

WAR ECHOES INTENSIFY FEARS

VIEWS OF SERBIAN CITIZENS ON RELATIONS IN THE REGION



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The data presented in the report derive from the Western Balkans Security Barometer (WBSB) survey. WBSB is a new regional initiative launched by KCSS in 2020, implemented in cooperation with the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) in Serbia and Center for the Study of Democracy and Governance (CSDG) in Albania, supported by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). WBSB serves as an instrument to measure public perceptions in Albania, Kosovo and Serbia on different security-related issues. The findings demonstrate how citizens percept or are informed about the issues presented in this report. As such, the views presented in this report do not necessarily represent the views of the KCSS, BCSP, CSDG or NED.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Belgrade Centre for Security Policy conducted the annual public opinion survey on relations in the region, with a special focus on the Western Balkan countries and current events and trends. This report analyses Serbian citizens' views on three main topics – the possibility of conflicts in the Balkans, Serbia's bilateral relations with its neighbours, as well as key benefits and opportunities of regional cooperation and initiatives.

Due to the current war in Ukraine and the war-mongering rhetoric in the Balkans, the fear of outbreak of conflict in the Balkans has risen. Compared to results from 2020, when more than half of citizens were not afraid of possible conflicts at all, the 2022 survey shows that almost two thirds of respondents are to a certain extent afraid of the outbreak of conflicts in the region in the next five years. Concerning potential causes of the conflict in the region, two-thirds of Serbian citizens believe that it is very or somewhat likely that a conflict might break out over the status of Kosovo. On the other hand, the results of the survey indicate a significant decrease in support of the reintroduction of mandatory military service, in comparison to results from 2020.

When it comes to bilateral relations between Serbia and its neighbouring countries, the data shows a decline in support for potential separation of Republic of Srpska from Bosnia and Herzegovina and unification with Serbia. Citizens believe that relations between Serbia and Montenegro have not improved significantly, despite the signing of the Fundamental Agreement with the Serbian Orthodox Church. On the contrary, the negative perception of Serbian public towards Albania has slightly improved over the last two years, mainly due to the closer cooperation between the leaders of the two countries through the Open Balkan initiative. However, regional relations are still seen as strained, in part due to the promotion of the concept of Serbian world which creation is supported by slightly more than 40% of citizens.

In 2022, the focus of the public in terms of regional cooperation was directed more directly to the Open Balkan initiative as a platform for collaboration between Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia. Although the data show an increase in the number of Serbian citizens who are familiar with the idea, there are still no concrete and publicly visible results of the initiative.

INTRODUCTION

The citizens of Serbia are aware of the insecurity caused by geopolitical competition and conflicts in Europe, and beyond. The war in Ukraine, which has been going on for a year now, has revived memories of the 1990s wars and fuelled fears that it could spill over into the Balkans and lead to an open conflict in the region, primarily in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

This is why the international and domestic attention has recently been focused on the tensions between Belgrade and Pristina, which, due to the lack of inclusive and functional dialogue, have led to localised riots and violent incidents. In the last few months, the media was informing the public about the erection of barricades in the north of Kosovo, and about the intervention of the special police forces of Kosovo and the resistance of the Serbian community to the introduction of Kosovo vehicle licence plates. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the political leaders of all three constituent peoples brought inter-ethnic tensions to a boil in order to gain political points for their parties before the elections. The political situation in Montenegro has been unstable since the fall of the DPS regime in the 2020 election. Since then, two governments have lost the majority support in the Parliament, while ethnic tensions have further deepened because of the agreement signed between the Montenegrin government and the Serbian Orthodox Church. Political tensions in North Macedonia have escalated in light of the French proposal for overcoming the issue of the Bulgaria's veto on North Macedonia's EU integration process and threaten to further destabilise current government and the situation in the country and provide space for the return of the previous regime.

The first section of the report analyses Serbian citizens' perception of possibilities of conflict break out in the Balkans in the next five years. Furthermore, it interprets the citizens' views about military intervention and reintroduction of mandatory military service in Serbia. The second part of the report looks into bilateral relations between Serbia on one hand, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Albania on the other. The final section is focused on regional cooperation in the Balkans, in particular on the Open Balkan initiative.

