WESTERN BALKANS SECURITY SYNOPSIS:

REFLECTIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE 8TH REGIONAL SECURITY COORDINATION CONFERENCE 2023

SECURE THE FUTURE:
BUILDING RESILIENCE THROUGH COLLABORATION

Post-Conference Report

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1. Executive Summary

The 8th Secure the Future: Building Resilience through Collaboration Regional Security Coordination Conference, held on 14th and 15th of November 2023 in Rome, stood as a testament to the evolution and significance of regional cooperation in tackling security challenges in South-East Europe, with a specific focus on the Western Balkans. Organised annually by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), this conference has transitioned from exclusively addressing Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE/CT) to encompass a broader spectrum of security concerns, attracting a diverse assembly of practitioners, organisations, and networks devoted to regional security.

Although the Western Balkans (WB) has not faced any conflict in more than twenty years, the region is still rife with ethnic and political tensions, boundary/border disputes, and neighbourly and identity-driven disputes which makes it susceptible to a variety of threats across the spectrum of human to national security. Led by geostrategic ambitions, authoritarian peer challengers to the Euro-Atlantic agenda such as Russia, China, or Iran utilise sophisticated and subversive toolkits acting directly or through proxies, using active and passive measures across diplomacy, economy, information and security sectors and exploiting regional vulnerabilities for their strategic endgame. Such an approach allows them to camouflage their intentions and engage "below the threshold of war" with subversive illiberal activities affecting every aspect from human to economy-level security in the region.

Non-state actors have also proven keen on exploiting the regional challenges and using them for safe havens. Extremists across the spectrum from pan-Islamic movements to right-wing radicals try to take advantage of the internal vulnerabilities, the boom of modern information and communication technologies and the effects of growing geopolitical competition in the region to recruit and radicalise individuals with perspectives to unleash violence. Using sophisticated disinformation campaigns that build on religion, history, belonging, prospects of good governance and Western disengagement from the region these groups and individuals are able to hamper years of Euro-Atlantic investment in regional stability, cooperation and integration. Hence, if not properly addressed, the ability of global challenges with the local prefix (such as the foreign terrorist fighters-FTF effect) to galvanise existing threats from sleeper cells and outcomes of potentially failed deradicalisation and reintegration processes across the region vis-à-vis ongoing (Ukraine & Gaza) or emerging conflicts worldwide is looming at large.

Transnational organised crime (TOC) is a growing threat to economy-level security and human security across the Western Balkans region. A general belief across the region is that TOC networks may threaten WB stability, undermine human security, and free markets as they seem to build alliances within the economies of the region. Criminal networks usually abuse all positive prospects and challenges of the EU integrations not just to expand but also to diversify their activities. Hence, pressing issues such as human trafficking (and abusing migrants), environmental-based crimes including other forms of economic-based crimes (such as but not limited to swindling and fraud, money laundering, corruption, and intellectual property crime), or manipulating political processes designed for different purposes (ethnic cohesions for example) to cover for illicit activities are add-on to well established TOC practices such as small arms trafficking, illegal drug and tobacco smuggling, etc.

Cybersecurity represents another growing concern that intertwines with economy-level security and human security across the WB region with high velocity and greater volume. As a result, challenges from the physical

world to WB security are becoming more complex, and unpredictable, and providing opportunities for easy exploits and short-cuts for various malicious actors in advancing their agenda. Cyberspace and the information and communication technologies – ICT (including the so-called dual-use technologies such as the internet of things-IoT, or emerging dual-use technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence applications, Machine learning, Deep fake, etc.) role in the context of the current trends in the region is twofold. First, ICT and cyberspace may multiply push and pull factors to conflict, i.e. serve as enablers. Second, they generate new threat vectors to highly centralised, risk-averted, and highly politicised government security apparatus and institutions across WB.

Themed Securing the Future: Building Resilience through Collaboration, Security Coordination Conference 2023 built upon its established foundations, fostering discussions, strengthening regional relationships, and sustaining the momentum of previous iterations. At its core, the conference aimed to elevate initiatives promoting coordination and cooperation among the Western Balkan economies on the most important security challenges. By facilitating the exchange of best practices and strategic dialogues, it aimed to empower regional governments to craft targeted responses to emerging security threats.

A complex interplay of emerging security trends shapes the current security environment in the Western Balkans. Although these trends overlap and are highly interrelated this report offers analysis that delves into each one individually, decoding its separate impact on the WB security landscape. These trends, including but not limited to geopolitical shifts, authoritarian influence, the state of the rule of law and governance, the trajectory of EU integration processes, ethnic and political tensions, organised crime, violent extremism, migration and boundary/border security, and economic challenges collectively contribute to the complex mosaic shaping the security environment in the region.

Aligning with the overarching aims and objectives of the conference, and synthesising the multifaceted thematic discussions and feedback received during the event, the report provides an ensuing SWOT analysis. The SWOT analysis, therefore, serves as a lens to discern the critical strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. In doing so, it offers valuable insights into the present condition and the prospective trajectory of the Western Balkans in navigating the complex terrain of regional security challenges as highlighted at the conference.

The report culminates with tangible recommendations for future policies, collaborations, and interventions in the Western Balkans' security sector. These recommendations and suggestions are derived from the rich insights gleaned from discussions, survey responses, strategic analysis of the threat landscape, and RCC SecuriMeter' s results including a thorough overview of the emerging security trends. Hence, the suggested policy recommendations serve as strategic pathways to confront identified challenges and harness latent opportunities within the Western Balkans region. While not exhaustive, these recommendations are strategically curated, focusing on key opportunities outlined in the aforementioned review. The intent is to address specific issues with precision, fostering a secure, collaborative, and resilient environment in the Western Balkans.

2. Introduction

The 8th Regional Security Coordination Conference was the result of a collaborative effort between the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), International Relations Service of the Office for Coordination and Planning of Police Forces of the Ministry of Interior, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the government of Italy, and took place at the premises of the Police Institute of Advanced Studies in Rome.

This conference not only highlighted shared issues and challenges within represented economies but discussions also resonated with broader concerns in the region and across the EU. Notably, it broadened its scope, embracing wider societal challenges, including the pressing issue of brain drain, human security, disaster reduction, pandemics, etc. Interestingly, these thematic shifts echoed many of the key findings of SecuriMeter 2023 results, underscoring the conference's timeliness. Marking a full return to an in-person gathering, the 8th conference fostered open and productive dialogues, creating a palpable positive energy that reverberated throughout the venue over the course of both days.

Featuring a diverse lineup of over 55 speakers hailing from 19 different economies, spanning 3 continents, the event drew in more than 100 participants and security practitioners representing the Western Balkan economies, Italy, and various European Union (EU) member states. Attendees also included representatives of the EU Commission, Frontex, UNDP, IOM, IISG, GI, MAARI, WHO, and other pertinent regional and international organisations, civil society organisations (CSOs), as well as law enforcement agencies. This convergence of expertise and perspectives underscored the conference's commitment to fostering collaboration for a more resilient and secure future.

The conference's primary objective was to elevate and fortify initiatives aimed at streamlining cooperation and coordination within the Western Balkans, fostering synergies not only among the regional economies but also in their interactions with the European Union. A pivotal focus lies in stimulating the exchange of best practices concerning shared security issues. In a more pragmatic sense, the conference aspired to provide tangible support to the governments in the region. It aimed to assist these administrations in effectively mapping the evolving needs and formulating robust responses to the security challenges emanating from the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East. By facilitating this strategic dialogue, the conference sought to contribute meaningfully to the collective efforts in addressing and navigating the complex security landscape in the broader geopolitical context.

The opening session of the 8th Regional Security Coordination Conference commenced with a warm welcome from Mr. Raffaele Grassi, Deputy Chief of Police at the Ministry of Interior of Italy. Following his remarks, Mr. Andrea Cascone, Director of the Adriatic and Balkans Unit in the General Directorate for the European Union at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Italy, further set the tone for the conference. Ms. Majlinda Bregu, Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), then took to the floor, extending her heartfelt welcome to all participants, thereby officially opening the conference.

Captain Igor Malchiodi, representing the Ministry of Interior's Public Security Department, assumed the role of Master of Ceremony, steering the proceedings to ensure adherence to the agenda. The agenda unfolded across seven distinct thematic sessions. These sessions included: Thematic Panel 1 - Setting the Stage: Outlining Key Security Challenges and Trends in the Western Balkans; Thematic Panel 2 - Irregular Migration & Organised

Crime; Thematic Panel 3 - Extremism and Terrorism; Thematic Panel 4 – Human Security; Thematic Panel 5 - Cybersecurity and Critical Infrastructure Protection; Thematic Panel 6 - Use of AI and Innovative Technology in Policing; Thematic Panel 7 - Regional exchange on negotiating chapters 23 and 24.

Notably, Panel 4 delving into Human Security, and Panel 7 centred on the regional exchange pertaining to negotiating chapters 23 and 24 deserve special emphasis as they introduced innovative topics for discussion. These additions significantly enriched the conference, offering valuable insights to participants. Panel 4 encouraged a non-traditional approach to security, urging attendees to explore unconventional perspectives, while Panel 7 provided a unique and valuable opportunity for shared experiences, fostering a collective learning environment.

This report offers a concise overview of the conference deliberations, highlighting key insights articulated by participants in the thematic sessions. Additionally, it seeks to put these discussions into context vis-à-vis the existing security landscape in the Western Balkans and further afield. Moreover, it provides observations and preliminary recommendations aimed at refining future editions of the Regional Security Coordination Conference. These proposed changes are designed to address the requirements and organisational objectives of participating stakeholders more effectively, ultimately aligning with and advancing the strategic goals set by the organisers.

To set the scene of these deliberations, the next chapter presents analysis of the current security environment in the Western Balkans.

The Eighth Regional Security Coordination Conference took place in Rome on 14-15 November 2023 at the premises of the Police Institute of Advanced Studies, Police Academy (Scuola Superiore di Polizia)
(Photo: RCC/Mario Sayadi)

3. Security Landscape Analysis

3.1. The current trends in security environment across the WB at a glance

The observed organised crime and corruption at different levels, as well as a mixture of public and private interests, have become endemic in the last three decades. Hence, corruption and clientelist networks saturate the decision-making processes. At the same time, in the interconnected and interrelated world with the rise of dual-use technologies, the UN rule-based order[1] (respected by the Euro-Atlantic community) is under strain, and as a result, unpredictability and uncertainty in global security affairs like never before provide lucrative opportunities for different spectrum of challengers.

Led by geostrategic ambitions, authoritarian peer challengers to the Euro-Atlantic agenda[2] such as Russia, China, or Iran utilise sophisticated and subversive toolkits of direct and indirect- active and passive measures.[3] Acting directly or through proxies, they use these measures across diplomacy, economy, information, and security sectors to exploit regional vulnerabilities for their strategic endgame. This allows them to camouflage their intentions by engaging "bellow the threshold of war"[4] with subversive illiberal activities. Such an approach affects every aspect from human to economy-level security. It provides the authoritarian competitors with a unique opportunity to exploit the regional security challenges (triggers a combination of factors and actors as discussed below in 3.2.) and inhibits the proper democratic response. In reality, for the purpose of the ongoing great power competition[5] the authoritarian peer challengers attempt to compensate for their technological and military disadvantages to the liberal world by denying regional stability nested under Euro-Atlantic integrations. Without region-grown sustainable stability, these measures may paralyse proper Euro-Atlantic response and thus, rapidly influence the conflict across the region.

Similarly, non-state actors have also proven keen on exploiting the regional challenges and using them for safe havens.[6] From its earliest days, the pan-Islamic movements in the region have recognised the value of contemporary means of communication to connect with followers, surpassing the traditional religious communities in

1 For an explanation of what the rule-based order refers to please see: Parley Policy Institute, (3 May 2023), "The 'Rules-Based International Order,' explained", Parley Policy Cable No. 29, available at: https://www.parleypolicy.com/post/the-rules-based-international-order-explained

2 Most of the Western scholars and experts use either this term or similar "authoritarian peer competitors". It generally attempts to address Russian, and the People's Republic of China – PRC activities in the geopolitical context. However, Iran, North Korea, or other regimes that in some views represent authoritarian governments are also labelled as such. In this report, the term will refer to Russia and PRC-China and to a certain degree to Iran's activities particularly related to the recent alleged connection with the severe cyber-attacks against Albania. For further use of this term you may refer, for example, to: Pascal Abb und Irene Weipert-Fenne, (19 April 2023), Regime Competition in a Fragmented World: Consequences for Peace and Conflict, PRIF Blog, available at: https://blog.prif.org/2023/04/19/regime-competition-in-a-fragmented-world-consequences-for-peace-and-conflict/

3 A good overview of the of External Powers in the Western Balkans may be found in: Arlinda Rrustemi, Rob de Wijk, Connor Dunlop, Jovana Perovska, Lirije Palushi, (January 2021), Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans, The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, available at: https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Geopolitical-Influences-of-External-Powers-in-the-Western-Balkans_0.pdf

4 See more about this method in: Juliet Skingsley, (2 December 2020), Countering Threats below the Threshold of War, Chatham House, available at: https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/12/countering-threats-below-threshold-war

5 Jonathan M. DiCicco and Tudor A. Onea, (31 January 2023), Great-Power Competition, International Studies, International Studies Association and Oxford University Press, available for free at: https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-756?d=%2F10.1093%2Facrefore%2F9780190846626.001.0001%2Facrefore-9780190846626-e-756&p=emailA0AJOd4jxyXYc

6 See more general information in, for example: Jelena Beslin and Marija Ignjatijevic, (June 2017), "Balkan foreign fighters: from Syria to Ukraine", European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), available at: https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%2020%20Balkan%20foreign%20fighters.pdf

their use of various modern forms of technology.[7] Abusing modern communication technologies pan-Islamic movements proved capable of remote recruitment or even more instalment and recruitment.[8] Utilising disinformation methods and manipulating religion to radicalise directly or via the internet religious extremist groups that practise terrorism or their affiliates have seen the region as a fertile ground for recruitment.[9] While efforts in the Global War on Terror[10] and that of the global coalition against Daesh[11] arguably to a certain degree denied safe haven for AL Qaeda and ISIS and reduced the phenomena of the proliferation and recruitment of religiously motivated foreign terrorist fighters-FTF effect,[12] the threat from sleeper cells or a potentially failed deradicalisation and reintegration processes[13] is looming at large particularly vis-à-vis emerging conflicts worldwide.

Along these lines, the Russian aggression against Ukraine has accelerated the rise of right-wing extremism - a growing trend across the liberal World[14] in general and in the WB in particular.[15] Abusing religion, manipulating history, and misleading its commitment with colourful symbolism Russia has never been more actively engaged throughout diplomatic, economic and information channels (and in some respects via the security sector) in recruiting proxy right-wing individuals and groups in the region of WB.[16] Hence, replicating the pan-Islamic model of recruitment alleged right-wing extremist involvement from the region in military activities against Ukraine poses compelling concerns for regional stability for two reasons.[17] First, due to the prospects of the returnees and potential activism, i.e. recruitment, radicalisation, and action at home. Second, more dangerously due to the prospects of maybe the forgotten effect of so-called "horizontal terrorism"[18] vis-a-vis the revamped conflict between Israel and Hamas.[19] Another cause of concern is the issue of foreign fighters joining the Ukrainian Army in the Russian imposed war. Put all this in perspective of relatively new and inexperienced deradicalisation and re-

7 Halilović Majda, Zuković, Aner, & Veljan Nejra. (2019). "Mapping online extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Findings and reflections", Atlantic Initiative, available at: https://plus.cobiss.net/cobiss/bh/bs/bib/28081414
8 Simeon Dukić, (29 August 2023), Online Radicalisation in the Western Balkans: Trends and Responses, EU Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, RAN Practitioners, available at: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-08/ran_WB_online_radicalisation_in_wb_trends_and_responses_en.pdf
9 Adrian Shtuni, (August 2019), Western Balkans Foreign Fighters and Homegrown Jihadis: Trends and Implications, Sentinel, Vol. 12, Issu 7, Combating Terrorism Center, West Point USA, available at: https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/CTC-SENTINEL-072019.pdf
10 Chris Moody, (8 September 2021), "Twenty years after 9/11, did US win its 'war on terror'?", Al Jazeera, available at: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/8/20-years-after-9-11-did-the-us-win-its-war-on
11 Global Coalition against Daesh, (5 December 2023), Joint Statement on the Small Group of the Global Coalition Rome 2023 against Daesh, available at: https://theglobalcoalition.org/en/global-coalition-small-group-rome-2023/
12 For arguments about the declining number of FTF in the WB please see: Alexis Hollon (April 2018), Declining Number of Foreign Fighters in the Balkans, Presented at the Transatlantic Students' Conference Addressing Diplomatic, Economic, and Migration Challenges in Southeastern Europe, James Madison University, Florence, 23-27, available at: https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=ese
13 Rachael Piltch-Loeb, Megan K. McBride, Anna Ekström, Metodi Hadji-Janev, Rachel Nielsen, Richard Legault, Nigel Walsh Harriman, Elena Savoia, (2021), The Use of a Scenario-Based Nominal Group Technique to Assess P/CVE Programs: Development and Pilot Testing of a Toolkit, Journal for Deradicalization, No. 28, Fall, available at: https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/495
14 Gilles Ivaldi & Emilia Zankina, (March 2023), ed. The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-Wing Populism in Europe, A report by European Center for Populism Studies, Brussels, available at: https://www.populismstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/DOWNLOAD-ECPS-REPORT.pdf
15 Dušan Spasojević, (March 2023), "Balancing on a pin: Serbian populists, the European Union and Russia", in Gilles Ivaldi & Emilia Zankina, ed. The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-Wing Populism in Europe, A report by European Center for Populism Studies, Brussels, pp. 266-278, available at: https://www.populismstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/DOWNLOAD-ECPS-REPORT.pdf
16 Mirza Buljubašić, (2022), "Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the Western Balkans: An overview of country-specific challenges for P/CVE", Radicalisation Awareness Network, European Commission, available at: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-08/ran_vrwe_in_western_balkans_overview_072022_en.pdf
17 See more about this in the recent Global Initiative against Transnational and Organized Crime, (14 February 2023), "Balkans fighters are taking up arms in Ukraine, with Risks for Organized Crime", Risk Bulletin, No. 14, GI, available at: https://riskbulletins.globalinitiative.net/see-obs-014/04-balkans-fighters-are-taking-up-arms-in-ukraine.html
18 Examples of horizontal terrorism might include violent actions by extremist individuals or groups against perceived adversaries within society, such as ideologically motivated attacks between rival extremist groups or hate crimes directed at specific ethnic, religious, or social communities. The attacks by white supremacists and neo-Nazis on ethnic minorities, immigrants, and religious groups in the US, Europe, and elsewhere, such as the Christchurch mosque shootings in 2019. See for example: Daniel De Simone, (11 February 2021), "The powers being used to disrupt a terror group", BBC News, available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-55861305
19 For similar analysis please see: Christian Kaunert, Alex MacKenzie, and Sarah Léonard, (June, 2023), "Far-right foreign fighters and Ukraine: A blind spot for the European Union?", Special Issue, New Journal of European Criminal Law, Vol. 14, Issue 2, pp. 247-266, available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/20322844231164089

integration approaches and processes across the region, including the trend of renewed terrorist attacks across Europe that conflict between Israel and Hamas instigated,[20] the prospects of security concerns for WB could not be clearer. The influx of military-grade weapons into Ukraine amidst the ongoing conflict, coupled with technological advancements in arms manufacturing, like 3D-printed 'ghost guns,' pose a latent risk of increased arms smuggling in Europe, and, consequently, the Western Balkan. While current data suggests minimal diversion of these weapons into illegal markets, trends and the evolving nature of arms trafficking indicate a potential surge once the conflict's intensity diminishes. This concern is heightened by reports of armed migration-related violence along key European routes and the involvement of organised crime in arms trafficking. The situation demands awake monitoring and pre-emptive action plans by agencies like Frontex to mitigate the impending threat of illegal arms proliferation, which could potentially fuel organised crime and terrorism, exacerbating the already complex security challenges.[21]

Transnational organised crime - TOC is also a growing threat to security across the Western Balkan economies. The intensified process of globalisation, the rise of information and communication technologies, and a trend of authoritarian governments exploiting different political power instruments (particularly economics) have influenced a radical shift in how TOC affects human and economy-level security in the WB. Well-established evidence of TOC that operates across the WB generates dire implications for security through public safety, public health, environmental security, border security, cyber security, democratic institutions, and economic stability.

