpredictability of future developments. Unresolved conflicts such as the conflict between Serbia and Kosova, state dysfunction and permanent tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the intensified domestic political disputes in Montenegro and identity problems in North Macedonia, - contribute to the feeling of insecurity of the citizens of the Western Balkans.

Important steps have been taken in the direction of the intensification of political, economic and social exchanges between the countries of the Balkans during the last years in the framework of regional initiatives supported by the European Union and the United States. However, the level of integration of the Western Balkan countries is insignificant as it is shown by economic relations and especially low level of intraregional trade representing a fifth of exports and a tenth of imports.³⁶ The low level of regional exchanges is also reflected in the lack of mutual trust - as shown by surveys – and the perception of each other as threat.

The security cooperation between Western Balkan countries is framed mostly on bilateral bases, within NATO, or within regional frameworks initiated and financed by the European Union. Some scholars are inclined to call the current state of security cooperation a kind of 'security community'. All the security cooperation initiatives and mechanisms in the Western Balkans can hardly be described as offering any kind of cooperative security, not to mention a 'security community'.

However, after Russia's aggression against Ukraine, favorable conditions that favor the intensification and institutionalization of regional security cooperation have come to the fore. The dedication of the United States and the European Union to provide conditions that encourage long-term solutions that guarantee regional peace and stability and the broad popular support for regional cooperation are among such conditions. The decision-makers have to seize the momentum to foster regional security cooperation.

Leaders, politicians and decision-makers in the Western Balkan countries have to come to an understanding that to deal with transnational threats and challenges – like organized crime, terrorism, migration, natural disasters and climate change, pandemics, – states

³⁶ Kaloyanchev. P. Kusen. I. & Mouzakitis. A. (2018). *Untapped Potential: Intra-Regional Trade in the Western Balkans*. Discussion Paper 080. European Commission's Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs. https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/economy-finance/dp080_western_balkans.pdf

need to work together. Under such conditions ‘cooperative security’ is necessity, not altruism.

To maintain regional security and safeguard national security interests, countries have to adopt the idea that zero sum game serves no one and that inter-state relations should become more cooperative. Such cooperation has to be based on the principle of equality, respect and openness. The adaptation of an unconditional, problem-solving and result-based approach is *the* precondition for such cooperation to be meaningful.

To be effective and acceptable to all parties involved, a cooperative security approach in the Western Balkans has to be a principled based cooperation where all WB6 (Western Balkan Six) countries have to seat as equals on the basis of the principle of sovereign equality despite unresolved political disputes, including that between Serbia and Kosova. A cooperative security system is based on sovereign equality where decisions should be taken together on the basis of consensus.

The strategic outlook and the position of Western Balkan countries versus NATO and EU is asymmetrical. Such asymmetries and uncertainties contribute negatively to the stability of the Western Balkans. Cooperative security, as an approach which encourages states to jointly identify and prevent threats – both national and transnational – rather than counter them through deterrence or the use of force, can provide additional opportunities to overcome such shortcomings.

These opportunities and wide popular support for regional cooperation have to be translated into concrete, meaningful and effective initiatives that facilitate exchanges between officials working on the security sector agencies across the region. Such mechanisms should aim at confidence building, increased transparency, information exchange and joint responses for common transnational challenges in the Western Balkans.

At the strategic level, we recommend the establishment of a regional mechanism such as the Western Balkans Security Forum (WBSF). The WBSF should be a framework of dialogue of decision-makers and senior security officials from WB6, whose main function would be to identify common challenges and commit to providing common solutions. We understand that cooperative security will not necessarily lead to perpetual peace – but it is an effective framework in preventing wars and managing relations peacefully. At the end, the very process of dialogue and inter-action can build trust which is key to regional cooperation.

At a more technical and operational level, the EU facilitated initiative, the Integrative Internal Security Governance (IISG), is the most institutionalized security cooperation framework in the region. Although IISG is at the very beginning, it has to be oriented more toward a problem-solving and result-based approach, with measurable outputs in the

incentivization of regional cooperation in countering organized crime, terrorism and border security.

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