METHODOLOGY

The analysis below is based on data collected from the survey which is part of the regional project titled Western Balkans Security Barometer (WBSB), led by Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS), in partnership with Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) in Serbia and the Centre for the Study of Democracy and Governance (CSDG) in Albania. ¹

The survey was conducted in the period between October 3rd and October 17th 2022 on a representative sample of 1,020 respondents. It is therefore necessary to take into account possible changes and toughening of certain attitudes in respect to presented results in the context of events that took place between October 2022 and February 2023 when this study has been published. For a better understanding of trends, most of the data presented in the study were compared with the data from the public opinion survey conducted by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy in 2020, applying the same methodology and based on a sample that allows a comparative analysis. More details from this survey are available in the analysis entitled Many Faces of Serbian Foreign Policy - Public Opinion and Geopolitical Balancing.²

1. FEAR OF CONFLICT AGAIN IN THE FOCUS OF PUBLIC ATTENTION

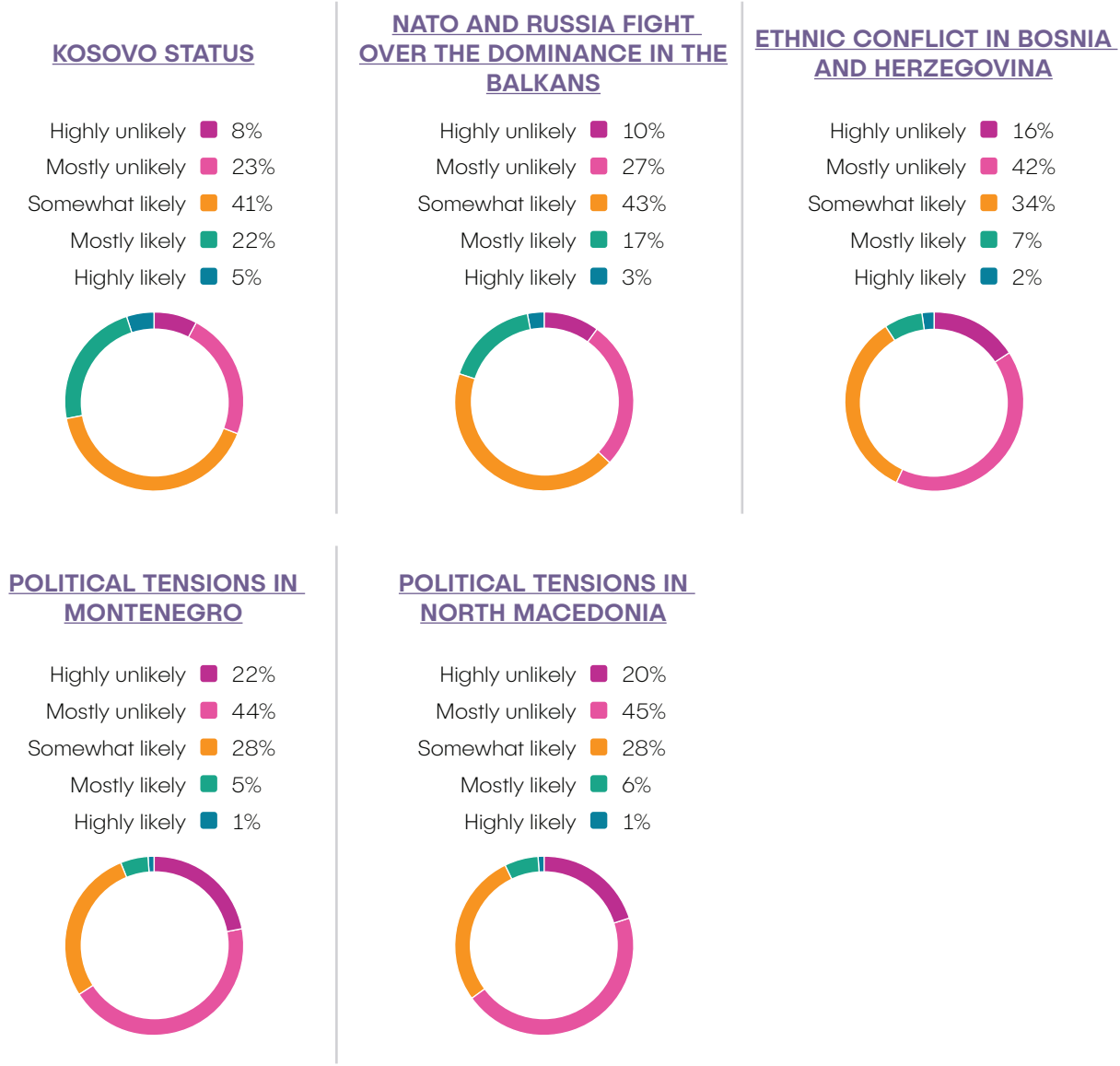
The region is facing probably the most complex security situation in the last twenty years. Political crises, which usually have an ethnic dimension, burden the internal and bilateral relations of almost all countries in the region. In addition, local leaders constantly frighten citizens with inflammatory rhetoric, announcing through the media threats of new wars and inter-ethnic conflicts, and insisting that the state and the nation are at risk.³ Bearing in mind the current war in Ukraine and the war-mongering rhetoric in the Balkans accompanied with sporadic incidents, it is not surprising that almost two-thirds of citizens are somewhat afraid of the outbreak of conflict in the Balkans, while only slightly more than one third of respondents are not afraid at all or mostly not afraid of the possibility of the outbreak of conflicts in the region in the next five years. The current situation is even more alarming if we compare it with the results from 2020, when nearly three-quarters of citizens stated that they were mostly not afraid of conflict or not afraid at all.