Criminal networks usually abuse all positive prospects and challenges of the EU integrations not just to expand, but also to diversify their activities. This is often accomplished through direct bribery (but also, sometimes, as an option, by having members run for office); setting up shadow economies; infiltrating financial and security sectors through coercion or corruption; and positioning themselves as alternate providers of governance, security, services, and livelihoods. A general belief across the region is that TOC networks may threaten WB stability, undermine human security, and free markets as they seek to build alliances with political entities, financial institutions, lucrative and/or politically motivated businesses, law enforcement, foreign intelligence, and security agencies.[22] Hence, pressing issues such as human trafficking (and abusing migrants), environmental-based crimes including other forms of economic-based crimes (such as but not limited to swindling and fraud, money laundering, corruption, and intellectual property crime[23]), or manipulating political processes designed for different purposes (ethnic cohesions for example) to cover for illicit activities are add-on to well established TOC practices such as small arms trafficking, illegal drug and tobacco smuggling, etc.[24]

These illegal activities generate development inequities, systemic corruption, and persecution of certain groups that foster unrest within, and between, societies in the WB. As such they erode the populace's trust in the system and made the WB societies susceptible to foreign authoritarian or violent extremist influence. Later, these illicit practices are used as bases in the radicalisation against the government and Euro-Atlantic integrations through various forms of disinformation.

20 Christy Cooney, 4 December 2023), "Paris attack near Eiffel Tower leaves one dead and two injured", BBC, available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67604591

21 See more:
1. "Monitoring illicit arms flows from the conflict in Ukraine." Global Initiative (GI) https://riskbulletins.globalinitiative.net/ukr-obs-001/01-monitoring-illicit-arms-flows-from-the-conflict-in-ukraine.html, November 2023;
2. "Beat the gun: The high stakes battle to break the chain of firearms smuggling." FRONTEX, https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/beat-the-gun-the-high-stakes-battle-to-break-the-chain-of-firearms-smuggling-Uaa2p2, September 2023
3. "Frontex Risk Analysis 2023/2024 discusses challenges at EU external borders," FRONTEX, https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/frontex-risk-analysis-2023-2024-discusses-challenges-at-eu-external-borders-J6yq05, September 2023

22 ACIT Centre & Finance Think, (June 2022), SecuriMeter2022–Public Opinion Survey on Security, Regional Cooperation Council, available at: https://www.rcc.int/download/docs/Securimetar%202022_final.pdf/812a4b746e4de5f7f5b657c61a82cd34.pdf

23 For more information about economic crimes classification see: European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation, (2022), "Economic crimes", available at: https://www.eurojust.europa.eu/crime-types-and-cases/crime-types

24 Please see contextual in depth analysis about the WB region at: Global Initiative against Transnational and Organized Crime, (20 May 2019), "Hotspots of Organized Crime in the Western Balkans, Local vulnerabilities in a regional context", available at: https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/oc-western-balkans/

The convergence of physical and cyberspace across the WB mirrors global trends. Cybersecurity is intertwined with economy-level security and human security with high velocity and greater volume. As a result, challenges from the physical world to WB security are becoming more complex, unpredictable, and providing opportunities for easy exploits and short-cuts for various malicious state and non-state actors in advancing their agenda.[25] Cyberspace and the information and communication technologies – ICT (including the so-called dual-use technologies such as the internet of things-IoT, or emerging - dual-use technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence applications, Machine learning, Deep fake, etc.) role in the context of the current security trends in WB is twofold. First, ICT and cyberspace may multiply push and pull factors to conflict, i.e. serve as enablers. Second, they generate new threat vectors to highly centralised, risk-averted, and highly politicised government security apparatus and institutions across WB.[26]

3.2. An overview of combinations of factors and actors and the likely triggers that might lead to an increase in conflict or violence and challenge human and economy-level security in the region

A combination of factors and actors shape the internal and regional security dynamics across the Western Balkans. Weak democratic institutions; the lack of a more efficient Western strategy for the region (beside the well-established enlargement process and the EU membership perspective of the region); the rise of the authoritarian peer competitors and the general crisis of the liberal democracy more or less generate the framework for push and pull vulnerability factors/triggers with the potential to flaring up conflicts or violence and endanger peace across the region.

Ethnic tension, boundary/border disputes, and neighbourly disagreements are most likely triggers that may be put into certain contexts and push or pull WB economies into violence and conflicts. Furthermore, the recent global security trends such as the migrant crisis,[27] the COVID-19 pandemic and response accompanied by disinformation campaigns,[28] cybersecurity incidents, TOC-based activities, or the Russian aggression against Ukraine[29] and Israel operations in Gaza against Hamas can be easily utilised in the local-regional context and instigate internal tensions, divisions and extreme narratives, initiatives and even violence. Hence, although with lower probability, other emerging issues (such as LGBTQ-related violence and/or inclusiveness, climate change, limited resources-related competition, or crime-related activities that endanger human security), particularly combined with populace grievance from poor governance and/or proxy support from abroad may lead to internal, bilateral, or regional violence and conflict.

25 Conclusions from the Thematic Panel 5, Cybersecurity and Critical Infrastructure Protection from the 8th Regional Jumbo Security Conference, titled: Securing the Future: Building Resilience Through Collaboration, organised by RCC during 14-15 November 2023 and held in Rome

26 Conclusion from the Thematic Panel 6, Use of AI and Innovative Technologies in Policing from the 8th Regional Jumbo Security Conference, titled: Securing the Future: Building Resilience Through Collaboration, organised by RCC during 14-15 November 2023 and held in Rome

27 Speaking at the opening of the 5th Regional (Jumbo) Security Coordination Conference held online 19-20 November 2020, Amer Kapetanovic, RCC's Head of Political Department stressed that "Over-securitisation of illegal immigration can be dangerous, but neglecting its detrimental potential can be equally dangerous too". He also underlined that study conducted by RCC showed that 63% of Western Balkan citizens in 2020 perceived migration as a direct security threat. Please see more about this at: https://www.rcc.int/news/664/kapetanovic-over-securitisation-of-illegal-immigration-can-be-dangerous-but-neglecting-its-detrimental-potential-can-be-equally-dangerous-too

28 See for example how disinformation played a role during vaccine hesitancy in North Macedonia, Stephen P. Fucaloro, Vahe S. Yacoubian , Rachael Piltch-Loeb, Nigel Walsh Harriman, ORCID, Tea Burmaz, Metodi Hadji-Janev and Elena Savoia, (2022), Essential Workers' COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy, Misinformation, and Informational Needs in the North Macedonia, Vaccines 2022, 10(3), 348; https://doi.org/10.3390/vaccines10030348

29 More about this see, for example, in: Maxim Samorukov, (25 April 2023), Surviving the War: Russia-Western Balkan Ties After the Invasion of Ukraine, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89600

Given that digitalisation across the region is an ongoing and rapidly developing issue, any potential trigger that will disrupt peace and security across the region will have an increasing impact on cybersecurity. Consequently, regardless of whether cyberspace and ICT will be utilised as an enabler (e.g. influence operations[30]) or as general threat vectors to endanger critical infrastructures and with cascade effects to inflict chaos, and material costs including loss of lives, this will likely affect economies' security and human security respectively in the targeted economy or even regionally. Both state and non-state actors have already exploited these factors and actors in the past separately or in combination with economy and crisis-specific contexts and will likely continue to do so.

3.2.1. Weak democratic institutions and semi-authoritarian tendencies as combinations of factors and actors that may be exploited by some triggers/drivers and increase conflict perspectives

According to the European Commission 2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, corruption, including high-level corruption, continues to be widespread across enlargement countries, and entanglement of public and private interests remains an issue of concern. Elements of erosion of governance quality and democratic principles persist, with threats to democratic stability, high-level corruption and undue influence by oligarchs being observed, alongside attempts by organised criminal networks to infiltrate the economic and political systems, administrations, and media.[31]

Efforts to promote the rule of law and media freedoms in WB have generally resulted in weak outcomes, while corruption and crime rates remain high.[32] Economies across the region are dependent on foreign investments. Civil society activism is underdeveloped and the societies are vulnerable to foreign influence that exploits internal or regional weaknesses and disputes.

Although Euro-Atlantic efforts to dismantle foreign authoritarian influence in the region (particularly Russian and Chinese) are evident, the ability of authoritarian competitors to capitalise on region-based proxies and generate destabilising effects when needed, remain open. This is particularly true vis-à-vis the so-called veteran's political elites patterns that have the ability to come into power waiting for the right moment to exploit some trigger (such as interethnic hatred for example and with that to increase its relevance or even instigate violence). Another reason that presents elements across the Western Balkans which may provide room for some triggers for conflict escalation stems from their ability to inhibit prospects for regional cooperation. Moreover, the ability of some present elements in the region to affect prospects of cooperation is a compelling reason for the EU to sharpen its stick.

30 Jon Hateman, Elonnai Hickok, Laura Courchesne, Isra Thange, Jacob N. Shapiro, (29 June 2021), Measuring the Effects of Influence Operations: Key Findings and Gaps From Empirical Research, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/28/measuring-effects-of-influence-operations-key-findings-and-gaps-from-empirical-research-pub-84824

31 https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/COM_2023_690%20Communication%20on%20EU%20Enlargement%20Policy_and_Annex.pdf

32 See for example the Opening remarks by the Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) Majlinda Bregu, during the Launch of Balkan Barometer and SecuriMeter 2022, held in Brussels on 24 June 2022. Available at: https://www.rcc.int/news/771/bregu-support-of-western-balkan-citizens-to-regional-cooperation-remains-stable-at-76; also see: Milica Starinac, (14 October 2022), "EC 2022 Reports on the Western Balkans: Track record on fighting corruption needs to improve", European Western Balkans, available at: https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/10/14/ec-2022-reports-on-the-western-balkans-track-record-on-fighting-corruption-needs-to-improve/

3.2.2. The lack of a more efficient Western strategy as the framework vulnerable to existing triggers that may instigate violence and lead to conflict in the Western Balkans

The region is firmly on the Euro-Atlantic agenda. However, the expectations for the Euro-Atlantic perspectives of WB are stumbling as also recent Balkan Barometer 2023 public opinion surveys show: "A third of Western Balkan citizens, or 34% (3% less than last year), are still optimistic believing that the EU accession will happen by 2030, and another 32% aim for 2035. However, almost a quarter (23%) think it will never happen, which is 3% more than in 2020."[33]

The years of absence of a coherent Western strategy for the Western Balkans had led to decline in the public sentiment index. This is a sheer reminder that any further hesitation could potentially contribute to heightened tensions and the risk of conflict in the region for several reasons. The potential lack of a unified and clear Western strategy, especially in case the EU and US turns more to right after this year's elections, may create uncertainty and instability in the region. This uncertainty can lead to a vacuum where various actors, both internal and external, may exploit divisions or pursue conflicting interests, exacerbating tensions. The importance of keeping Euro-Atlantic integration in perspective for regional stability, therefore, is undisputed. The utmost importance of Euro-Atlantic integration for the region is that the integration perspectives are the framework of all conflict resolution strategies across the region. Put differently, the idea of accepting peaceful resolutions to violent conflicts across the region was the perspective of the EU integration itself. The integration thus makes territorial and ethnic disputes irrelevant, integrating various WB identities in one family that is a European family.

Without a cohesive strategy, there could be increased competition among regional powers vying for influence in the Western Balkans. These rivalries might intensify existing fault lines, "creatively" exploit negative security trends (organised crime, religious or right-wing violent extremism, disinformation, migration, environmental concerns, energy, or even cybersecurity-related issues) that contribute to instability and could turn them into conflict resolution tools, or the reason for their survival. After all, revamping complex ethnic and territorial disputes could happen in no time.

3.2.3. The rise of the authoritarian peer competitors and their ability to exploit existing factors, actors, and triggers to generate instability, violence, and conflict in the Western Balkans

The rise of authoritarian peer competitors more or less represents a framework with the potential to exploit push and pull vulnerability factors, manipulate and leverage internal weaknesses and western disengagement while turning the region into a geopolitical interplay.[34] Led by their geostrategic ambitions, these authoritarian regimes have emerged from ad hoc (PRC) and neutral (Russia, with certain exceptions) involvement to sophisticated coordinated engagements that collide with liberal values and obstruct democratic transition and alignment with the Euro-Atlantic normative and institutional architecture. In their endgame, the PRC and Russia proved capable of employing aggressive and subversive authoritarian agendas that build on lucrative alternatives and deals (as opposed to Western democratically and good governance conditioned support).

33 Balkan Barometer 2023 Public Opinion Survey, Regional Cooperation Council, https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/key_findings/2/, June 2023
34 See for example, Pascal Abb und Irene Weipert-Fenne, (19 April 2023)

3.2.4. The general crisis of the liberal democracy as a framework/factor susceptible to existing triggers that may instigate violence and lead to conflict in the Western Balkans

The liberal democratic crisis is a highly debatable issue. However, in regional forums and debates, it is usually contextualised to EU fatigue, the rise of populism,[35] democratic deconsolidation,[36] or the hollowed-out democracy.[37] In combination with the previous three factors/frameworks, this factor holds the potential to transform into a powerful trigger that can use existing crises or generate one (e.g. on the bitter issues - ethnic tensions, boundary/border, or bilateral disputes) and prompt a shift towards conflict and violence escalation. For example, the decline in liberal democracy may be seen as an opportunity by certain political powers to find alternatives for EU integration processes conditioned with transparent and good governance. Another example may be that the liberal decline may become a powerful manipulative argument that can be further employed in the influence operations by the authoritarian peer competitors and harness anti-transatlantic sentiments while fusing ethnic divisions through violent extremism and falsely induced historical and religious relations.

It's all set for the Eighth Regional Security Coordination Conference to begin (Photo: RCC/Mario Sayadi)

35 William Galston, (17 April 2018), "The populist challenge to liberal democracy", Brookings, available at: https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-populist-challenge-to-liberal-democracy/
36 Yascha MounkRoberto Stefan Foa, (July 2016), The Danger of Deconsolidation: The Democratic Disconnect, Journal of Democracy, Vol.27, Issue 3, pp. 5-17, available at: https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-danger-of-deconsolidation-the-democratic-disconnect/
37 Shalini Randeria, (10 July 2023), "Democracy is being hollowed out from within", UNDP, available at: https://www.undp.org/eurasia/blog/democracy-being-hollowed-out-within

4. Trend Analysis

Before exploring the specific security trends in the Western Balkans, let us first understand how the Western Balkan citizens view their security landscape, as documented in the SecuriMeter 2023 report. This report sheds light on the complex and various security concerns that shape the region's dynamics from the perspective of its people.

The perception of organised crime as a significant security concern amongst the region's population is a dominant trend. Approximately 60% of Western Balkan respondents identify it as their top concern, highlighting its deep-rooted presence. For the first time since the 2021 survey, misuse of firearms ranks second among the factors negatively impacting feelings of security for respondents. The possibility of an armed conflict between different ethnic groups/political instability in the region is considered a factor negatively impacting feelings of security for 47% of respondents, ranking in the top three.

The region is not an exception in terms of illicit activities, including arms and human trafficking, with the war in Ukraine potentially exacerbating the influx of weapons.

Western Balkan respondents perceive the dissemination of fake news as an acute threat (79%); according to a majority of respondents, intentional disinformation causes the most harm in provoking hatred and divisive opinions (47%), closely followed by trust in public institutions (46%). Cyber threats are increasingly prominent, with 1 in 4 respondents citing them impacting their security. Compared to 2022, these security threats rank higher on the list of concerns, showing a growing awareness of the phenomenon, especially in light of the increasing importance and reliance on the online sphere for receiving information and shaping opinions.

Migration and border/boundary security also present significant challenges. A 59.5% increase in migrant arrivals in 2022, compared to 2021 and a 348% increase since 2018, underlines the difficulties in managing migratory flows and maintaining border/boundary security in a region troubled by organised crime.

Environmental security is also a growing concern, with 81% of respondents acknowledging natural disasters as a significant threat. This reflects the rising impact of climate change on regional stability and security.

4.1. Geopolitical dynamics and foreign authoritarian influence as security trend

The Western Balkan region is at a geopolitical crossroad, attracting interest of various global powers. While EU and NATO integration remains a primary aspiration for many economies, Russia and China also vie for influence through economic investments, energy projects, and diplomatic engagements, affecting regional dynamics, particularly human and economy-level security.

The rise of the authoritarian rivals to the liberal-dominated world order has elevated the importance of geopolitics in the Western Balkans like never before in the last thirty-plus years.[38] Abusing the virtues of liberalism bolstered by globalisation (i.e. free market, technological development, information and communication tech-

38 Mahir Sijamija, Haris Ćutahija, Milena Gvozdenović, Marko Pankovski, Dorka Takácsy, Dominik Istrate, Veronika Víchová, (2020), Foreign Authoritarian Influence in the Western Balkans, Political Capital Kft, available at: https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/FAII-Final-Study.pdf

nologies and social media, etc.) authoritarian challengers are now able to affect liberal democracies by different forms of exploiting the pressure of systemic economic stresses, growing tribalism and nationalism, and a general loss of confidence in established international and public institutions.[39] Besides China and Russia whose roles have become most alarming recently among the EU and NATO efforts to re-energise their commitment to the region, some Gulf states including Iran have also been active for quite a while.[40] Unlike Russia, though, which has a clear anti- EU agenda, others have focused their interest on investments and "buying out" hearts and minds of people.

Throughout the years both China and Russia exploited internal weaknesses across several Western Balkan economies and utilised various methods to advance their agenda.[41] Russia tries (and to a certain degree has been quite successful) to operationalise its geostrategic ambitions through both active and passive measures in the region in politics, defence, economy, culture, education, religion, civil society, and energy sectors.[42] It tries to capitalise on history and religion enhanced with strong symbolism and disinformation campaigns tailored to reach out to almost all of the WB economies.

Unlike Russia, China is not a traditional power actor present in WB (except to a certain degree).[43] Instead, China is a new player whose actions are a potential threat to liberal democratic values. China's initial indirect influence in the WB economies - mainly commercial and transactional, has gradually evolved and become cross-sectorial and more direct.[44] China still insists on presenting its interest as purely economic seeking mutual benefit. However, in these endeavours, China offers lucrative economic arrangements that defy transparency and accountability.[45]

Although for now, there is no direct link or synergy between the two, these authoritarian regimes use diplomacy, economic and information sectors to support multi-layered influence across different sectors of society in a way that is in stark contrast to liberal democracy. China and Russia prompted their political and highly centralised government-owned/supported framework of companies, the investment and sale (including offer) to advance their political and economic interest through the WB economic sector, with the indications that they are doing it in a non-transparent way surrounded by corruption. By doing so, they can disturb the free market efforts, undermine liberal values, and create internal divisions and segmentation in WB's societies.

