

IMPACTS OF POLITICAL AND SECURITY CHANGES IN EUROPE TO THE WESTERN BALKANS

Ladies and Gentlemen, Distinguished Guests, Dear Colleagues,

It is an honor to open this timely and crucial discussion on the **Western Balkans' political and security landscape**, and to frame the debates that will follow.

As we gather here today, **the Western Balkans once again finds itself at a historic crossroads**—a region whose fate is intertwined with the broader struggles shaping Europe and the world.

To begin, let me place the current geopolitical realities of the Western Balkans into a broader conceptual framework. Three decades ago, **Samuel L. Huntington**, in his famous work *The Clash of Civilizations*, argued that **future conflicts would increasingly be shaped not by ideology or economics, but by deep cultural and civilizational divides**. While many have debated and criticized his thesis, looking at the Western Balkans today, it is impossible to ignore that **cultural, religious, and historical divides—between East and West, Orthodoxy and Catholicism, Islam and Christianity—still play a potent role in shaping political identities and conflicts**.

The region sits **at the fault line of civilizations**, as Huntington would put it—a space where **the European, Orthodox, and Ottoman-Islamic legacies meet and sometimes collide**.

In this context, **external actors like Russia and Turkey, but also the EU and NATO, are not just political players but also symbolic representatives of these "civilizations."** Thus, any attempt to stabilize and integrate the Western Balkans must recognize that **this is not merely a contest of policies, but also of identities, narratives, and visions of belonging**.

The changing geopolitical environment—from the war in Ukraine to great-power competition—has only **deepened these divides**, creating opportunities for some and dangers for others. **The only positive example was the Dayton Accords**, though imperfect, at least attempted to acknowledge the deep civilizational and ethnic divisions in Bosnia and sought to create a framework that could hold the peace by accommodating those differences within a workable political structure.

One of the most overlooked present opportunities, however, may come from an unexpected direction: Ukraine.

If **Ukraine's path to EU accession** becomes a reality—and recent political momentum suggests there is a slight chance—it would **redefine the enlargement paradigm**. Not only would it signal that the EU is once again capable of strategic enlargement in the face of geopolitical necessity, but **it could also open the door for new thinking about the Western Balkans**.

Specifically, if **a country like Ukraine, with unresolved territorial issues and ongoing conflict, can advance toward EU membership**, this could **reshape how the EU approaches other "frozen conflicts"**—notably **the Serbia-Kosovo issue and Bosnia's internal divisions**.

Of course, **this is not to say that Ukraine's accession is a precondition for the Balkans' path forward—but it demonstrates that the EU can be flexible and strategic when the geopolitical stakes are high enough.** And let me be clear: **the geopolitical stakes in the Western Balkans are high.**

This brings me to **the growing crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina**—arguably one of the most acute threats to regional stability today.

At the same time, when we look at the deepening political crisis in **Bosnia**, it is crucial to **understand the broader context in which the Serbian leadership are operating.**

Milorad Dodik's recent threats to withdraw the Republic of Serbia from Bosnia's central institutions **should not be seen merely as nationalist posturing but as expressions of deep frustration over a dysfunctional state paralyzed by ethnic divisions.** While some of these grievances are legitimate and deserve recognition, the methods — including undermining Bosnia's sovereignty and threatening its institutional framework — risk unraveling the fragile balance established by the Dayton Agreement.

Backed by Serbia, Russia, and increasingly tolerated by parts of the EU, these moves could destabilize the entire Western Balkans.

Between 1998 and 2000, the first Orbán government provided significant support in helping to overthrow the Serbian dictator, Slobodan Milošević. Through what became known as the "Szeged Process", Serbian opposition parties received guidance from foreign advisors, with their campaigns primarily financed by the United States. However, one of the key locations for their preparation was Hungary, which offered space and opportunity for Serbia's democratic opposition to organize. **By October 2000, thanks in part to the Hungarian government's efforts, Milošević was indeed removed from power, paving the way for a new Serbia far more aligned with Hungarian interests.** Notably, Serbia today remains the only neighboring country where an autonomous region with Hungarian minority exists — Vojvodina, in Hungarian Vajdaság — which has long been a key aim of Hungarian national policy.

Let's not forget the past! What is urgently needed is a renewed dialogue and compromise to build a functioning Bosnia that respects all its communities, rather than sliding into separatism and renewed conflict.

The role of Russia in this context is undeniable, though more constrained than before. Since its invasion of Ukraine, Russia has had every incentive to stir trouble in Bosnia and Herzegovina to create a second front of instability for the EU and NATO. **However, Moscow's room for maneuver in the Western Balkans has noticeably shrunk due to its isolation and military focus on Ukraine.** Still, Putin's rhetorical support for Serb nationalist narratives remains part of a broader Kremlin strategy to weaken European unity and transatlantic ties — **to the extent that such unity still holds.**

China, too, plays a quieter but no less important role, offering economic leverage through loans and investments, especially in Serbia, further complicating the EU's ability to act decisively.

In this context, **NATO and the EU remain the pillars of stability,** but they must recognize that **the security challenges are evolving.** The **KFOR presence in Kosovo, EUFOR in**

Bosnia, and other missions need **stronger mandates and greater political backing**. Moreover, **EU enlargement policy** must be treated as a **security strategy, not just a bureaucratic process**. **Leaving the Western Balkans in limbo creates a vacuum that hostile actors are ready to fill.**

Finally, I want to emphasize that **the slowdown of EU enlargement is not just a disappointment, it is a strategic danger**. If the EU cannot offer a **credible, realistic, and near-term perspective** for countries like **Bosnia and Serbia**, we should expect renewed **instability**, the return of nationalist agendas, and a **deeper anchoring of Russian and Chinese influence**.

The future of the Western Balkans is a test case for the EU's ability to act as a geopolitical actor. The Union must show that **it can protect and integrate a region that is surrounded by EU and NATO members, and whose instability directly affects European security**. Of course, we have been advocating this tirelessly and countless times and EU usually was not able to deliver.

Ladies and gentlemen,

To conclude, as we open this discussion, I invite all of us to think boldly and strategically. Let us move beyond the tired debate of whether the Western Balkans are "ready" for the EU and instead ask: **Can the EU afford not to integrate the Western Balkans? Can we afford to leave a fragile, strategically critical region at the mercy of authoritarian powers, nationalist forces, and geopolitical instability?**

If Ukraine's potential candidacy has taught us anything, it is that **when the stakes are high, the EU can and must act decisively**. The Western Balkans deserve nothing less.

Thank you.

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