FIGURE 1 HOW AFRAID ARE YOU OF POSSIBLE CONFLICTS IN THE BALKANS IN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS?



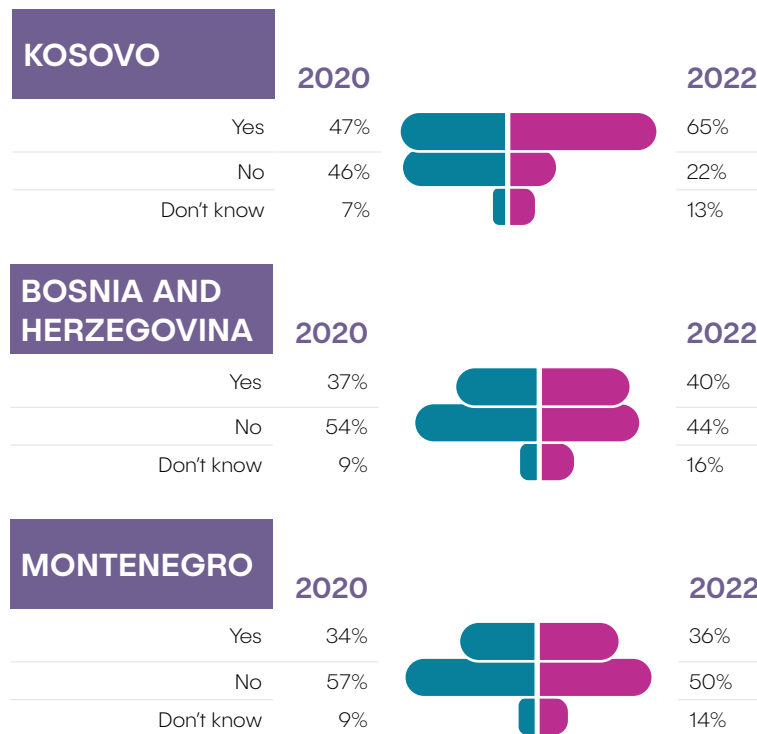
As regards the burning issues that could cause potential conflicts in the region, the public focus is primarily on the political and security situation in Kosovo. Two-thirds of Serbian citizens believe that it is very or somewhat likely that a conflict over the status of Kosovo will break out. Since the survey was conducted during the crisis over vehicle licence plates in Kosovo, it is possible that the media coverage of the security situation in Kosovo influenced citizens in shaping their views. Following Kosovo issue, the second largest percentage of respondents specify the Balkans as a potential area of conflict between the great powers. The public is also somewhat concerned about political and ethnic tensions in the countries of the region where Serbs live, primarily in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, but the majority of respondents agree that a conflict in those countries is very unlikely or not likely to happen.

FIGURE 2 HOW LIKELY IS IT THAT CONFLICT WILL BREAK OUT OVER THE FOLLOWING ISSUES?



Two-thirds of respondents believe that Serbia should intervene if the Serbian community in Kosovo is threatened. If we compare these data with the percentage of citizens who think that Serbia should intervene militarily in Bosnia and Herzegovina or Montenegro in such situations, it is clear that citizens empathise more with the Serbs in Kosovo and would consider a military intervention aimed at their protection as a legitimate one.

FIGURE 3 SHOULD SERBIA INTERVENE MILITARILY IF SERBS ARE ATTACKED IN:



The data presented in the graph clearly indicate that citizens today would generally be more willing to support a military intervention if members of their people are at risk. This is also an indicator of the degree of militarization of Serbian society, which is actively contributed to by the media landscape flooded with news about possible wars that creates an impression of danger among citizens. The tone in which the pro-government media outlets report about the army, procurement of weapons and military exercises is likely contributing to the militarization of the public discourse.⁴