39 Shashank Joshi, (21 June 2018), Authoritarian Challenges to the Liberal Order, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, available at: https://www.institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/authoritarian-challenges-liberal-order; but also see: interview with professor Dominique Reynié, Professor at Sciences Po and Director General of the Foundation for Political Innovation in: Dominique Reynié, (3 January 2023), "How authoritarian regimes threaten democracies", A Review By Institut Polytechnique De Paris, available at: https://www.polytechnique-insights.com/en/columns/geopolitics/are-democracies-at-risk/

40 See for example: Kurt Bassuener, (2019), Pushing on an Open Door: Foreign Authoritarian Influence in the Western Balkans, National Endowment for Democracy, available at: https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Pushing-on-an-Open-Door-Foreign-Authoritarian-Influence-in-the-Western-Balkans-Kurt-Bassuener-May-2019.pdf

41 More on the Chinese and Russian influence specifically may be found in: Rumena Filipova & Ruslan Stefanov, (February 2021), The Twin Authoritarian Challenge in the Western Balkans, Center for the Study of Democracy, available at: https://csd.bg/blog/blogpost/2021/02/08/the-twin-authoritarian-challenge-in-the-western-balkans/

42 See more in: James McBride, (21 November 2023), Russia's Influence in the Balkans, Council of Foreign Relations, available at: https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/russias-influence-balkans

43 Vladimir Shopov, (March 2022), Mapping China's Rise in the Western Balkans, European Council on Foreign Relations, available at: https://ecfr.eu/special/china-balkans/; But, for opposing views arguing that in fact China is not a newcomer, although only the visit of Josip Broz Tito in 1971 is provided as evidence, see: Valbona Zeneli, (17 November 2022), Countering Beijing's Regional Influence, perConcordiam, Journal for European Security and Defence Issues, available at: https://perconcordiam.com/china-in-the-balkans/

44 Branislav Stanicek & Simona Tarpova, (June 2022), "China's strategic interests in the Western Balkans", European Parliamentary Research Service, available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI(2022)733558_EN.pdf

45 Visar Xhambazi, (28 January 2020), China Buying Balkans Influence, Competing with West, BIRN, available at: https://balkaninsight.com/2020/01/28/china-buying-balkans-influence-competing-with-west/; However, different opinion may be seen at: Michal Himmer, (13 April 2023), "Chinese debt trap diplomacy: reality or myth?", Journal of the Indian Ocean Region, available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19480881.2023.2195280

The Gulf States have also sought to exploit the region in their strategic and geopolitical endgames.[46] Various investigative stories, anecdotal and empirical evidence attest that in their early involvement KSA, UAE and Iran were involved in spreading and supporting violent religious extremism.[47] Later engagement, nevertheless, evolved in closing lucrative and corrosive economic deals including in the so-called trend of the land grab deals in certain WB economies.[48]

Put in the context of the slow progress on implementation of fundamental reforms and the adoption of EU standards, the geopolitical authoritarian influence represents a significant security risk for the region's Euro-Atlantic prosperity and integration. Sometimes the authoritarian presence and "honey deals" have been promoted as leverage in domestic reach out and as an alternative to the West (EU and the US). Moreover, usually, these deals have served as confidence against critics of paused democratic transformation in the engagement with the EU and the United States.[49]

Starting from 2014 Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, but more vigorously after COVID-19 and 2022 Russia's aggression against Ukraine the Euro-Atlantic community has undertaken a series of initiatives to counter this authoritarian presence across the Western Balkans. Numerous studies, research and public-awareness initiatives have supported diplomatic, economic, information and military/security efforts to deny Russia' active and passive measures and China's hidden win-win deals to dominate the region.[50] While evidence of reduced Chinese and Russian influence across the region is here, any underestimation or lowering of the guard mode of operation vis-a-vis the capabilities to destabilise vulnerable peace processes from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Kosovo* including Montenegro and North Macedonia would be a naïve observation.

Along these lines prospects that may play a crucial stimulative role in bolstering anti-authoritarian dominance across the Western Balkans seem to be losing against the trends that are dragging the region towards accepting these powers with open hands. For now, the "liberal democracy values" still play a dominant role against the peer challengers, but the more relevant questions are for how long and to what extent in such a global context would "the West" be successful in winning the battle of values, which is also increasingly plaguing the Western Balkans. Arguably this is relevant in terms of the content, to keep multilateralism alive and kicking, realm of global and regional order intact, to sustain economic leverage through delivering funds that will feed the social stability growth, and militarily to project the idea of collective security and safeguarding the security both psychologically and physically. Nevertheless, issues such as the protracted decline of Euro-Atlantic agenda in the region, chronicallylevels of corruption, highly politicised public sector and growing trend of organised crime schemes, demographic decline (a trend of exodus to the West and brain drain), re-energised efforts of

46 Arlinda Rrustemi, Rob de Wijk, Connor Dunlop, Jovana Perovska, Lirije Palushi, (January 2021), Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans, The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, available at: https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Geopolitical-Influences-of-External-Powers-in-the-Western-Balkans_0.pdf

47 See for example in Matthew Levitt, (6 September 2002), Eradicating Evil, Harvard International Review, available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20150620115244/http://hir.harvard.edu/archives/1080; also see: Lyubomir Kyuchukov ed.,(2018), Balkan Islam a Barrier or a Bridge for Radicalization?", Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, available at: https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sofia/15331-balkan_islam_eng.pdf

48 Fatjona Mejdini & Fabian Zhila, (19 April 2022), "A safe haven in the Gulf: Balkan criminals, and their money, are hiding in the United Arab Emirates", Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, available at: https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/balkans-criminals-uae-gulf/ For KSA illicit practices see for example: Jennifer Rankin, (26 October 2017), "EU under mounting pressure to ban arms sales to Saudi Arabia", The Guardian, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/26/eu-under-mounting-pressure-to-ban-arms-sales-to-saudi-arabia; also see: Logan Cochrane, (13 February 2021), "The United Arab Emirates as a global donor: what a decade of foreign aid data transparency reveals", Development Studies Research, Volume 8, Issue 1, pp. 49-62, available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21665095.2021.1883453

49 Harun Karčić, (23 December 2020), The Chinese Honey Money Moon in the Western Balkans, RUSI, available at: https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/chinese-honey-money-moon-western-balkans

50 See Ana Krstinovska, Bledar Feta, Aleksandra Stankovic, Senada Selo Sabic, Aleksandra Davitkovska-Spasovska, Momcilo Radulovic, (2023), China's Influence on the Western Balkans' EU Accession Process: Synergies and Obstacles, KAS and Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, available at: https://www.martenscentre.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Chinas-Influence-on-the-Western-Balkans-EU-Accession-Process-Synergies-and-Obstacles.pdf; But also see James McBride, (21 November 2023), cited, Vladimir Shopov, (March 2022), Visar Xhambazi, (28 January 2020) cited

radicalisation (exploiting both vulnerabilities in the physical and online domain), economic and social stability and potentially lost initiative to uphold the trends of regional cooperation are all dragging the region into the opposite than Euro-Atlantic integration.

4.2. The impact of the rule of law and good governance on the security in the Western Balkans

The trend of the rule of law and good governance holds immense significance in shaping human security and economy-level security in the Western Balkans. Understanding the impact of this trend is crucial in evaluating its effects on stability, prosperity, and the overall security landscape of the region.

According to the European Commission's Enlargement Package and the Progress Report, adopted on 8 November 2023,[51] the Rule of Law and Fundamental Reforms remain one of the biggest challenges for the Western Balkans. Strong emphasis on the fundamentals represents the EU's determination to help WB laying the foundation for legal certainty, accountability and transparency, and with that for the effectiveness and efficiency of the governance across the region.[52] The rule of law ensures predictability, fairness, and justice in societies, providing citizens with confidence in legal systems and institutions. Furthermore, good governance promotes accountability of public institutions, transparency in decision-making processes, and effective checks and balances, fostering trust in governments, but also the ability to deliver tailored human and economy-level security. Good governance, therefore, is the prerequisite for tailored security sector reform and security sector governance and accountability.[53] The future development of good governance and the rule of law and their impact on human and economy-level security may have profound effects on transformational potential, regional cooperation, and EU integration processes. Without putting efforts to strengthen the rule of law and good governance, WB economies will remain stuck in a transition that never ends. They will fail to transform societal norms, promote trust in institutions, and miss the opportunity to ensure long-term stability and security dividends.

The trend of advancing the rule of law and good governance in the Western Balkans should become pivotal in the leadership agenda for shaping human security, fostering societal resilience, and bolstering security. Upholding these principles will strengthen institutions, promote accountability, protect human rights, and contribute to regional stability.[54] Consequently, this will significantly impact the overall security landscape in the region. Embracing and implementing effective governance practices and rule of law principles are indispensable for ensuring a secure, prosperous, and harmonious future for the Western Balkans.

51 See more: "Commission adopts 2023 Enlargement package, recommends to open negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, to grant candidate status to Georgia and to open accession negotiations with BiH, once the necessary degree of compliance is achieved", https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/%20en/ip_23_5633, November 2023.

52 For a more general approach about this see : UNDP, (2023), Governance and Peacebuilding, Rule of Law, Justice, Security and Human Rights, available at: https://www.undp.org/eurasia/our-focus/governance-and-peacebuilding/rule-law-justice-security-and-human-rights

53 See OSCE, (2022), Security Sector Governance and Reform: Guidance for OSCE Staff, OSCE Secretariat, Vienna, available at: https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/4/512470_0.pdf

54 See more on this in OSCE, (2022) cited

4.3. The declining Euro-Atlantic agenda as the emerging security trend

The importance of keeping the Euro-Atlantic agenda is directly related to the region's stability and prosperity.[55]

There are three factors that would keep the Euro-Atlantic agenda from the decline.[56] First, the ability of the Western Balkan leadership to seize the momentum offered by the EU's new Growth Plan and CRM, in other words to lead the region towards the EU membership. Second, the EU's ability to keep this agenda alive against many challenges including internal political dynamics.[57] Third, the ability of the authoritarian and revisionist forces to challenge the dominance of EU and NATO and with that to undermine the very essence of the cornerstones which regional stability depends on.[58]

Absence of the above-mentioned factors or their fulfilment could have negative consequences to socio-economic and consequently security context. In such a scenario, WB will dwell deeply into the extremely unstable status quo. Protracted stabilitocracy will become business as usual. EU integration will become almost impossible.[59] Consequently, the domino effect of political governing regression, socio-economic stagnation and the "quest for alternative" narrative as an excuse to enter into behind-the-door lucrative authoritarian-led initiatives will most likely become a flourishing trend in the Western Balkans.[60] Organised crime in its traditional criminal mode but also in its developing geopolitical context will likely explode.

It is therefore encouraging that the EU enlargement policy has gained new momentum and it is properly contextualised against emerging threats and challenges.

4.4. Ethnic and political tensions in the Western Balkans as the emerging security trend

The Western Balkans region has long been characterised by complex and often fragile inter-ethnic and political relations, creating an environment prone to ethnic and political tensions. Understanding these tensions as an emerging security trend in the region is essential for assessing the potential risks and challenges they pose and developing strategies to mitigate them.[61]

55 See for example the Minister of Defence of North Macedonia statement Slavjanka Petrovska, (29 August 2022), "Petrovska: The Euro-Atlantic integration of the region is a tool for improving security and stability", MOD of North Macedonia, available at: https://mod.gov.mk/petrovska-the-euro-atlantic-integration-of-the-region-is-a-tool-for-improving-security-and-stability/

56 See the conclusions of series of articles at: European Council, "Western Balkans - EU relations" available at: https://consilium-europa.libguides.com/c.php?g=693887&p=4977672; but also see: European Union, (2018), A Credible Enlargement Perspective for and Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans", Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions Strasbourg, 6.2.2018 COM(2018) available at: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2019-03/western_balkans_strategy_brochure.pdf

57 See for example: Dimitar Bechev, The Periphery of the Periphery: The Western Balkans and the Euro Crisis, European Council of Foreign Relations, available at: https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/173470/ECFR60_WESTERN_BALKANS_BRIEF_AW.pdf

58 NATO, (10 January 2023), Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation, by the President of the European Council, the President of the European Commission, and the Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_210549.htm

59 Wouter Zweers & Giulia Cretti, (February 2022), The EU as a Promoter of 'Stabilitocracy' in the Western Balkans?, Clingendael, available at: https://www.clingendael.org/publication/eu-promoter-stabilitocracy-western-balkans

60 Licia Cianetti, James Dawson & Seán Hanley, (18 July 2018), "Rethinking "democratic backsliding" in Central and Eastern Europe – looking beyond Hungary and Poland", East European Politics, Volume 34, Issue 3, pp 243-256, available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21599165.2018.1491401

61 A good contextual summary of the WB conflicts may be seen in Nadina Resulani, (2023), Ethnic Tensions in the Western Balkans and the Experience of Ethnic Minorities, City University of New York, a Master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York, available at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=6449&context=gc_etds

The legacy of conflict, combined with the culture with long memories and collectivism underlines the importance of a careful approach when it comes to history and security.[62]

A mix of nationalistic agendas, competing interests, and unresolved territorial disputes compile the political landscape across the region and further exacerbate tensions.[63] Years of ill-structured democratic transition based on the former premises have a high potential to produce ethnic divides. Given the former observation, particularly about the future security trends, ethnic divisions and grievances will persist. More likely, they will be fuelled by historical animosities, perceptions of discrimination, and competition over resources, leading to occasional outbreaks of violence and unrest. The unfortunate result will be that political instability may increase even further.

Political volatility, governance challenges, and contested legitimacy will contribute to a sense of uncertainty and frustration among different ethnic communities.[64] This will very likely continue to feed sentiments and ideas about territorial reorganisation. Resurgences of nationalist rhetoric and ideologies in some parts of the region will intensify ethnic polarisation, exacerbating divisions and hindering reconciliation efforts.[65] Unresolved border and territorial disputes will remain potential flashpoints that could reignite ethnic tensions and have negative effects on the overall development and reconciliation context.[66]

Such developments may affect security directly and indirectly. Directly, escalating ethnic tensions could lead to localised violence, threatening stability and potentially escalating into broader conflicts.[67] Indirectly, this could have a wider socio-economic impact. Political and ethnic instabilities can hinder economic development, deter foreign investment, and exacerbate social disparities, impacting the region's growth and prosperity.[68] Eventually, this may affect reconciliation and inter-ethnic relations. Obstacles, including nationalistic sentiments and historical grievances, will hinder efforts towards reconciliation and fostering inter-ethnic relations.

Mitigation strategies could reduce negative impact of increased ethnic and political tensions. Besides dialogue and reconciliation, effective governance building trust and inclusivity efforts among diverse communities, encouraging inter-ethnic dialogue, strengthening democratic institutions, rule of law, and good governance, pursuing a people-oriented socio-economic and security reforms that would narrow socio-economic convergence gap and the quality of life gap between the Western Balkans and EU is essential. The inherent desire of every single individual in the Western Balkans is to have better quality of life, responsive and accountable institutions, and feel secure in the context of human security nexus. To that end, regional cooperation that has to be holistic (both driven by socio-economic and JHA parameters) remains indispensable.

62 See more about this in: Đorđe Vuković, (May 2021), Conflict of a Memory Culture in Western Balkans", STED Journal, Volume 3, Issue 1, pp 57-68, available at: https://stedj-univerzitetpim.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/7_CONFLICT-OF-A-MEMORY-CULTURE-IN-WESTERN-BALKANS_Vukovic_57-68.pdf

63 For similar views see: Jenny Nordman, (2016), Nationalism, EU Integration, and Stability in the Western Balkans, OSCE Yearbook 2015, Baden-Baden 2016, pp 151-163, available at: https://ifsh.de/file-CORE/documents/yearbook/english/15/Nordman-en.pdf; also see: Jens Woelk, (2012), Identity-Diversity and the Territorial Dimension in the Western Balkans, Dans L'Europe en Formation, Volume 1, No. 363, pages 189 – 204, available at: https://www.cairn.info/revue-l-europe-en-formation-2012-1-page-189.htm

64 See more in: Marko Kmezić and Florian Bieber, (Marc, 2017), The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans, An Anatomy of Stabilitocracy and the Limits of EU Democracy Promotion, Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG), available at: https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/TheCrisisofdemocracy.pdf

65 See more general information about this in an early report submitted to NATO which is still relevant today: Ivanka Nedeva Atanassova, (June 1999), The Impact of Ethnic Issues on the Security of South Eastern Europe, Report Commissioned by the NATO Office of Information and Press, available at: https://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/97-99/atanassova.pdf

66 See an op ed analysis from RANE, Powered by Stratfor in Sam Lichtenstein, (15 August 2022), The Risk of Another Balkans War, Part 1: Placing Recent Flashpoints in Context, RANE, available at: https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/risk-another-balkans-war-part-1-placing-recent-flashpoints-context

67 See more on this in the International Crisis Group's report: International Crisis Group, (7 July 2022), Managing the Risks of Instability in the Western Balkans, Europe Report N°265, available at: https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/265-risks-of-instability-western-balkans_1.pdf

68 Francesco Marino, (8 October 2023), "Political instability in the Balkans and its effect on the citizens", Newsletter of the European Union, available at: https://www.newslettereuropean.eu/political-instability-in-the-balkans-and-its-effect-on-the-citizens/

4.5. The organised crime trends across the Western Balkans as the emerging security challenge

The Western Balkans region has been a hotspot for various forms of organised crime and corruption.[69] These interrelated activities pose complex challenges that continuously evolve and adapt. Understanding the evolving nature of these criminal activities is urged by the complexity but also by the negative effects on the security simultaneously and conclusively. Therefore, encompassing a spectrum of illicit actions, and predicting their future trajectory is essential for devising effective strategies to combat these corrosive practices that disturb economic growth, undermine prosperity, erode public trust, and damage the environment, affect safety, human and economy-level security.

The dynamics and evolution of transnational networks; corruption nexus; geopolitical dynamics; evolving nature of crime; criminal syndicates' ability to diversify criminal activities, criminal's flexibility to fragment and operate in decentralised fashion, sophistication of money laundering; ability to utilise technology and exploit digitalisation and dual-use technologies and the ability to infiltrate in the legitimate sector more or less mark the current landscape of organised crime across the region.

Organised crime in the Western Balkans operates through intricate transnational networks, engaging in drug trafficking, human smuggling, arms trade, and money laundering.[70] Less frequent, or less reported, crime types are organised property crimes (where smuggling of goods is the most prominent activity) and smuggling of antiquities and trafficking in cultural goods.[71] These networks exploit porous boundaries/borders and weak governance structures for their activities.

Corruption nexus is the most powerful enabler of organised crime activities across the Western Balkans.[72] Corruption, both in public institutions and private sectors, remains a great concern. It intertwines with organised crime, providing avenues for illicit activities. Together with weak governance and geopolitical complexities, it creates vulnerabilities and fosters an environment conducive to organised crime, allowing criminal elements to exploit divisions for their gain.[73]

69 A very good review of the literature covering these topics may be seen in the recent GI's report, Saša Đorđević, (March 2023), "Mind the Gap: Analysis of research on illicit economies in the Western Balkans", Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, available at: https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Sasa-Dordevic-Gap-analysis-13march.pdf

70 The most recent overview of this topic was provided by the UNODC Crime Research Section, in their report: UNITED NATIONS OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME, (2020), Measuring Organized Crime in the Western Balkans, available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/OC/Measuring-OC-in-WB.pdf; for early writings about this topic see: Dejan Anastasijevic, (2006), Organized Crime in the Western Balkans, paper was presented at the First Annual Conference on Human Security, Terrorism and Organized Crime in the Western Balkan Region, organised by HUMSEC project in Ljubljana, 23-25 November 2006, available at https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/102340/1_Anastasijevic.pdf

71 See for example GI-TOC, (May 2023), "Smuggling of antiquities threatens North Macedonia's cultural heritage", GI-TOC Risk Bulletin #15 – May 2023, available at: https://riskbulletins.globalinitiative.net/see-obs-015/02-smuggling-of-antiquities-threatens-north-macedonias-cultural-heritage.html

72 Uglješa Zvekić, (2017) Corruption (and Organized Crime) in the Western Balkans, presentation during the UNODC Workshop on organised crime, available at https://www.unodc.org/documents/NGO/SEE_Workshop_2017/Presentations/Others/Corruption_in_WB_Amb._Zvekic.pdf

73 Bałkanów Zachodnich, (2019), "Organized crime and state capture in the Western Balkans" Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej, Vol. 19, No. 4, pp. 287-306, available at: https://ies.lublin.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/riesw_2021-04-14.pdf

Prospects that the trend of organised crime will evolve across WB are very high.[74] There are two key factors that will drive this evolution. The process of digitisation in the region is not just a buzzword.[75] It is a reality that converges with the physical world and affects it like elsewhere with high velocity and greater volume across various sectors of society. The second factor that will boost evolution in organised crime trends across WB is the adaptable nature of the criminals. Organised crime is expected to evolve technologically, embracing cybercrime, cryptocurrency-based transactions, and sophisticated digital schemes to conduct illegal activities, making detection and investigation more challenging. Furthermore, put in the context of weak governance and geopolitical interplay, it is very likely that authoritarian regimes may be keen on exploiting economic proxies and act below the radar of economy-level security including at local community level to inflict harm to democratic processes and achieve strategic objectives.

Along these lines, it is also expected that organised crime will very likely diversify. Criminal groups may diversify their activities, moving beyond traditional crimes like drug trafficking to newer areas such as cyberattacks, human trafficking, and exploitation of emerging markets. As the recent trends in avoiding European export ban in arms industry indicate, organised crime activities may become enabler in a wider process of sanction evasion including trade in certain production materials or goods, thus generating strategic geopolitical impact.

Organised crime syndicates will very likely continue change strategy and their modus operandi in order to evade detection.[76] Two factors will accelerate these processes: use of modern technology and ability to act in a fragmented and decentralised mode.

Using modern technologies to communicate and act or to deliver impact remotely in emerging areas that are vaguely regulated (encrypted communications or usage of drones and other dual-use technologies) will elevate organised crime schemes capability to a next level. Cybercrime surge is also to be expected. The proliferation of cybercrime is anticipated, with criminal groups exploiting technological advancements and digital platforms for a wide range of illegal activities, posing threats to cybersecurity and financial systems.[77]

To evade law enforcement scrutiny, criminal networks might adopt decentralised structures, breaking into smaller, adaptable cells that are less susceptible to complete dismantling.[78] This will further complicate the highly intrusive nature of financial and economic crimes that are among the most challenging criminal activities to investigate and tackle. A fragmented landscape sees different criminal actors interact with one another, making criminal operations more complex and tangled. Key players typically remain anonymous and operate independently from established criminal structures, often from criminal safe havens.[79]

74 For general overview on how organised crime may evolve, which is very relevant for the Western Balkans, please see: Kate Wilson, (28 September 2020), The Evolution of Serious and Organised Crime: The Diversifying Nature of Criminal Operations in the Digital Age, Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), available at: The Evolution of Serious and Organised Crime: The Diversifying Nature of Criminal Operations in the Digital Age - SHOC RUSI

75 Mariya Gabriel, (June 2018), "European Commission launches Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans", the European Commission, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/IP_18_4242; also see: European Commission, (6 October 2020), An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, Brussels, COM 641, available at: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-10/communication_on_wb_economic_and_investment_plan_october_2020_en.pdf

76 EUROPOL (2023), European Financial and Economic Crime Threat Assessment 2023 - The Other Side of the Coin: An Analysis of Financial and Economic Crime, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/The%20Other%20Side%20of%20the%20Coin%20-%20Analysis%20of%20Financial%20and%20Economic%20Crime%20%28EN%29.pdf

77 For more comprehensive analysis see: Gargi Sarkar & Sandeep K. Shukla, (December 2023), "Behavioural analysis of cybercrime: Paving the way for effective policing strategies", Journal of Economic Criminology, Volume 2, available at: https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2949791423000349

78 Megan Gates, (1 July 2021), A Pandemic Pivot: Organised Crime Finds a Way to Thrive in the New Abnormal, ASISOnline, available at: A Pandemic Pivot: Organised Crime Finds a Way to Thrive in the New Abnormal (asisonline.org); also see: Kate Wilson, (28 September 2020), cited, also see: Camilla Uppal, (31 March 2023), The Evolution of Organised Crime in the UK: Legal Trends and Challenges, available at The Evolution of Organised Crime in the UK: Legal Trends and Challenges | The Student Lawyer

79 EUROPOL, (11 September 2023), "Europol Report: An analysis of financial and economic crime", available at: https://www.paymentscardsandmobile.com/europol-report-an-analysis-of-financial-and-economic-crime/

Collaboration among transnational organised crime groups from the region and global players may increase.[80] Organised crime is likely to intensify transnational collaborations, forming alliances across boundaries/borders to expand their reach and capabilities, exploiting weaknesses in cross-boundary/border cooperation. This strategy and modus operandi combined with modern technology will allow transnational organised crime groups to utilise local criminals or criminals for hire from the region and camouflage their schemes and origins.

Consequently, this will result in sophistication in money laundering.[81] With increased scrutiny on financial transactions, organised crime could employ more intricate methods for money laundering, involving shell companies, offshore accounts, and complex financial networks. Combined with the continued corruption challenges another trend to be expected is the growth of infiltration in legitimate economic sectors across the region. Acting through legitimate sectors of the economy and utilising legal businesses for illicit purposes will increase challenges to identifying and disrupting criminal activities.

The potential evolution of organised crime in the Western Balkans is intricately linked to the region's governance landscape and geopolitical interplay.[82] While governance reforms might disrupt criminal activities, there is a possibility of criminal networks adapting and diversifying their operations. Therefore, a holistic approach that combines robust governance reforms anchored in the EU integrative processes, enhanced law enforcement capabilities, regional cooperation, and continuous adaptation to emerging criminal trends is essential to effectively combat organised crime in the region. All of these activities will be crucial to tackle a potential convergence and nexus between organised crime and violent extremism that has all the prospects of flourishing in the future.

4.6. Violent extremism as the continuous and emerging security trend in the region of WB

Violent extremism in the Western Balkans represents a complex and evolving challenge that intersects with historical factors and ethno-religious, socio-political dynamics, geopolitics, and regional contexts.[83] Understanding current trends and potential evolutions in this landscape is crucial for effective preventive measures and counter-extremism strategies in the region. Out-of-the-region non-state actors with vague or virtual historical connections may have the ability to exploit WB challenges and fuel the rise of violent extremism across the region. Hence, WB represents fertile ground for recruiting both religiously motivated and right-wing nationalistic extremists across the spectrum.[84]

History and ethno-religious dynamics have played pivotal roles in the proliferation of violent extremism across the region. Unfortunately, coupled with weak governance, fragile conflict management with prospects of weakening the EU integrative agenda and organised crime trends (as described above), and abuse of historical, ethnic, and religious divisions continue to shape the narrative of violent extremism.[85] Exploiting these divisions to

80 The U.S. National Security Council, (25 July 2011), Strategy to Combat Transnational Organized Crime, The U.S. Whitehouse, available at: https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/administration/eop/nsc/transnational-crime

81 Manuel Delgado, (10 November 2023), "FinCrime has reached new levels of sophistication", EY Global FinCrime, available at: https://www.ey.com/en_es/financial-services/fincrime-new-levels-of-sophistication

82 Isabelle Ioannides, (2018), "Peace and Security in 2018, An evaluation of EU peacebuilding in the Western Balkans", European Parliamentary Research Service, available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/621816/EPRS_STU(2018)621816_EN.pdf

83 See more in the recent study published by PAVE: Maja Halilovic Pastuovic, Johanna-Maria Hülzer, and Gillian Wylie, (January 2023), Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans and MENA Region: Key Findings and Implications for Research Theoretical Synthesis Paper, PAVE, project sponsored by Horizon 2020, available at: https://www.pave-project.eu/publications/PAVE_Theoretical_Synthesis_Paper.pdf

84 Ibid; for the right-wing extremism see: Mirza Buljubašić, (2022), "Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the Western Balkans: An overview of country-specific challenges for P/CVE", Radicalisation Awareness Network, European Union, available at: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-08/ran_vrwe_in_western_balkans_overview_072022_en.pdf

85 Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, (29 August 2023), Online Radicalization in the Western Balkans: Trends and Responses, August 2023, EU-European Commission, available at: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/whats-new/publications/online-radicalisation-western-balkans-trends-and-responses-august-2023_en

propagate radical ideologies both non-state and state actors are able to directly and remotely (via information and communication technologies and social media) identify (through tailored social profiling techniques), reach out, disinform, entrap in closed echo-chambers, manipulate and radicalise individuals and groups.[86]

Given the local authorities' enhanced efforts (helped by the EU and NATO member states) to mitigate prospects for radicalisation into violence across the region, online radicalisation soon became a norm. Extremist propaganda and recruitment efforts have increasingly shifted to online platforms and social media, allowing wider reach and potential for radicalisation among susceptible populations.[87] Frustrated by socio-economic situation, corruption, unaccomplished promises by the decision-makers, and the increased aggressive market competition including other grievances in remote pockets but also across WB urban areas individuals are now able to self-radicalised against government and EU integrative processes.[88]

With the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and in Gaza, the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon as one of the outcomes of these trends surrounding the violent extremism in the region is still looming large with potential to affect regional security.[89] The region has witnessed individuals joining conflicts abroad and returning with radicalised ideologies and combat experience, posing potential security threats upon their return.[90] While these individuals predominantly came from the Muslim communities and more or less had predetermined ethnic belonging, Russian efforts through disinformation and geopolitical meddling across WB hold the potential to mass-replicate the same phenomenon among orthodox Christian communities.[91] All of these coupled with socio-economic vulnerabilities, including high unemployment rates and marginalisation of certain communities, contribute to the susceptibility of individuals to extremist recruitment.[92]

Ability to adapt, explore vulnerabilities and import global and export regional issues along with technological advancement shape the future trends of violent extremism in the region. Violent extremist groups may adapt tactics, moving towards more clandestine and decentralised operations to evade detection, potentially increasing the complexity of countering their activities. The organised and regular crime nexus with terrorism and violent extremism is not something new. Blending with local criminals will not just camouflage the real intentions but will also lower the prospects of threat assessment matrices and proper response, level of cooperation and resource allocation and prioritisation among the authorities.

Violent extremists will continue to persistently exploit local vulnerabilities. Social, economic, and identity-based grievances will be very likely manipulated through orchestrated and protracted disinformation campaigns and

86 GCERF, (2020) Regional Strategy for Investment in the Western Balkans, available at: https://www.gcerf.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/GCERF-Strategy-for-Investment-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf

87 Ramadan Ilazi, Ardit Orana, Teuta Avdimetaj, Bledar Feta, Ana Krstinovska, Yorgos Christidis and Ioannis Armakolas, (March 2022), Online and Offline (De)radicalisation in the Balkans, Working Paper 5, PAVE, available at: https://www.pave-project.eu/publications/PAVE_870769_D5.1_publication_layout.pdf

88 Marija Todorovska, (2023), "Research on socio-economic context for radicalization to violent extremism in target municipalities", Association for Action Against Violence and Trafficking in Human Beings – Open Gate/La Strada, available at: https://lastrada.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Research-on-socio-economic-context-for-radicalization-to-violent-extremism-in-target-municipalities.pdf

89 Tom Mockaitis, (27 October 2023), "Surging extremism in the wake of the Gaza War is no coincidence", The Hill, available at: https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/4277125-surging-extremism-in-the-wake-of-the-gaza-war-is-no-coincidence/; also for how Russia uses the War in Gaza see: Maria Shamrai, (8 December 2023), "How Russia uses the Israel-Gaza Crisis in its disinformation campaign against the West", International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), available at: https://www.icct.nl/publication/how-russia-uses-israel-gaza-crisis-its-disinformation-campaign-against-west

90 Adrian Shtuni (22 September 2022), The Western Balkans: Repatriated Foreign Terrorist Fighters, Sentencing Trends, and Security Considerations, The George Washington University, available at: https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/Western-Balkans-Repatriation_Shtuni_September-2022.pdf

91 Hikmet Karcic, (1 May 2020), The Balkan Connection: Foreign Fighters and the Far Right in Ukraine, New Lines Institute, available at: https://newlinesinstitute.org/nonstate-actors/extremism/the-balkan-connection-foreign-fighters-and-the-far-right-in-ukraine/; also for more general evolving trends see: Claudia Wallner, (1 March 2023), The Global Far Right and the War in Ukraine: Initial Reactions and Enduring Narratives, Global Center on Cooperative Security, available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep48741.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3A1ded7297b2541848ac84fea13ad5a40f&ab_segments=&origin=&initiator=&acceptTC=1

92 Marija Todorovska, (2023), "Research on socio-economic context for radicalization to violent extremism in target municipalities" cited

will be used to fuel radical ideologies and recruit followers. Corrupt practices, unreformed administration and security services and a lack of a more efficient EU integration strategy will generate open threat vectors for radicalisation through disinformation and manipulation against regional cooperation, peaceful dispute settlement and EU integration processes.

The multiplying effect that these new trends may have on WB security also straddles the boundaries of security, social cohesion and regional cooperation. Evolving extremist tactics will pose security challenges, particularly when these groups and individuals are nested under internal local political schemes and cheap gains used for local or economy-level elections.[93] If not addressed, these practices will continue to threaten social cohesion, undermine efforts towards inter-ethnic and inter-religious dialogue and foster divisions within communities. Consequently, this may inhibit prospects of regional cooperation, intelligence sharing, and joint efforts to counter cross-border/boundary extremist activities.

Regional and global developments, including geopolitical shifts, conflicts in neighbouring regions, and the influence of global extremist movements, may impact the evolution of violent extremism in the Western Balkans. Technological advancement and accelerated digitalisation for good will particularly enhance these trends. As technology continues to evolve, extremists might harness advancements for sophisticated propaganda, recruitment, and cybercrime-related activities, challenging law enforcement and intelligence agencies. Moreover, the criminal nexus channel[94] and an emerging trend of data laundering and data selling[95] on the dark web,[96] including other popular trends such as hacker for hire[97] or open-source intelligence, are force multipliers in the ever-federated threat environment. All of these accompanying trends could compensate in intelligence gathering, operation planning and execution, resource allocation, communication all up to covering traces of the attacker(s) and affecting human and economy-level security.

Understanding the evolving trends of violent extremism in the Western Balkans requires a multi-faceted approach that addresses socio-economic vulnerabilities, utilises effective counter-narratives, improves media and information literacy, strengthens law enforcement capabilities, fosters regional cooperation, and promotes inclusive governance. Proactive and collaborative efforts are imperative to mitigate the evolving threats of violent extremism and build resilient societies in the Western Balkans.

In the age of digitalisation, greater interdependence and interconnectivity addressing the growing challenge from violent extremism, international cooperation is a must for the region. This will help the WB leadership to receive timely and quality information about future threats as a preventive prerequisite to counter violent extremism. International cooperation based on the EU integrative processes will help keep the prospects of safeguarding human rights and democratic governance followed by transparent and accountable leadership - an antidote to the recruiting agenda. Regional and international cooperation will help sharing good practices and joint forces to reduce societal and systematic vulnerabilities on which the violent extremist narrative and ideology build.

93 Adrian Shtuni (22 September 2022), cited
94 Christian Altpeter, (January 2015), Building Peace at the Nexus of Organized Crime, Conflict, and Violent Extremism, Folke Bernadotte Academy, available at: https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/IEF-Meeting-Note-TOC-and-Peacebuilding.pdf
95 Dori H. Rahbar, Laundering Data, Columbia Law Review, Vol. 122, No. 3 (APRIL 2022), pp. 713-754, available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/27132235
96 William Self, (30 October 2023), "Hackers for hire: The dark web, pen tests, and beyond", Cybersecurity Watch-Crowe, available at: https://www.crowe.com/cybersecurity-watch/hackers-for-hire
97 Tom Uren, (24 November 2023), The Hack-for-Hire Industry: Death by a Thousand Cuts + When Theft Doesn't Work... Troll, Lawfare, available at: https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/the-hack-for-hire-industry-death-by-a-thousand-cuts-when-theft-doesn't-work-troll

4.7. Migration and border security as the emerging security trend

Migration and border security are pivotal aspects shaping the security landscape in the Western Balkans, driven by various factors such as geopolitical dynamics, socio-economic disparities, and global migration patterns.[98] Understanding these trends and their potential evolution is crucial for assessing their impact on regional security.

Current trends on how the flows of migration may affect border/boundary security and with that human and economy-level security across the region depend on the migration routes, migration flows and border/boundary security capacities and challenges.[99] The Western Balkans has historically been a transit route for migrants seeking entry into the European Union. The closure of the Balkan Route in 2016 altered migration patterns but did not eradicate migratory flows. This unequivocally indicates that migration trend generally depends on external, out-of-the-region factors.

In the future, the migration flows most generally will depend on refugees fleeing conflicts, economic migrants seeking better opportunities, and irregular migrants aiming for EU entry.[100] Pre-existing challenges such as porous borders/boundaries, smuggling networks, widespread corruption among the relevant stakeholders (border police and customs predominantly) and the influx of migrants will continue to shape the security challenge caused by the migrants as an emerging trend.[101] On the other hand, irregular border/boundary crossings and human trafficking will pose security and humanitarian concerns.[102] If not planned accordingly, this may impose extra resource allocations and a budget burden or overstretching of the security personnel.

Evolving dynamics indicate that potential migrant routes may change. This shift may be a result of geopolitical developments, policy changes in neighbouring countries, or shifts in global migration patterns. All of the former factors may impact the flow and management of migrants in the region.It is very likely to expect that smuggling networks could adapt and evolve, utilising new routes, modes of transport, or technology to circumvent border/boundary controls and continue facilitating irregular migration.[103]

Continuation of irregular migration flows may strain the region's resources. As a result, this will likely impact social infrastructure and overstretch the relevant stakeholders. Potentially, this could lead to humanitarian challenges for both migrants and host communities.

From the experience it became clear that migrant crisis will generate border/boundary management challenges.[104] It will require enhanced surveillance, coordination, and resources to prevent illicit border/boundary crossings. It also will open lucrative opportunities and links to transnational organised crime links. Hence, crimes

98 Senada Šelo Šabić, (July 2018), "Enhanced cooperation to tackle migration – Western Balkans and the Berlin Process", Institute for Democracy Societas Civilis – Skopje, available at: https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Migration.pdf
99 [80] See early work on how migration can affect border security, and human and national security in: Reingard Lohrmann, (2000), International Migration, Vol. 30 Issue 4, available at: https://library.fes.de/libalt/journals/swetsfulltext/8629557.pdf
100 Rhea Sohst, Jasper Tjaden, Helga de Valk and Susanne Melde, (April 2020), The Future of Migration to Europe: A Systematic Review of the Literature on Migration Scenarios and Forecasts, International Organization for Migration, Geneva, and the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute, the Hague,
available at: https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/the-future-of-migration-to-europe.pdf
101 Ibid
102 European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, (12 July 2023), "Forced displacement: Refugees, asylum-seekers, and internally displaced persons (IDPs)", European Commission, available at:
https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/what/humanitarian-aid/forced-displacement_en
103 Andreas Schloenhardt, (June 2019), "Irregular migration and smuggling of migrants along the Balkan route", Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, available at: https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/budapest/15559.pdf
104 European Parliament, (11 October 2023), "Countering irregular migration: better EU border management", available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20170627STO78419/countering-irregular-migration-better-eu-border-management

such as human trafficking, drug smuggling, and exploitation will likely flourish, impacting regional security.[105] Consequently, this will cause socio-political impacts. Migrant influxes might strain social cohesion, trigger anti-immigrant sentiments, and potentially exacerbate ethnic and political tensions in host communities.

The negative impact of the migrant crisis and border/boundary security may be avoided with timely contingency planning, regional cooperation, and cooperation with EU partners. This cooperation should focus on enhanced border/boundary controls, humanitarian response, and long-term solutions. Strengthening border/boundary management capabilities, investing in surveillance technology, and fostering regional cooperation are critical and will likely help address border/boundary security challenges. Balancing security concerns with humanitarian principles, planning for and ensuring adequate reception facilities, and providing assistance to migrants is crucial for managing the humanitarian impact. Regional cooperation, international support, and a comprehensive approach would be imperative for managing evolving migration dynamics and ensuring security and stability in the Western Balkans.

4.8. Regional cooperation and security

Regional cooperation stands as a crucial pillar for stability and progress in the Western Balkans, impacting the region's security landscape profoundly. Understanding the trends in regional cooperation and their potential evolution is pivotal in assessing their influence on security dynamics.[106] In general, the contextual security importance of regional cooperation depends on the EU integration aspiration, bilateral and multilateral agreements, and security cooperation.[107]

All the economies in the Western Balkans aspire to EU membership, driving regional cooperation efforts towards aligning with EU standards, policies, and reforms.[108] This is why keeping the EU agenda alive plays an important role in maintaining the security framework. The region also engages in various multilateral organisations and frameworks. Initiatives like the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), Southeast Europe Cooperation Process (SEECP[109]), Regional Anti-corruption Initiative (RAI[110]), South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SEESAC[111]), Integrative Internal Security Governance (IISG[112]), Disaster

105 UNODC, (2023), Prevention of Trafficking in Persons, available at: https://www.unodc.org/e4j/zh/tip-and-som/module-7/key-issues/root-causes.html

106 Donika Emini and Donika Marku, (June 2019), Regional Security Cooperation in the Western Balkans, Visegrad Fund, available at: https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/a5_regional_security.pdf

107 See for example the statement of the RCC Secretary General Majlinda Bregu speaking at the Berlin Process Forum of Economy Ministers in Tirana on 26 September 2023. RCC, (26 September 2023), Bregu: A Human-Centric Europe, with Western Balkans Firmly in Its Fold, Is the Best Investment in Peace and Security for the Entire Continent, available at: https://www.rcc.int/news/837/bregu-a-human-centric-europe-with-western-balkans-firmly-in-its-fold-is-the-best-investment-in-peace-and-security-for-the-entire-continent

108 Antonela Dhimolea, (March 2023), Role of Regional Organizations and Initiatives towards Acceleration of the Western Balkans' European Integration, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, available at: https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/albanien/20173.pdf

109 The South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) was initiated in 1996 at the meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of SEECP held in Sofia, and the first SEECP Summit was held in Crete in 1997. See more at: https://www.seecp.info/

110 Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative (RAI) is an intergovernmental regional organisation, which deals solely with anti-corruption issues, covering the nine member economies: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, and Serbia. It is a product of members cooperation, institutionalised by signing the Memorandum of Understanding concerning cooperation in fighting corruption through Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative (previously known as Stability Pact Anti-Corruption Initiative – SPAIN), signed in 2007 and the Protocol amending the MoU, signed in 2013. See more at: https://rai-see.org/who-we-are/about-us/

111 The South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SEESAC) works to strengthen the capacities of national and regional stakeholders to control and reduce the proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons, advance gender equality, facilitate regional cooperation and thus contribute to enhanced stability, security and development in South Eastern and Eastern Europe, https://www.seesac.org/

112 The IISG (Integrative Internal Security Governance) process has been initiated as part of the EU's decisive action to improve cooperation on security issues with the Western Balkans region. IISG aims to improve the collective efficiency of security actions and actors in the WB and support the European perspective of the region. As announced at the 4th IISG Board Meeting, the RCC (Regional Cooperation Council) has become the host of a new IISG Secretariat as of 1 April 2020, https://wb-iisg.com/about-iisg/

Preparedness and Prevention Initiative (DPPI[113]), Western Balkans Cyber Capacity Center (WB3C[114]) and Regional Arms Control Verification and Implementation Assistance (RACVIAC) Centre for Security Cooperation promote dialogue, confidence-building measures, and joint efforts to tackle common security challenges.[115]

Evolving trends in regional cooperation will affect WB security through ability to prevent conflicts, mitigate growing and complex evolving security challenges and enhance or reduce economic development. Strengthened regional cooperation can contribute to conflict prevention by fostering dialogue, trust-building, and joint initiatives, enhancing stability and reducing the risk of conflicts.[116] If decision-makers fail to recognise this, they may risk opening the door for both state and non-state actors' various agendas that serve all the purposes but not to the stability of the region. Insufficient cooperation on security matters might hinder effective responses to transnational threats like organised crime, violent extremism and terrorism, disinformation, and irregular migration, impacting regional security. Enhanced economic cooperation, on the other hand, can drive growth, create jobs, and promote prosperity, reducing socio-economic vulnerabilities that might fuel instability and tensions.[117]

Continued EU support for Western Balkans jurisdictions' integration processes, coupled with incentives and assistance, can encourage, and sustain regional cooperation efforts. Nevertheless, if the EU does not recognise this, it risks losing thirty plus years of investment not just for the region but for its own security as well.

Continued EU support will ensure strengthening of regional mechanisms for conflict resolution. Conflict resolution mechanisms, mediation, and crisis management can foster trust and stability among neighbouring economies as a prerequisite to bypass many of the emerging challenges that gravitate over WB. Promoting cultural exchanges, educational programmes, civil society engagement and grass-route initiatives, including other people-to-people initiatives, can build bridges, foster understanding, and enhance regional cohesion.

The trajectory of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans will continue to be critical in shaping the security landscape. Advancing collaborative efforts, fostering trust, addressing mutual challenges, and aligning policies will be essential for enhancing stability, economic development, and security in the region. Failure to invest in

113 The overarching goal of DPPI is to foster regional cooperation and coordination in disaster preparedness and prevention for natural and man-made disasters in South Eastern Europe, without creating new structures or layers of bureaucracy. Read more: https://dppi.info/dppi-see/about

114 The Western Balkans Cyber Capacity Centre (WB3C) is a training centre in the fields of: cyber crime, cyber security, cyber diplomacy. France and Slovenia initiated the project at the turn of their respective presidencies to emphasize the European support to Wester Balkans. It aims at improving the cyber capacities in the region of the Western Balkans. For this goal, it provides in-service training for specialised agents, training for trainers in the specialised training schools, meetings of professionals for exchanges of good practices, initiates or facilitates cooperation among administrative, technical and educational institutions. Read more: https://me.ambafrance.org/Western-Balkans-Cyber-Capacity-Center-WB3C

115 RACVIAC was established in 2000 as the Regional Arms Control Verification and Implementation Assistance Centre with an aim to provide arms control training, promote confidence and security building measures and broaden cooperation in South Eastern Europe (SEE). With a view to enhancing regional stability, the Centre later broadened its scope of activities to comprise a wide range of politico-military issues, including security sector reform and international and regional cooperation with a focus on Euro-Atlantic integration. Developments and changes in the security environment and the changing needs of the SEE countries necessitated a review of the RACVIAC mission, objectives, and structure. This led to the beginning of the transformation process of the Centre in 2007, which was concluded by the signing of a new Agreement on RACVIAC in 2010. With the Agreement, ratified in December 2011, the Centre obtained the status of a regionally owned international organisation and was renamed the RACVIAC – Centre for Security Cooperation. See more at: https://www.racviac.org/what-is-racviac/mission/

116 More general on the issue in: United Nations, (20 October 2023), "Strengthened regional cooperation can contribute to conflict prevention by fostering dialogue, trust-building, and joint initiatives, enhancing stability and reducing the risk of conflicts", Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, UNSC 9448th Meeting, available at: https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc14548.doc.htm; for the region based views citing RCC's Balkan Barometer in this context see: Dimitar Bechev, Filip Ejdus and Dane Taleski, (2015), Culture of Regional Cooperation in Southeast Europe, Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, p.1, available at: https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/BIEPAG-Culture-of-Regional-Cooperation-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf

117 For very similar views see also the RCC Secretary General Majlinda Bregu opening speech at the 6th Meeting of Sherpas on Common Regional Market (CRM) and Western Balkans Green Agenda (WBGA), in Brussels on 20 April 2022, Bregu: Enhanced Regional Cooperation and Clear Enlargement Prospect for the Region Are Vital to Overcome Challenges, RCC, available at https://www.rcc.int/news/756/bregu-enhanced-regional-cooperation-and-clear-enlargement-prospect-for-the-region-are-vital-to-overcome-challengesrn

strengthening regional ties, resolving disputes through dialogue, and sustaining commitments to cooperation will be imperative for ensuring the Western Balkans' peaceful and prosperous future.

4.9. Economic challenges and their impact on the Western Balkans security

Economic challenges, encompassing demographic decline and other socioeconomic factors, significantly influence the security landscape in the Western Balkans. Understanding these trends and their potential evolution is crucial in comprehending their impact on regional stability.

Demographic decline and brain drain, economic disparities and unemployment and poverty shape current economic trends in the WB that may have profound effects on security. According to the Balkan Barometer Public Opinion 2023, the economic situation and unemployment are the primary concerns for the citizens, with 47% and 32% of respondents identifying these as the top problems. These issues are acute in Kosovo*, where the education system is the primary worry. In Albania and North Macedonia, brain drain has emerged as a significant issue, with 41% and 27% of respondents, respectively, highlighting it as a critical problem, showing a notable increase from the previous year. This trend, particularly in Albania, may be linked to new migration waves and a surge in asylum requests in the EU and the UK. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, 29% of respondents identify brain drain as the third most pressing issue, indicating an 8-point increase.[118] Declining birth rates, brain drain, and ageing populations contribute to a demographic challenge, impacting labour markets, economic productivity, and social welfare systems.[119] Disparities in income, employment, and infrastructure development exist among economies in the region, leading to economic inequalities and potential social tensions. High unemployment rates, particularly among youth,[120] coupled with poverty, limited opportunities, and socio-economic vulnerabilities, affect overall stability.[121]

Continued brain drain and workforce migration from the region represent pressing issues in the evolving environment that may negatively affect economic stability and with that shake security across the region. The emigration of skilled workers and young talents could persist if economic opportunities and prospects for growth and development remain limited. Another pandemic such as COVID-19 will have exacerbated economic challenges, disrupt markets, trade, and industries, potentially leading to prolonged economic recovery. Unaddressed economic challenges will likely have devastating impact on the social fabric.[122] Economic hardships might strain social cohesion, exacerbate inequality, and fuel dissatisfaction, potentially leading to social unrest and political instability. Consequently, vulnerability to disinformation, foreign authoritarian influence and violent extremism will likely increase.[123]

Economic disparities and rising poverty levels can elevate the prospects of social unrest. Demographic decline will likely urge corporate leadership to seek labour replacement which will further complicate internal tensions

118 Balkan Barometer 2023 Public Opinion Survey, Regional Cooperation Council, www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/publications, June 2023
119 Pyke Haans, (December 2022), Brain Drain Is Both a Cause and Effect of the Economic Woes in the Balkans, ResPublica, available at: https://respublica.edu.mk/blog-en/politics/brain-drain-is-both-a-cause-and-effect-of-the-economic-woes-in-the-balkans/?lang=en
120 Amira Ramhorst, (July 2021) Study on Youth Employment in the Western Balkans, Regional Cooperation Council, available at: https://www.lse.ac.uk/LSEE-Research-on-South-Eastern-Europe/Assets/Documents/Staff-activities-docs/2020-21/Study-on-Youth-Employment-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf
121 Rufin Zamfir, (April 2020), Risks and Vulnerabilities in the Western Balkans, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, available at: https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/risks_and_vulnerabilities_in_the_wb_30apr_1-9931a.pdf
122 On how COVID-19 affected the region see: OECD, (2022), "The Covid-19 Crisis in the Western Balkans, Economic impact, policy responses, and short-term sustainable solutions", Co-Founded by the European Union, available at: https://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/COVID-19-Crisis-Response-Western-Balkans.pdf
123 About some prospects of vulnerabilities to disinformation across the Western Balkan see: Daniel Sunter, (21 December 2020), Disinformation in the Western Balkans, NATO Review, available at: https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2020/12/21/disinformation-in-the-western-balkans/index.html

and rise of right-wing extremism. Eventually, this will produce social discontent, leading to protests, civil unrest, and potential security challenges. Economic vulnerabilities might drive radicalisation among marginalised groups and prompt irregular migration, impacting regional security dynamics, and endanger EU integrative processes by inflicting additional requirements on already complicated integrative processes. Eventually, this will likely lead to political instability. Economic hardships can undermine confidence in governance, and possibly hinder regional cooperation efforts.

Tailored and well synchronised economic reforms will reduce negative effects of economic challenges.[124] Implementing structural reforms, attracting investments, and fostering entrepreneurship can stimulate economic growth, create jobs, and reduce dependence on remittances. Investing in education and vocational training to retain and attract young talents, bolstering innovation and addressing skill gaps, can mitigate brain drain.[125] Strengthening social welfare systems, providing safety nets, and ensuring inclusivity can alleviate poverty, reduce inequalities, and promote social stability. This will reduce the risk of unrest and enhance overall security prospects. Regional cooperation and international support are crucial in navigating and mitigating the evolving economic challenges facing the Western Balkans.

4.10. Conclusion

The spectrum and intricacy of trends impacting the Western Balkans underscore the necessity for forums like the 8th Regional Security Coordination Conference. Such gatherings breathe life into the evident commitment, dedication, and shared resolve to confront these multifaceted challenges within and beyond the region. These platforms become crucial arenas for addressing these challenges head-on. In this context, the upcoming section will meticulously delve into the feedback garnered from the conference, embarking on a comprehensive SWOT analysis. The aim is to distil insights that can fortify and elevate future iterations of the conference. These insights, when amalgamated with an in-depth analysis of the current security landscape and the discerned trends, lay the groundwork for the policy recommendations that follow. These recommendations, in turn, seek to shape potential future trajectories for regional security cooperation in the Western Balkans, guided by a proactive and informed approach.

124 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, (2020), "Recovering better: economic and social challenges and opportunities A compilation of the High-level Advisory Board on Economic and Social Affairs", available at: https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/2020/11/recover_better_final.pdf

125 Blina Salihi, (6 September 2023), Youth and Migration: Shifting Brain Drain to Brain Gain in the WB Region, Connecting Youth, available at: https://connecting-youth.org/single_blog.php?submit=17; see some experiences and views shared on this topic in: Jean Marie Muhirwa, (2012), "Funnelling talents back to the source: can distance education help to mitigate the fallouts of brain drain in sub-Saharan Africa", Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity (Germany) , available at: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000218282; also see: Inder Jit Ruprah, (10 August 2016), "Brain Drain: Are we investing in the 'right' skills to keep our talent?", available at: https://blogs.iadb.org/caribbean-dev-trends/en/6181/

5. Conference Overview

5.1. Introduction to the conference

The commencement of the 8th Regional Security Coordination Conference was marked by the inaugural address delivered by Mr. Raffaele Grassi, Deputy Chief of Police, Ministry of Interior of Italy. Mr. Grassi extended a warm welcome to all participants, emphasising the exceptional opportunity the ensuing two days presented for the exchange of knowledge and skills. He underscored the significance of the relationships forged and information shared, highlighting their pivotal role in establishing enduring forms of cooperation, not only among Western Balkans participants but also on a broader scale with Italy and Europe.

In his address, Mr. Grassi acknowledged the shared capacity and knowledge that could be harnessed to fortify economies against modern challenges such as terrorism, organised crime, threats emanating from the ongoing war in Ukraine, and the conflict in the Middle East. The conference, he stated, served as a solid reference point for discussions on these critical issues, many of which would form the thematic panels over the two-day event. Notably, he also highlighted challenges outside of the traditional security themes, such as migration trends, brain drain, and increasing interconnectivity, all of which had the potential to impact the security and stability of both the region and wider Europe.

Expressing pride in the collaborative efforts that brought the event to fruition, Mr. Grassi also acknowledged the timeliness of the conference, coinciding with the first anniversary of the launch of generative AI. This underscored, he noted, the rapid evolution of the security landscape, reinforcing the benefits and necessity of closer collaboration.

Following Mr. Grassi, Mr. Andrea Cascone, Director of the Adriatic and Balkans Unit, highlighted the event's return to Rome, expressing satisfaction at these opportunities for joint strategies to address current security challenges. He emphasised Italy's commitment to assisting Western Balkan economies in aligning with EU standards in this area. While he acknowledged great results and extensive cooperation in many areas, he reminded about the need to continue efforts to ensure peace, stability and economic prosperity in the region. He also noted that the conference provided an opportunity to advance such ambition and ensure cooperation in addressing the complexities around security and stability in the region and across Europe.

Closing the opening addresses, Ms. Majlinda Bregu, the RCC Secretary General, extended a warm welcome to participants, acknowledging the longstanding recognition and support the conference received. She expressed gratitude for the Italian Government's support, especially from the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation in this regard. Ms. Bregu reiterated the two previous addresses by recognising the conference's role in fostering collective and effective responses to emerging security threats.

Ms. Bregu highlighted the changing security landscape which has traditionally been viewed in the context of conflict resolution and prevention, yet argued that it now needs to be viewed from an evolving perspective noting

> *"Migration is becoming one of the biggest problems of today, because countries are emptying. Not just those that result in the inflow of migrants to our region, but also because of the emigration from our region further to the west. Hence, the term of security challenges is dramatically changing. Security challenge is not just conflict resolution or prevention, but it is also climate change and catastrophes, espionage, and real problems of human lives. Like brain drain which is becoming not only human capital but also a security issue."*

Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), Majlinda Bregu, at the opening of the eighth Regional Security Coordination Conference in Rome on 14 November 2023 (Photo: RCC/Mario Sayadi)

In this context, she highlighted the complexity presented not only to economies of the Western Balkans but also in Europe, especially in an era where inward migration was often needed but often not welcomed.

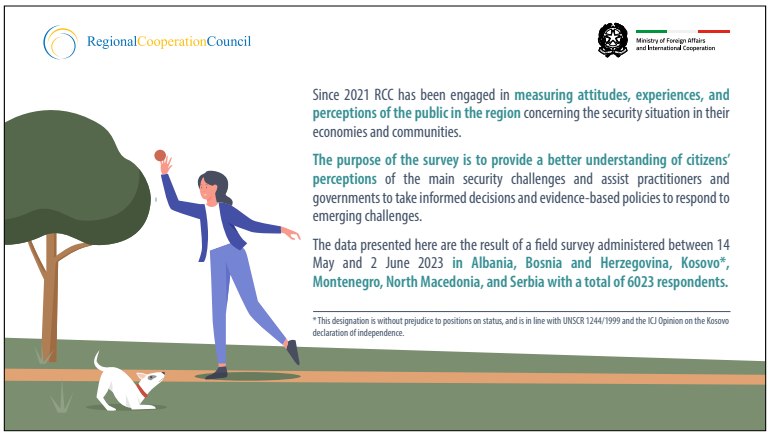
Referencing the third edition of the RCC's public opinion survey SecuriMeter, Ms. Bregu noted how many of these trends are resonating with the people of region, stating that many respondents highlighted concerns around migration, war fears, cybersecurity, and disinformation, whilst continuing to be concerned about more traditional issues such as corruption and organised crime. More than 60% of Western Balkan citizens rank organised crime as their top security concern, which goes hand in hand with corruption with 55% of the region's citizens believing the level of corruption has increased. As a result, Ms. Bregu reiterated the need to promote increased dialogue within the region and investing in shared efforts to respond to them, stating that

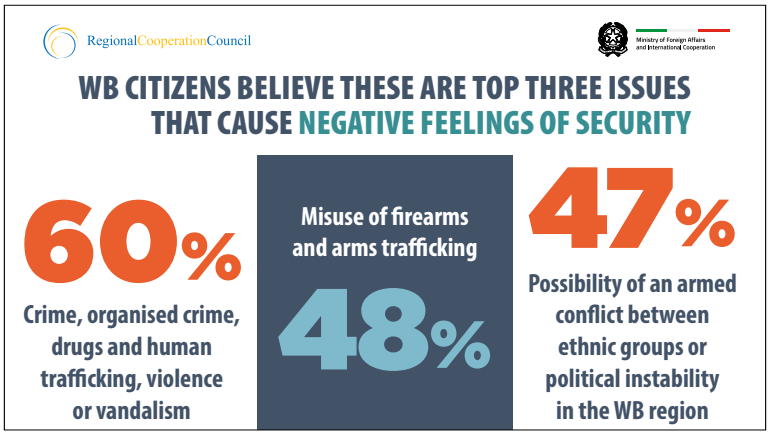
"We all live too close to each other not to treat security challenges as a common issue and address them as such, always strengthening our cooperation".

In this regard, Ms. Bregu called for strengthening cooperation within the region and with Europe to ensure the whole of Europe was more secure and resilient.

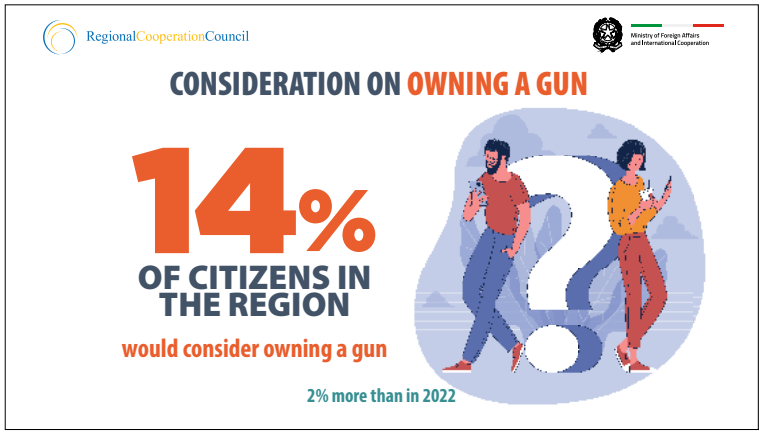
5.2. SecuriMeter 2023 presentation: Key findings

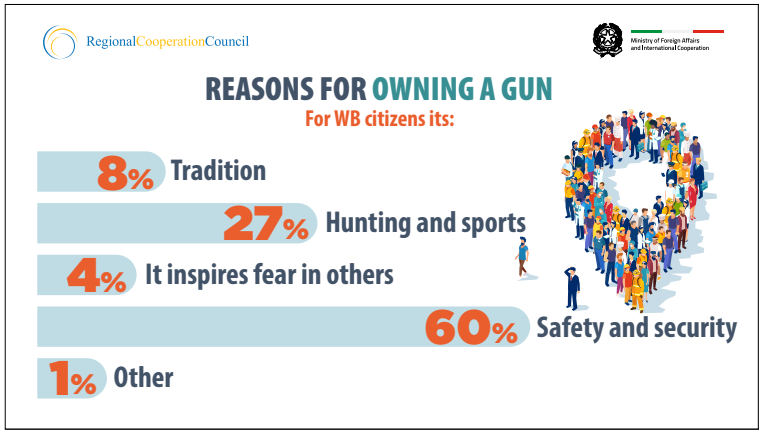
The RCC Political Advisor, Mr. Aner Zuković, presented key insights from the 2023 SecuriMeter Report, a comprehensive public opinion survey on security engaging over 6000 citizens across the Western Balkans. The subsequent infographic slides will give the key insights gathered from the Report, visually interpreting the main data and conclusions.

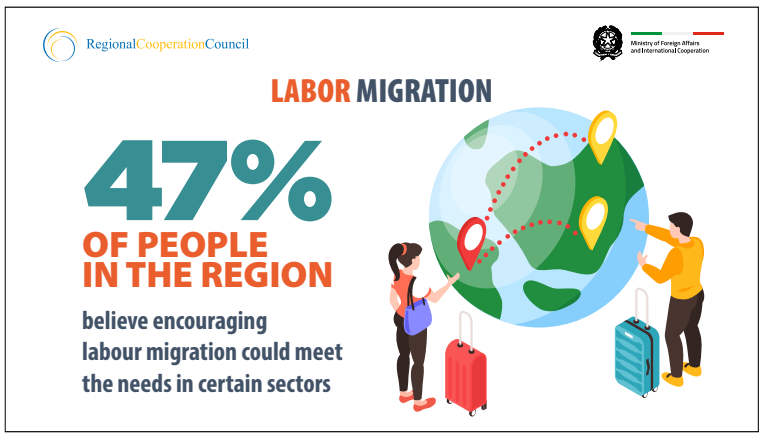


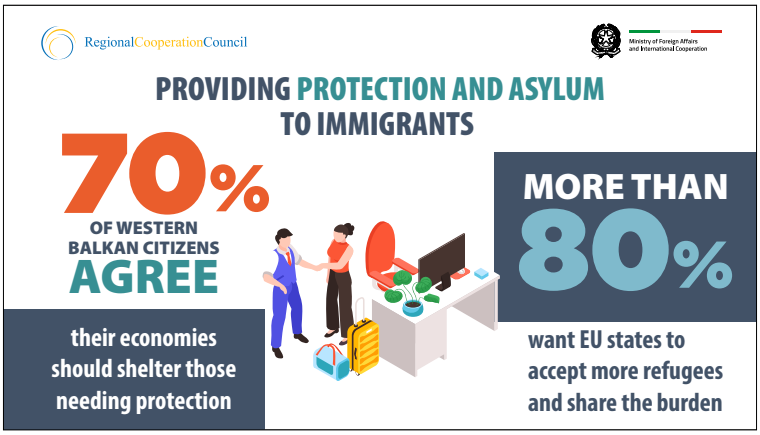


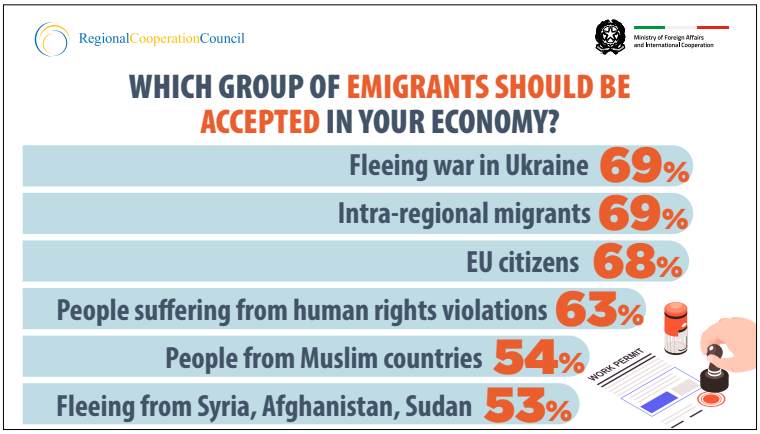
RegionalCooperationCouncil
WESTERN BALKANS WILL BE A MORE SECURE PLACE TO LIVE IN THE FOLLOWING YEAR
AGREE
51%
OF CITIZENS
WHILE
46%
DO NOT AGREE

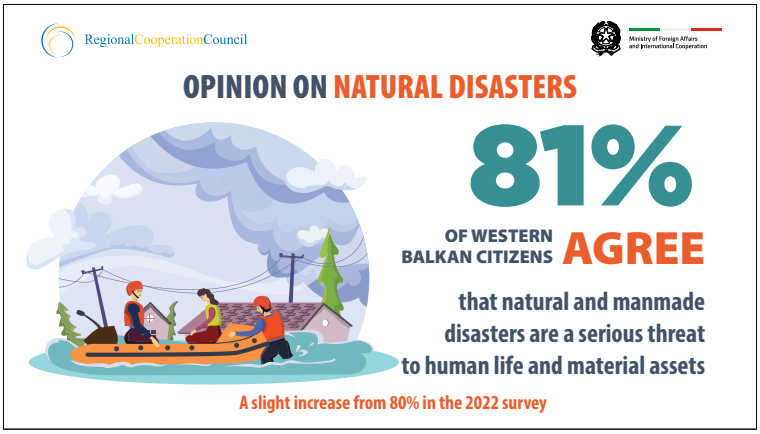

RegionalCooperationCouncil
CONSIDERATION ON OWNING A GUN
14%
OF CITIZENS IN THE REGION
would consider owning a gun
2% more than in 2022

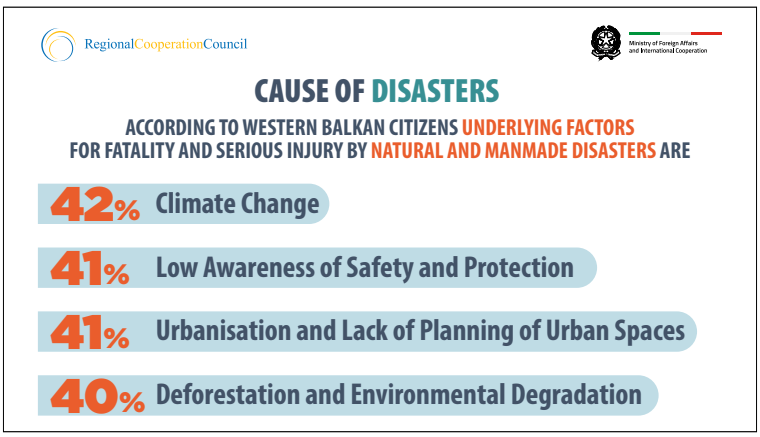

RegionalCooperationCouncil
REASONS FOR OWNING A GUN
For WB citizens its:
8% Tradition
27% Hunting and sports
4% It inspires fear in others
60% Safety and security
1% Other

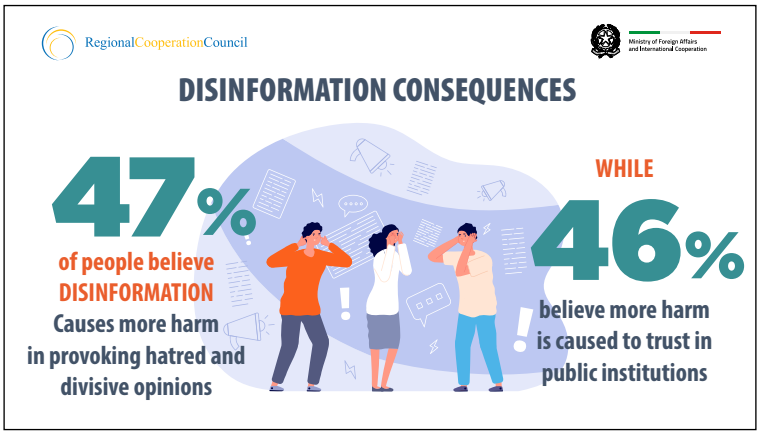

RegionalCooperationCouncil
LABOR MIGRATION
47%
OF PEOPLE IN THE REGION
believe encouraging labour migration could meet the needs in certain sectors

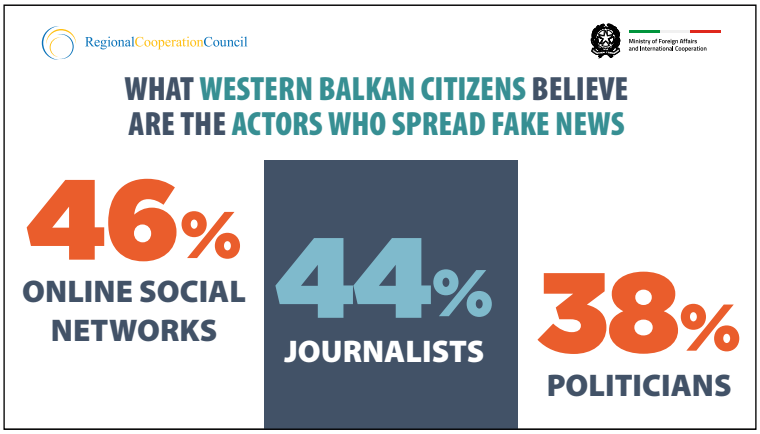

RegionalCooperationCouncil
Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation
PROVIDING PROTECTION AND ASYLUM TO IMMIGRANTS
70%
OF WESTERN BALKAN CITIZENS AGREE
their economies should shelter those needing protection
MORE THAN 80%
want EU states to accept more refugees and share the burden

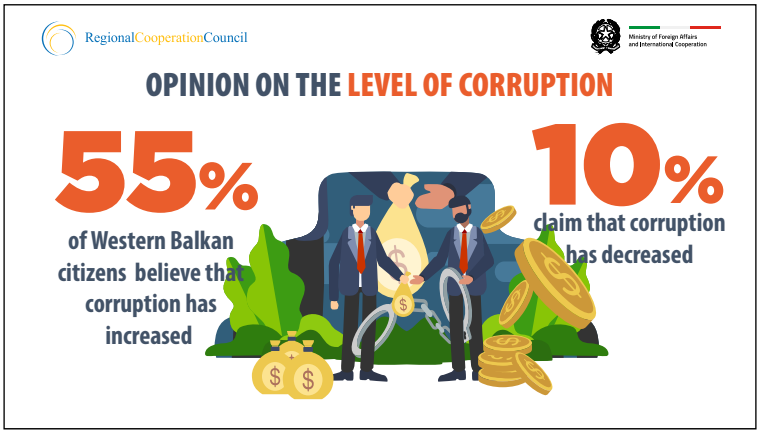

RegionalCooperationCouncil
Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation
WHICH GROUP OF EMIGRANTS SHOULD BE ACCEPTED IN YOUR ECONOMY?
Fleeing war in Ukraine 69%
Intra-regional migrants 69%
EU citizens 68%
People suffering from human rights violations 63%
People from Muslim countries 54%
Fleeing from Syria, Afghanistan, Sudan 53%
WORK PERMIT

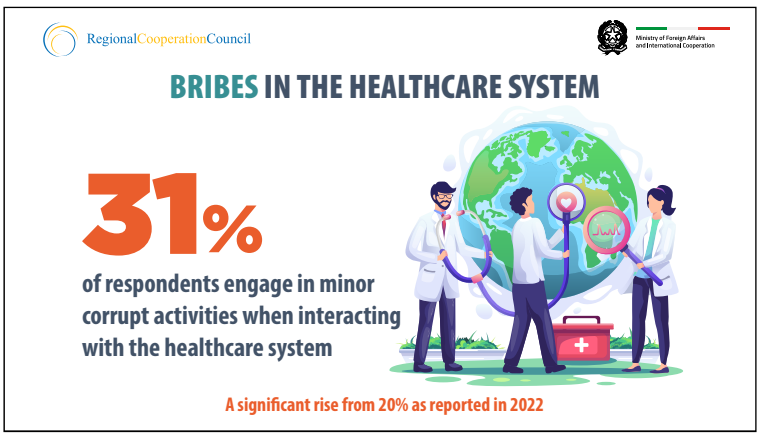

RegionalCooperationCouncil
Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation
OPINION ON NATURAL DISASTERS
81%
OF WESTERN BALKAN CITIZENS AGREE
that natural and manmade disasters are a serious threat to human life and material assets
A slight increase from 80% in the 2022 survey

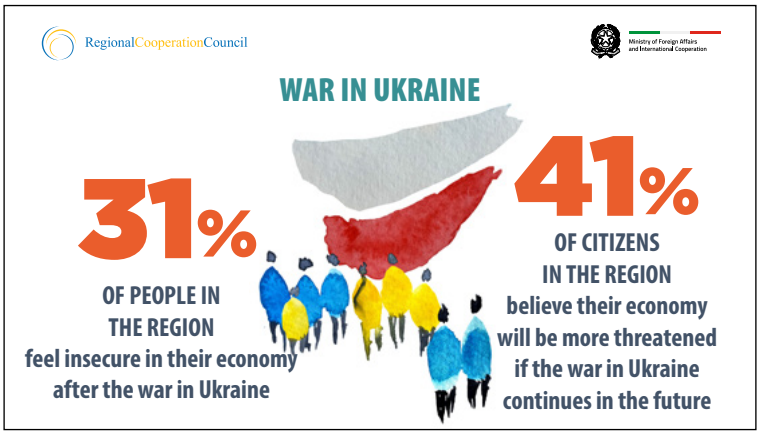

RegionalCooperationCouncil
Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation
CAUSE OF DISASTERS
ACCORDING TO WESTERN BALKAN CITIZENS UNDERLYING FACTORS FOR FATALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY BY NATURAL AND MANMADE DISASTERS ARE
42% Climate Change
41% Low Awareness of Safety and Protection
41% Urbanisation and Lack of Planning of Urban Spaces
40% Deforestation and Environmental Degradation

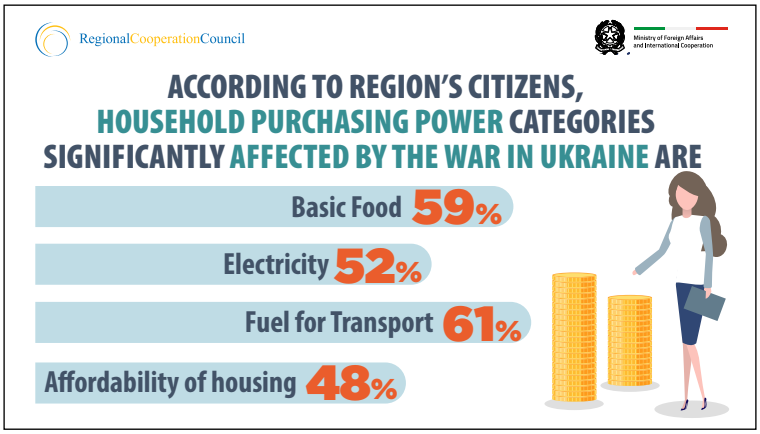

RegionalCooperationCouncil
DISINFORMATION CONSEQUENCES
47%
of people believe DISINFORMATION Causes more harm in provoking hatred and divisive opinions
WHILE
46%
believe more harm is caused to trust in public institutions


RegionalCooperationCouncil
WHAT WESTERN BALKAN CITIZENS BELIEVE ARE THE ACTORS WHO SPREAD FAKE NEWS
46%
ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS
44%
JOURNALISTS
38%
POLITICIANS


RegionalCooperationCouncil
OPINION ON THE LEVEL OF CORRUPTION
55%
of Western Balkan citizens believe that corruption has increased
10%
claim that corruption has decreased


RegionalCooperationCouncil
BRIBES IN THE HEALTHCARE SYSTEM
31%
of respondents engage in minor corrupt activities when interacting with the healthcare system
A significant rise from 20% as reported in 2022


RegionalCooperationCouncil
Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation
WAR IN UKRAINE
31%
OF PEOPLE IN THE REGION
feel insecure in their economy after the war in Ukraine
41%
OF CITIZENS IN THE REGION
believe their economy will be more threatened if the war in Ukraine continues in the future


RegionalCooperationCouncil
Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation
ACCORDING TO REGION'S CITIZENS,
HOUSEHOLD PURCHASING POWER CATEGORIES
SIGNIFICANTLY AFFECTED BY THE WAR IN UKRAINE ARE
Basic Food 59%
Electricity 52%
Fuel for Transport 61%
Affordability of housing 48%

5.3. Thematic Panel 1 - Setting the Stage: Outlining Key Security Challenges and Trends in the Western Balkans

Moderator: **Ms. Sheelagh Brady**, *International Expert in the areas of terrorism, countering violent extremism, organised crime, and rule of law*

Panellists:

- **Mr. Mersel Bilalli**, *University Professor of International Law, Analyst and Publicist; former MP in the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly; former Advisor to the Prime Minister of North Macedonia*
- **Dr. Giuseppe Giliberti**, *Central Directorate for Criminal Police - Countering Organised Crime in Balkans*
- **Ms. Vera Stojarová**, *Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Masaryk University*
- **Ms. Mirela Arqimandriti**, *Executive Director, Gender Alliance for Development Center (GADC)*
- **Mr. Lulzim Peci**, *Executive Director, Institute for Policy Research and Development*

The first Thematic panel's onset highlights the discussion on regional security challenges.
(Photo: RCC/Mario Sayadi)

The first thematic session's panel played a pivotal role in framing subsequent discussions by providing a diverse array of perspectives on the prominent security challenges and trends in the Western Balkans. Topics raised and discussed included: Geo-Political Sensitivity; Hybrid Threats and Malign Actors; Broader Societal and Political Factors; EU Accession Concerns; Economic Development and Power Struggles; Gender Dynamics and Violence; and Brain Drain as a Risk to the Region.

The topics discussed by panellists echoed many of the issues raised in the SecuriMeter results, vividly portraying an intricate and dynamic landscape, echoing the juxtaposition of acknowledging persistent concerns related to traditional organised crime issues, such as drugs, weapons trafficking, and corruption, while also highlighted notable progress, underscored by improved information flows, collaborative investigations, and enhanced judicial cooperation.

Despite affirming that the region was relatively secure, panellists cautioned against complacency in the face of recent geopolitical shifts, with many panellists arguing that these changes could destabilise the region. That said, it was highlighted that the potential ramifications of these changes should have been known in advance, particularly in light of the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. It was noted, however, that little attention had been paid to this then, negatively impacting the situation now.

In this light, concerns were raised about alternative economic influences, exemplified by the situation in Ukraine, and highlighted the threats posed by hybrid warfare and malign actors aiming to undermine democracy and political systems. Russia was given as an example in this regard, emphasising that such action posed a threat to regional stability, thus resulting in the need for better collaboration and cooperation within the region.

While European accession was deemed favourable, divergent views surfaced, especially in light of the absence of EU enlargement towards the region since 2013. The impending European elections were noted as potential sources of future risk, with the possibility of accession economies having to navigate a transformed political landscape within the EU. This uncertainty was presented as another possible situation that could be monopolised by other economies to gain traction and support in the region.

The discussion also delved into the persistent issue of low economic development in the region despite nearly three decades of economy-building efforts. Additionally, the risk of brain drain was identified as a critical challenge, given the significant numbers leaving the region. Panellists expressed concerns about power struggles hindering progress and the negative impact of interethnic tensions. Gender-related issues were underscored, emphasising the need for women's inclusion and empowerment to foster a more secure society. The alarming prevalence of violence against women in the region was highlighted, juxtaposed with a growing but under-researched phenomenon of females assuming roles in extremist and criminal groups.

Overall, the panel discussion illuminated the multifaceted and complex challenges facing the Western Balkans, calling for a comprehensive and nuanced approach to address the diverse issues affecting the region, and to ensure the region's stability and development in the face of evolving threats. This discussion echoed, in many respects, the issues and challenges raised in the situational assessment.

Mr. Mersel Bilalli spoke during Thematic Panel 1, which focused on outlining key security challenges and trends in the Western Balkans, with Ms. Sheelagh Brady serving as the panel's moderator.
(Photo: RCC/Mario Sayadi)

5.4. Thematic Panel 2 - Irregular Migration & Organised Crime

Moderator: **Mr. Mirsad Buzar**, *Deputy Director of the Service for Foreigners' Affairs (SFA), Bosnia and Herzegovina*

Panellists:

- **Dr. Marco Martino**, *Central Anti-Crime Directorate*
- **Mr. Samir Rizvo**, *Assistant Minister, Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina*
- **Mr. Trpe Stojanovski**, *Senior Advisor, Global Initiative against Transnational Organised Crime*
- **Mr. Oliver Janser**, *Project Manager, EU Fight against Migrant Smuggling and Tracking in Human Beings in the Western Balkans and Countering Serious Crime in the Western Balkans*
- **Mr. Miguel Nicolau**, *Senior Liaison Officer to Italy and Malta, FRONTEX*

The moment from Thematic Panel 2, focusing on Irregular Migration & Organised Crime
(Photo: RCC/Mario Sayadi)

This panel delved into the topic of irregular migration and organised crime, shedding light on the underlying push and pull factors both within the region and beyond that drive these flows. Despite a recognised reduction in the use of the Western Balkans route over the last decade, concerns were raised about the level of activity still persisting. This ongoing issue not only prompted questions about the sovereignty and integrity of economies within the region but also underscored the substantial involvement of organised criminal groups. The situation, it was emphasised, exerted immense pressure on the resources of impacted economies, even with the observed reductions and increased cooperation. Irregular migration, therefore, remains a formidable and persistent challenge for the region.

A noteworthy shift in the modus operandi was highlighted, contributing to the evolving threat landscape. As of 2023, the movement of people has reportedly become more decentralised, chaotic, and marked by violence, with acts of violence used both as a means of control and directed at Law Enforcement Agencies (LEAs) and border officials. Armed clashes between groups and targeting of officials have become increasingly common. Additionally, an uptick in the use of firearms in trafficking operations and increased instances of exploitation

of unaccompanied minors were observed. This may explain, in part, why firearms have returned as an issue of concern in the SecuriMeter result. Notably, a change was also noted in the demographics of traffickers, with a growing reflection of the ethnicities being smuggled; a majority of traffickers are no longer citizens of the region, emphasising the external influence in the trafficking networks.

In response to these challenges, panellists drew upon their extensive experience to propose practical suggestions. First and foremost, the need for strengthening capacity was underscored. Furthermore, a call for a dual approach–one addressing the issue from both law enforcement and humanitarian perspectives–was emphasised. In regard to the latter, several panellists highlighted the imperative to enhance victim support services and protective measures. Moreover, it was stressed that a coordinated and collaborative effort along the entire migratory route was essential to realistically tackle the issue. Within the region, specific areas for improvements were identified, particularly the need for integrated border management. Externally, it was argued that further action was required to foster partnerships with the countries from which these people originated, aiming to increase the possibility of return of those without a right to remain. Improving these relationships, it was noted, would also aid in investigating crimes committed by migrants with unknown or unverifiable identities.

The key takeaway from the panel was the need to recognise the persistent and evolving challenges posed by irregular migratory and organised crime in the Western Balkans region, and the need to ensure an urgency in addressing these issues collectively to safeguard the stability, security, and prosperity of the Western Balkans region, emphasising the need for international cooperation and comprehensive strategies that go beyond traditional law enforcement measures.

5.5. Thematic Panel 3 - Extremism and Terrorism

Moderator: **Mr. Adrian Shtuni**, *CEO / Principal Consultant, Shtuni Consulting, LLC*
Panellists:

- **Dr. Arturo Varriale**, *Police of Prevention Central Directorate*
- **Mr. Slobodan Kovacevic**, *State Secretary, Ministry of Interior, Montenegro*
- **Mr. Željko Markovic**, *Head of Department for Fight against Terrorism, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Serbia*
- **Ms. Ivana Veselcic**, *Assistant Minister, Sector for the fight against terrorism, organised crime, corruption, war crimes and drug abuse, Ministry of Security, Bosnia and Herzegovina*
- **Mr. Giovanni Cioffi**, *European Commission, Team Leader – DG HOME D.2 Counter Terrorism Unit*
- **Mr. Agron Sojati**, *Head of the Secretariat for Integrative Internal Security Governance (IISG)*
- **Mr. Albert Rakipi**, *Executive Director, Albanian Institute for International Studies*

Mr. Raffaele Grassi, Deputy Chief of Police at the Italian Ministry of Interior, and Ms. Eufemia Esposito, Director of the International Relation Service - Office for Coordination and Planning of Police Forces at the Ministry of Interior of Italy, expressed their appreciation to the moderators, panelists, and participants for their significant contributions to the conference. (Photo: RCC/Mario Sayadi)

The focal point of the third panel of the day was the pressing issues of extremism and terrorism, shedding light on the interplay between recent geopolitical activities and the evolving threat landscape in the region. The speakers underscored the profound impact of events like the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, the war in Ukraine, instability in Africa, and ongoing developments in the Middle East. There was a unanimous agreement among the panellists that extremism and terrorism, whether rooted in religious, political, environmental motivations, or whatever, continue to pose a significant and complex threat to the region.

Building upon discussions from the previous panel, the potential use of irregular migration as a mechanism for extremists or terrorists to infiltrate the region and onward to the EU, utilising the mass movement of people as

a guise for criminal or terrorist motives, was highlighted. This emphasised the interconnected nature of the various topics addressed throughout the conference.

The panellists drew attention to the persistent risk posed by foreign fighters globally, shifting the narrative from traditional jihadist fighters to a broader spectrum of individuals with diverse motivations, exemplified by recent movements of people participating in the conflict in Ukraine. While acknowledging the potential deterrent effect of laws against travelling to fight on foreign soil, the speakers stressed the ongoing need for resource investment, planning, and effective reintegration management to ensure a safe return into communities for those released from prison or repatriated.

Disinformation and misinformation emerged as another significant, yet ongoing concern, with speakers exemplifying the challenges posed by malicious propaganda and influence operations, both from state and non-state actors. While initiatives by the EU and groups like Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) were commended, panellists emphasised the crucial role of resources, capacity, and competency in keeping the internet free from terrorist content. Some proposed the necessity of public-private partnerships in addressing this issue.

In unanimous agreement, the panel asserted that an effective response to these threats necessitates meaningful cooperation at the economy-, regional and global levels. While recognising the impracticality of any single economy dealing with these challenges in isolation, emphasis was placed on local regional ownership to prioritise common security threats. Moreover, in acknowledging positive relationships between the region and the EU, and more globally, the need for continuous collaboration was underscored.

Practical suggestions for effective cooperation included the exploitation of large datasets held by organisations like Europol and Interpol, increased knowledge exchange within the region, adopting a multidisciplinary approach, and addressing not only the security issues but also delving into the root causes of extremism and terrorism. Overall, the panel discussion advocated for a comprehensive and collaborative strategy to tackle the multifaceted challenges posed by extremism and terrorism in the region.

5.6. Thematic Panel 4 – Human Security

Moderator: **Mr. Amer Kapetanovic**, *RCC*
Panellists:

- **Ms. Josen Pasanen,** *Research and Partnerships Specialist, UNDP Human Development Report Team*
- **Mr. Abebayehu Assefa**, *WHO Health Emergency Coordinator, Balkan Hub Europe at World Health Organisation, regional coordinator in the emergency hub in Belgrade*
- **Mr. Nicholas Ramos**, *Programme Management Officer, United Nations Office Disaster Risk Reduction*
- **Lt. Col. Federico Ninni**, *Arma dei Carabinieri*
- **Mr. Burak Rende**, *Deputy Director General for Energy and Multilateral Transportation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Turkiye*

The second conference day started with a shift in focus to human security to cover aspects like energy security, food security, environmental security, and health security. (Photo: RCC/Mario Sayadi)

The fourth panel discussion introduced a new and highly impactful topic to the conference – Human Security. Originating from UNDP's 1994 Human Development Report, this concept reframes security in terms of people rather than territories and development rather than arms. The notion revolves around ensuring individuals have freedom from fear, freedom from want, and freedom from indignity, positing that when individuals are secure, so are their countries and the world.

The audience responded positively to this inclusion, sparking engaging discussions both during the session and in subsequent offline conversations. The panel highlighted the benefits of the Human Security approach, aligning well with earlier discussions by emphasising the importance of a well-coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach from planning to implementation. The focus on addressing root causes rather than outcomes, rooted in local realities, was also underlined - a key concern that has come up in the previous panel. The imperative to

concentrate on prevention and resilience was recognised, aiming to strengthen local capacities, enhance social cohesion, and advance human rights and dignity.

A key action proposed to enhance human security was to invest in economic security for all. A considerable portion of the global population currently feels insecure about their economic well-being, participants were told, with potential destabilising effects on economies. This economic insecurity, combined with concerns about issues like inequalities, technological threats, violent conflicts, climate change, and health threats, contributes to increased vulnerability, polarisation, and political extremism. Trust is at an all-time low, creating conditions for nefarious actors to exploit and take advantage of threats that were highlighted as regional risks in the first panel.

The discussion also delved into health security, advocating for a shift from a disease-centric approach to a holistic hazard approach, executed through coordinated multi-sectoral engagement. Climate change was a focal point, emphasising the dramatic increase in climate disasters over the past two decades, leading to significant human security challenges. For instance, it demonstrated how a simple storm can expose economies to economic and political risks, highlighting the interconnectedness of environmental and human security.

The interdependencies underscored the need to strengthen resilience through effective governance, enhanced capacity, hazard preparedness, and building back better when failures occur. A proactive stance on environmental protection, ecological crime, and climate-related harms was called for, advocating for more robust investigations. The discussion acknowledged the profitability of such crimes, residing at the intersection of licit and illicit activities, making them challenging to investigate and prosecute.

In essence, the inclusion of Human Security in the panel discussion underscored a paradigm shift towards prioritising people over territories and development over arms - one that was met with positivity amongst participants. The approach aligns with the need for comprehensive, proactive strategies addressing root causes and interconnected challenges to ensure the well-being and security of individuals, communities, and the global community.

5.7. Thematic Panel 5 - Cybersecurity and Critical Infrastructure

Moderator: **Mr. Metodi Hadji-Janev**, *PhD –Associate Professor of Law, General Mihailo Apostolski Military Academy Skopje*

Panellists:

- **Dr. Riccardo Croce**, *Communication and Postal Police Service*
- **Mr. Radovan Bogojevic**, *Acting Director General for Multilateral Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Montenegro*
- **Mr. Jurica Cular**, *Information Security Professional*
- **Ms. Irina Rizmal**, *Manager, PwC Serbia*
- **Mr. Bardhyl Jashari**, *Executive Director, Metamorphosis Foundation*

Participants discussed cybersecurity and critical infrastructure protection, focusing on safeguarding essential services from cyber threats. (Photo: RCC/Mario Sayadi)

The subsequent panel discussion delved into the realm of cybersecurity, spotlighting the imperative of safeguarding critical infrastructure, especially in the wake of Ukraine conflict, which served as a stark reminder of the escalating threats in the cyber domain. The multifaceted risks to economy-level security emanating from cybercrime, cyber warfare, cyber hacktivism, and cyber terrorism were outlined, revealing that the latter three constitute approximately 30% of all cyberattacks, with cybercrime comprising the remaining 70%.

Within the context of critical infrastructure, the panel underscored the escalating frequency of attacks, including ransomware attacks, service denial and disruption, and supply chain breaches. It was noted that due to this the European Union has called for the incorporation of these concerns into economy-level strategies, particularly in light of the revelation that many of these attacks could be government sponsored. This underscores earlier concerns about third-party influence operations in the region.

While acknowledging improved cooperation through Europol, Interpol, and the Budapest 24/7 networks, it was emphasised that challenges persist in information sharing and capacity. The importance of enhancing aware-

ness and capacity regarding data collection and utilisation was emphasised to facilitate more specific and rapid exchanges of relevant data, crucial for timely interventions. However, some panellists advocated a nuanced approach, suggesting that less information shared more effectively could be more impactful.

A notable gap was identified between law enforcement agencies (LEAs) and prosecutors, prompting a call for attention to bridge this divide for more effective prosecutions. A legislative gap was acknowledged, leading to a call for the creation of case law to enhance the implementation of cybersecurity laws. Ethical approaches to addressing cyber risks, in tandem with protective activities, were also underscored.

The establishment of the Western Balkans Cyber Capacity Centre (WB3C) in Montenegro emerged as a positive development for the entire region, offering a platform for improved information exchange, educational collaboration to keep pace with developments, and the continuation of successful synergies and relationships in the field. This, it was hoped, would lead to the adoption of integrated strategies aimed at countering increasingly technologically advanced and transnational attacks.

The importance of public-private partnerships resurfaced, both in the broader context of enhancing cybersecurity and resilience and specifically in safeguarding critical infrastructure predominantly owned by the private sector. Aligning with earlier discussions on the need for economic security for all, this panel stressed that investing in cybersecurity is integral for economic stability, human resilience, and technological innovation. It reiterated the interconnectedness of economic and cybersecurity considerations, emphasising the pivotal role of proactive investments in fortifying the region's digital defences.

In summary, the panellists emphasised the critical need for a comprehensive, collaborative, and proactive approach to cybersecurity. It underscores the tangible impact of cyber threats on economy-level security, the challenges faced, and the opportunities for regional collaboration, legal improvements, and responsible practices to ensure economic stability and innovation. The discussion also reinforced the urgency of addressing cybersecurity as a fundamental component of modern security and stability.

5.8. Thematic Panel 6 - Use of AI and Innovative Technology in Policing

Moderator: **Mr. Ljubisa Bojic**, PhD, Senior Research Fellow, University of Belgrade

Panellists

- **Brigadier General Patrick Perrot**, *Headquarters of French Gendarmerie in Cyberspace*
- **Mr. Dylan Alldridge,** *Head of Innovation, Office of the Police Chief Scientific Adviser, UK*
- **Dr. Mirabelli Santo**, *Communication and Postal Police Service*
- **Ms. Onela Pilipovic**, *Senior Client Executive, Authority Partners*
- **Mr. Danilo Krivokapic**, *Director, SHARE Foundation*

This panel discussion delved into the role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and innovative technology in policing, highlighting their potential to augment law enforcement efforts, bolster public safety, and tackle modern security issues. (Photo: RCC/Mario Sayadi)

In another highly engaging panel, experts from law enforcement, policy influencers, the private sector, and NGOs converged to discuss the transformative impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Innovative Technology in policing. Amidst the current fervent debate surrounding AI, the panel highlighted the blurred lines between its positive and negative implications. There was a unanimous agreement that AI, particularly generative AI, is a game-changer that is here to stay. Governments, Law Enforcement Agencies (LEAs), and other stakeholders were urged to embrace it, or risk being left behind.

The discussion delved into the technological innovations brought about by AI, ranging from autonomous vehicles to computer vision and facial recognition. Yet, it also raised concerns about potential misuse, including algorithm-driven propaganda such as deep fakes by nefarious actors. Or the potential for abuse of facial recognition technology by law enforcement personnel, for example.

Emphasising the complexity of the topic, the panel underscored the responsibility on governments and LEAs to leverage the useful aspects of AI for efficiency while developing strategies to address misuses or abuses. The

forthcoming EU AI strategy was discussed, prompting the suggestion for a similar strategy for the Western Balkans, recognising both opportunities and challenges.

In the context of policing, AI was recognised as an exciting opportunity, but cautionary notes were sounded against viewing it as a panacea for everything. Instead, the importance of identifying clear opportunities and use cases, conducting testing and evaluation, and ensuring focused, proportional, and balanced use of AI in policing was emphasised.

Crucially, the panel stressed the need for an ethical framework around AI strategies and its use. This involves ensuring accountability, explainability, and proportionality, acknowledging potential biases, and keeping a human in the loop to complement AI decisions rather than having it direct them. External ethical oversight was advocated to actively consider issues like privacy and ethics, fostering public trust and confidence in AI use.

Collaboration emerged as a key theme once again, with an emphasis on public-private partnerships and multi-sectoral collaborations to capitalise on shared skills in research, development, implementation, data, and investigations. This collective effort aimed to reduce opportunities for criminals to exploit the system, recognising that criminals do not adhere to regulations and policies as governments and legal entities do, thus the latter needed to make better and more use of shared capacities.

In conclusion, the panel outlined a compelling vision for the responsible and strategic integration of AI in policing, emphasising ethical considerations, collaboration, and a proactive stance to navigate the transformative landscape of innovative technologies. The imperative for collective action, adaptive strategies, and ethical oversight resonated as key pillars for building a trustworthy and effective framework for AI integration in the region.

5.9. Thematic Panel 7 - Regional exchange on negotiating chapters 23 and 24

Moderator: **Mr. Besfort Lamallari**, *Deputy Minister, Ministry of Interior of Albania;*
Panellists:

- **Albania - Ms. Najada Shundi,** *Head of Unit of EU Integration, Director of EU Integration and Negotiations, Ministry of Justice*
- **Bosnia and Herzegovina - Ms. Irina Neuman**, *Expert Advisor for European Integration in the Department for European Integration - Sector for International Cooperation and European Integration, Ministry of Security*;
  Ms. Nejra Hiroš, *Advisor, Directorate for European Integration*
- **Kosovo*[126] - Mr. Artan Collaku**, *Director, Office of Coordination of the Stabilisation and Association Process, Office of the Prime Minister*
- **Montenegro - Mr. Bojan Božovic**, *State Secretary, Ministry of Justice;*
  Mr. Miloš Radonjic, *Head of the Negotiating Working Group for chapter 24 – Justice, freedom and security, Ministry of European Affairs*
- **North Macedonia - Ms. Magdalena Nestorovska**, *State Secretary, Ministry of Interior*;
  Ms. Bojana Bosilkova, *Head of Unit for Negotiation and Integration, Department for the EU, Ministry of Justice*
- **Serbia – Mr. Branislav Stojanovic**, *Deputy Minister, Ministry of Justice*

This year's Regional Security Coordination Conference included one thematic panel dedicated to the regional exchange between Ministries of Interior and Ministries of Justice of the Western Balkans at the level of leaders of working groups for Chapters 23 and 24. (Photo: RCC/Mario Sayadi)

The concluding panel cast a spotlight on how Western Balkan economies are navigating the challenges posed by delivering on Chapter 23 and Chapter 24 of the acquis. Acknowledging the diverse stages of progress across

126 Kosovo* - This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

economies, the consensus among panellists was that this platform provided a valuable opportunity for shared discussions and experiences, given the common aspiration for full EU membership. The significance of collaborative dialogue was emphasised, recognising the inherent support that economies could extend to one another in overcoming shared challenges.

Panellists underscored the substantial efforts already invested in both chapters by represented economies, showcasing a long-term commitment and resolute determination in negotiating the conditions for accession. Some notable achievements were highlighted, including comprehensive judicial reforms and development of strategic documents addressing issues such as terrorism, organised crime, migration, and asylum. New laws, addressing areas like asset confiscation and anti-corruption, were highlighted as examples of progress. However, identified areas requiring further attention for some encompassed freedom of media, cybersecurity, and other reform needs.

Internal challenges, including capacity and implementation issues, were acknowledged by some panellists. One highlighted the gradual pace of transition activities related to migration from international organisations to the government as a challenge. The growing need to engage with civil society, academia, and stakeholders was stressed as essential to garner valuable insights.

Acknowledging the benefits derived from collaborating with EU agencies such as Europol, Frontex, and Eurojust, panellists called for increased regional collaboration. This was deemed crucial not only for mutual learning but also to enhance the robustness of regional approaches.

While expressing the collective desire to be the next economy to join the EU, panellists voiced frustration at the prolonged nature of the accession process. The upcoming EU elections were identified again as a potential catalyst to reignite the accession process, but some raised concerns that it may change the landscape for negotiations and further delay enlargement.

In essence, this concluding panel highlighted the resilience, commitment, and shared aspirations of Western Balkan economies on their journey towards EU membership. The challenges and achievements underscored in this discussion formed a call to action for continued collaboration, strategic reforms, and sustained commitment to the EU accession process.

5.10. Closing Remarks and Conference Conclusions

From the left: Mr. Andrea Cascone, Director of the Adriatic and Balkans Unit in the General Directorate for the European Union at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Italy, Ms. Majlinda Bregu, Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), Mr. Raffaele Grassi, Deputy Chief of Police at the Italian Ministry of Interior, Ms. Eufemia Esposito, Director of the International Relation Service - Office for Coordination and Planning of Police Forces at the Ministry of Interior of Italy, and Mr. Amer Kapetanović, Head of Political Department of the RCC (Photo: RCC/Mario Sayadi)

In her closing remarks, Ms. Eufemia Esposito, Director of the International Relation Service - Office for Coordination and Planning of Police Forces at the Ministry of Interior of Italy, expressed her sincere appreciation to the moderators, panellists, and participants for their valuable contributions to the two-day conference. The palpable positive energy, evident throughout the event, underscored the significance of the discussions, exchange of views, and networking opportunities.

The conference shed light on the parallel challenges faced by Western Balkan economies and their EU counterparts, ranging from cybersecurity to irregular migration. The shared knowledge and experiences presented a significant opportunity to address these challenges collaboratively.

Despite notable progress in collaboration, coordination, and synergies within the region, Ms. Esposito emphasised the need for sustained commitment, especially in light of recent geopolitical shifts that could impact the region. Without continued effort, there is a risk that criminals and malicious actors could exploit divisions within the region and across the EU.

A crucial theme emerging from the panels was human security, offering a potential roadmap for a new approach to shared challenges by shifting the focus from territories to people. This perspective aligns with the overarching spirit of openness, respect, and inclusivity that characterised the conference discussions.

Mr. Kapetanović, in his brief remarks, echoed the appreciation for all contributors and acknowledged the inherent challenge of capturing the breadth and complexity of the themes explored in just two days. Looking ahead,

considerations will be made on how to best manage and further enhance the conference next year, recognising the ongoing importance of these dialogues.

As the conference drew to a close, the collective commitment to collaboration, coordination, and human security resonated as a powerful call to action. The event not only facilitated a robust exchange of ideas but also emphasised the shared responsibility of the region and its stakeholders in navigating the evolving landscape of challenges and opportunities.

Participants of the Eighth Regional Security Coordination Conference, captured in a group photo during the event held in Rome on 14 November 2023. (Photo: RCC/Mario Sayadi)

6. Participant Feedback

The conference yielded a multitude of positive outcomes, primarily underscored by the overwhelmingly constructive feedback from participants. All respondents noted that they found the sessions informative and useful. Networking emerged as a key highlight, with attendees expressing appreciation for the invaluable connections made during the event. Moreover, the diverse range of perspectives and knowledge shared across various panels contributed significantly to expanding participants' insights.

The emphasis on regional cooperation and international collaboration resonated positively, fostering a sense of shared responsibility and commitment. Some noted that this gave them encouragement for enhanced regional cooperation and further EU engagement given a clear demonstration of the ability of representatives of economies with historical conflicts to discuss complex issues in a normal and constructive manner.

Key topics, such as AI and its implications for law enforcement, were widely welcomed, with perspectives from industry experts being particularly appreciated. Human Security discussions also garnered acclaim, and many expressed a desire for future events to delve into this topic further. Additionally, requests were made for direct discussions on gender issues within the security space, digitalisation in the public sector, AI-related ethics, research security, P/CVE, international organised crime, geopolitical aspects, and negotiation of chapters 23 and 24. Others also expressed a keen interest in exploring models for cooperation with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and police and justice cooperation in the Western Balkans. There was also a call for further input from Western Balkan economies, influencing the Berlin Process.

While lauding the conference's success, some participants suggested a greater balance between informative content and interactive sessions. This, they believed, would enable more direct participation and engagement in the discussed topics.

In terms of running future events, valuable suggestions were put forth. These included smaller discursive panels with well-managed time slots, inclusive of critical views, allowing for broader discussions and engagement from the floor. Some proposed the addition of an extra day, while others cautioned about potential burdens on operational work. A consensus emerged around a greater concentration on focused thematic issues and related analytical discussions to streamline the agenda. Cultural visits were also suggested as a potential inclusion within the agenda.

7. Conference Enhancement Analysis

Aligning with the overarching aims and objectives of the conference and synthesising the multifaceted thematic discussions and participants' feedback received during and after the event, the ensuing SWOT analysis serves as a lens to discern the critical strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. In doing so, it offers valuable insights into the present condition and the prospective trajectory of the Western Balkans in navigating the complex terrain of regional security challenges, as highlighted at the conference.

Strengths	Weakness
Collaboration and Coordination: The conference highlighted the strengths of collaboration, coordination, and synergies within the Western Balkans, demonstrating a collective commitment to addressing shared challenges.	Time Constraints: Acknowledgment was made of the challenge posed by the two-day duration in sufficiently covering the scope and complexity of the explored themes. This limitation may have hindered a more in-depth exploration of certain topics.
Human Security Perspective: The emphasis on human security emerged as a strength, signalling a paradigm shift from territorial concerns to a focus on the well-being of individuals, providing a potentially more holistic approach to regional challenges.	Public Private Partnerships: While panels exhibited a mix of participants, including private sector representation, the opportunity was not fully explored as to identifying and capitalising on PPP opportunities. Thus, calling for more discussion around fostering fruitful collaborations between the public and private sectors.
Knowledge Sharing: The event facilitated a robust exchange of knowledge and experiences, offering a platform for participants to share insights on issues such as cybersecurity, Artificial Intelligence in policing, irregular migration, and geopolitical dynamics.	Internal Challenges: Some internal challenges within the region, such as capacity issues and slow transition activities, were highlighted as obstacles to moving forward more quickly, underscoring the need for continued internal reforms and efficient implementation of strategies.
Engagement of Diverse Stakeholders: The participation of diverse stakeholders, including representatives of law enforcement, policy influencers, the private sector, NGOs/CSOs, and government officials, contributed to the richness of perspectives and solutions.	
Opportunities	**Threats**
Geo-Political Shifts: The recognition of recent geo-political shifts presents an opportunity for the region to reassess and strengthen its collaboration, coordination, and synergies, particularly in response to potential risks posed by these shifts.	External Influence Operations: The region remains exposed to external influence operations from malicious actors, posing a threat to regional stability. The risk of these external threats capitalising on regional divisions was emphasised.
Public-Private Partnerships: Strengthening the continuation of collaboration within the region with the private sector, academics, NGOs and EU agencies, such as Europol, Frontex, Eurojust, and Hybrid CoE, presents a perceived opportunity to enhance regional approaches and learn from successful models.	Perceived Slow Progress: The frustration expressed about the prolonged EU accession process, and the potential catalyst of forthcoming EU elections may highlight a threat to regional morale and public confidence if progress is perceived as slow or uncertain.

Opportunities	Threats
Human Security as a Roadmap: The theme of human security emerges as an opportunity for a new way of responding to challenges, potentially guiding future strategies that prioritise the well-being and safety of individuals.	Risks of Criminal & Nefarious Exploitation: Without a sustained commitment to collaboration and coordination, there is a risk that criminals and nefarious actors could exploit rifts within the region, undermining the collective efforts towards stability and security.
Operationalising SecuriMeter Results: Greater regional cooperation, as called for by the panellists, is likely to be supported by the citizens of the region, given that 80% of citizens across the Western Balkans overwhelmingly back joint plan for collective migration governance to enhance collective management of migration, up sharply from 43% in 2021.	
Operationalising SecuriMeter Results: Citizens overwhelmingly view public discourse on migration as lacking factual grounding, revealing concerns over data gaps and dis(mis)information. As a result, it might be beneficial to increase public discourse in this area to reduce the opportunity for the topic to be used by malign actors for their gains.	

8. Strategic Recommendations

The feedback from the 8th Annual Regional Security Coordination Conference highlights the excellent contribution the event provides to those working in the field of security across the Western Balkans, and the efforts of key organisations and individuals who work persistently and ardently towards fortifying the security and resilience of the region, employing systematic approaches to address challenges head-on.

However, one significant piece of feedback was that while the two-day conference offers an exceptional respite from daily routines, the conference must strike a delicate balance between providing an opportunity for participants to step away and engage in blue-sky thinking whilst at the same time ensuring that the conference yields clear outcomes.

Drawing insights from participant feedback, both formal and informal discussions during the conference, SWOT analysis, and comprehensive situational analysis, the following considerations are offered to refine and elevate future iterations of the conference, ensuring that it continues to be a beacon of knowledge exchange, collaboration, and actionable outcomes.

- Streamline the number of thematic areas discussed (potentially down to two or three) by canvassing in advance for topic suggestions and issues facing the region, prioritising those of key concern. Less thematic areas will allow for more in-depth engagement around the topics. *A focused approach can lead to more meaningful and impactful conversations, making the conference more valuable for participants.*
- Design an agenda around these themes in a manner that is solutions-oriented, balancing discussions around the current state of affairs, whilst providing an opportunity for collective problem-solving and positive change. *Attendees are likely to find more value in actionable insights and solutions rather than just discussing problems*.
- Introduce a mix of formats for engagement around these themes, concentrating on those that provide opportunities for collaboration and interaction, for example, panel discussions, round tables, and workshops. Feedback really highlights a desire for more direct engagement with participants. *Attendees often appreciate opportunities for hands-on activities, workshops, and direct engagement, fostering a dynamic and participatory environment*.
- Organise workshops and roundtable discussions around real-world examples of challenges at an operation level, offering an opportunity to collectively solve problems and generate practical solutions. *Participants can relate more closely to real examples, making the learning experience more relevant and applicable to their work*.
- Enlist a diverse group of experts as mentors to facilitate the workshops, allowing the issue to be explored through different lenses. *Multiple viewpoints enhance the quality of discussions and provide participants with a more comprehensive understanding of the topics*.
- Conduct a tabletop exercise/discussion to close the conference that consolidates the learnings over the two/three days as it is proven to foster a culture of resilience and collaboration. *This hands-on approach can help participants apply what they have learned in a practical scenario, reinforcing key takeaways from the conference*.

9. Future directions for regional security cooperation in the Western Balkans

There was recognition by those in attendance at the conference that the traditional security lens often amplifies and seeks to address the symptoms of problems rather than the root cause. To address this, to operationalise a key learning from the conference, and to provide direction for the future of regional cooperation in the region, it is recommended that attention be given to the potential for a novel approach – one which shifts focus from a traditional securitised approach to one which looks through the human security lens.

While this would mean a considerable shift both in mindset and approach, and greater cooperation amongst non-traditional parties, there appears to be a clear recognition that if the root causes of some of the most systemic issues facing the economies of WB are not addressed, the impact of traditional security measures will forever be limited, and as a result, progress will be limited. Therefore, the following recommendations are made that will help frame an exploration as to whether any or some of the key issues of concerns would be suitable for a human security approach, and if so, what would be the needs for greater cooperation. Thus, the recommendations are not about implementation but rather about the preparatory work necessary to assess the feasibility of addressing existing challenges within the Western Balkans region through this new lens and the level and types of cooperation needed to do so.

Not only would this be a significant shift for the region but it would also elevate these conferences from being an excellent event for the exchange of ideas and networking where valuable insights are generated to an event with a clear focus on translating those insights into actionable steps that eventually could lead to tangible implementation. Moreover, it would provide the opportunity to garner the necessary support and address challenges in advance of rolling out a new approach, thus improving the chances of success.

Given the RCC's role in the region, its expertise and remit, it is well placed to take on this pivotal role, especially regarding early-stage exploration of the feasibility of implementing such an approach.

Within this context, it is recommended that the RCC, in consultation and conjunction with its partners, both regional and international, seeks to:

- Prioritise a small number of regional challenges discussed at the conference and explore how approaching those through a Human Security lens may offer opportunities to reduce the threats posed to the WB economies.
- Select one or two of the most suitable challenges and conduct a deep dive or scoping exercise into the wider range of issues that may not have been fully considered when solely looked at through a traditional securitised lens, such as consideration of the economic, environmental, health, and social challenges that impact people's lives.
- Use the results of SecuriMeter and other regional resources to identify where there may be more willingness for the regional decision-makers and citizens to coalesce around a shared issue.

- Identify the list of relevant stakeholders that will need to be included if one were to devise a human security led initiative to address the challenge identified.
- Bring these stakeholders together and explore the interest in developing a committed team to lead in this regard. It is better to have a small group of committed partners and develop a small action plan with a high degree of success than one that promises the stars and fails to deliver.
- Map out how you might deal with resistance to change within the traditional structures, for example, the lack of political will for an innovative approach.
- Identify the potential saboteurs to such an approach, who may resist a shift to human security, try to engage them early in this work so their concerns could be mitigated.
- Determine the required change needed regarding resource allocation and explore approaches to increase coordination of new and often previously disjointed agencies and/or economies.
- If a suitable issue is identified, gather a group of allies willing to come together to design a human security approach and potentially present it at next year's conference to get feedback on next steps.
- Try to tackle internal challenges, such as capacity issues and slow implementation processes, by investing in training programmes.
- Think about developing a regional platform/Working Group/knowledge sharing framework for the use of Artificial Intelligence in policing.

It is worth noting, in the context of such a review, that the complexity of some of the potentially suitable challenges may overwhelm traditional security institutions unaccustomed to dealing with such multifaceted issues, thus preparation, collaboration and coordination is key.

Moreover, a transition to human security requires not only policy changes but also a shift in perspective and mindset, both publicly and privately. Therefore, understanding and support are crucial for sustaining the transition as efforts to promote a human security mindset may face resistance without the proper approach. Thus, investment in development of educational curricula and cultural perceptions within the general population need to be carefully considered.

It is time to move forward, doing the same thing and expecting a different result only serves to embolden those who do not want change, and tire those who do. Shifting to a human security lens could be the mechanism around which the necessary change is made, providing an innovative collaborative approach for addressing exciting challenges, leveraging opportunities that exist in the Western Balkans region but may need to be better mobilised to foster a secure, collaborative, and resilient environment.

10. Conclusions

The 8th conference, themed Securing the Future: Building Resilience through Collaboration, reflected the event organisers' unwavering commitment to providing a platform for addressing security issues facing the Western Balkan economies. The participant feedback underscored the success of the conference, with attendees praising the informative sessions, networking opportunities, and the diverse range of perspectives shared.

The emphasis on regional cooperation and international collaboration resonated positively, fostering a sense of shared responsibility and commitment. Moreover, the inclusion of Human Security and Negotiating chapters 23 and 24 topics on the agenda proved successful, adding an innovative dimension to the conference that enriched the discussions and provided valuable insights.

One of the biggest pieces of constructive feedback was the need to strike a delicate balance between providing an opportunity for participants to step away from their routines while ensuring it yields clear and actionable outcomes.

In this light, one of the key recommendations is to consider designing the next conference agenda to garner a solutions-oriented approach to the next conference, as this provides a valuable opportunity for collective problem-solving and greater collaboration outside of the conference.

A high-level political panel featuring ministers of interior would be suitable, followed by two days of expert working groups. These groups could focus on developing concrete proposals for the international community and Western Balkan governments to mitigate security risks. A cornerstone of the upcoming conference could also be a comprehensive study on security risks, leveraging gathered data from the new SecuriMeter 2024.

In our pursuit of inclusivity and broadened perspectives, future conferences are planned to alternate locations among Rome, Paris, and various Western Balkan cities. This choice underscores our dedication to maintaining the conference's accessibility and relevance to the region's specific needs and contexts. Based on the participant's feedback, this strategy is designed to foster a rich exchange of ideas and experiences, drawing on the pool of expertise of over 500 distinguished experts and government officials from leading security agencies across the region. This approach not only enhances the diversity of participation but also significantly contributes to the conference's reputation as a key coordination and knowledge-sharing platform in security.

In addition to the strategic planning of conference locations and partnerships, a significant innovation for the upcoming iteration will be establishing specialised working groups. These groups are envisioned to bring together experts and officials from various fields to delve into specific security issues pertinent to the Western Balkans. By focusing on collaborative problem-solving and policy development, these working groups aim to produce actionable recommendations that can be directly applied to mitigate regional security risks. This approach enhances the depth and quality of conference output and fosters a more interactive and participatory environment, encouraging engagement and knowledge sharing among all attendees.

In conclusion, while the 8th Regional Security Coordination Conference 2023 reaffirmed its significance as a central hub for security practitioners, organisations, and networks dedicated to addressing the evolving security landscape in the Western Balkans, it commits to further developing these events in a way that fosters a more secure and resilient future for the region.

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