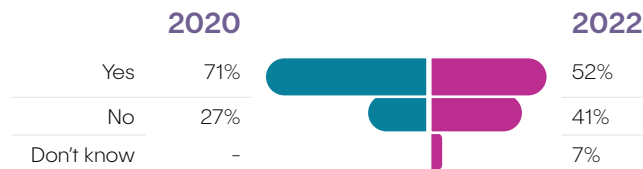
Bearing in mind that the army is one of the institutions that traditionally enjoys the highest degree of citizen trust, such narratives are very suitable for gaining political points.⁵ In light of the rhetoric built around Serbia's military readiness, a topic that comes into public focus at least once a year is reintroduction of mandatory military service. What has not changed for years is the fact that the oldest citizens are most often in favour of military service reintroduction. The group that follows percentage-wise are those who support the governing regime. However, the majority of respondents do not see military service primarily as a tool that would lead to a greater readiness of the army, but instead mention disciplining the youth and tradition as reasons for its reintroduction. The findings of the survey show that half of respondents point out that the main reason for supporting reintroduction of military service is its educational role for the youth, i.e. to teach them order and discipline. Political preferences influence citizens' opinions on this issue, since the overwhelming majority of those who support the government see disciplining the youth as the main reason for military service reintroduction, while a significant percentage of those who do not support the current government believe that the main reason should be the exposure to military threats that the country faces.

FIGURE 4 WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE MAIN REASON FOR REINTRODUCING MANDATORY MILITARY SERVICE IN SERBIA?



Despite the fact that nearly 90 percent of citizens have confidence in the army, the percentage of those who would support the reintroduction of mandatory military service is significantly smaller. Slightly more than half of respondents in 2022 support the reintroduction of mandatory military service, while in 2020 this was supported by nearly three-quarters of citizens. If we take into account the fact that the majority of citizens perceive military service as a kind of educational programme, one of the possible explanations for such a drastic change in views is that some of them have lost interest in the introduction of this measure with the growth of real security threats.

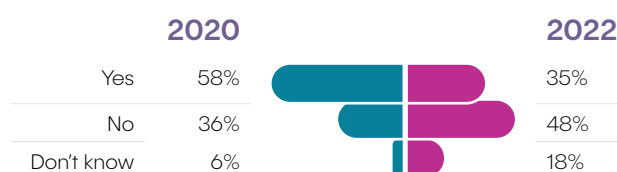
FIGURE 5 DO YOU THINK THAT SERBIA SHOULD REINTRODUCE MANDATORY MILITARY SERVICE?



2. BILATERAL RELATIONS - NATIONALIST RHETORIC FUELS ETHNIC TENSIONS

The status of the Republic of Srpska and special relations between Banja Luka and Belgrade are dominant topics in Serbia when it comes to bilateral relations with **Bosnia and Herzegovina**. Nevertheless, the data show a noticeable change in the perception of the public in Serbia regarding the status of the Republic of Srpska. While slightly more than a third of Serbian citizens believe that the Republic of Srpska should separate from Bosnia and Herzegovina and join Serbia, almost half are against such a proposal. Just two years ago, according to a survey conducted by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, the situation was almost reversed. In that survey, more than half of citizens believed that the future of the Republic of Srpska should be integration with Serbia, while only a third of citizens were against that idea.

FIGURE 6 DO YOU THINK THAT THE REPUBLIC OF SRPSKA SHOULD SEPARATE FROM BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA AND UNIFY WITH SERBIA?



A fall in support for potential unification can be explained with the general increase in the fear of conflict in the region felt by citizens. It seems that most citizens of Serbia are aware of the dangers that could be created by raising the issue of redrawing the borders, especially in the context of vivid memories of the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The reality of the war in Ukraine has led citizens to be far more cautious about the topics that could open a Pandora's box in the Balkans. In addition, there is an impression that in last year's campaign the newly elected President of the Republic of Srpska, Milorad Dodik, did not have open and clear support of President Vučić, who in public appearances mainly stayed away from the issue of the election in the Republic of Srpska. Therefore, the narrative about the unification of Republic of Srpska with Serbia, for which Dodik is recognisable, did not get the media space in Serbia that it had in previous years, when nationalist rhetoric was intensively built on this topic.

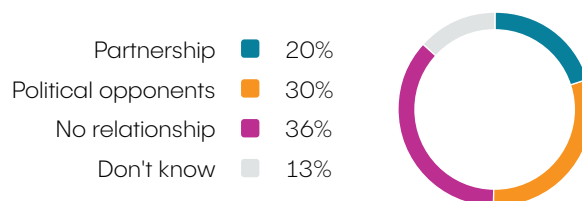
Also, only 4% of citizens in 2022 point out that getting the Republic of Srpska as a compensation would be an acceptable condition under which Serbia should agree to the independence of Kosovo in a potential new shuffling of cards in the Balkans. According to the 2020 data, such a deal was acceptable to as many as 17% of respondents. In the meantime, the issue of resolving the status of Kosovo has returned into focus due to a series of security crises and incidents, primarily in the north of Kosovo, and therefore citizens paid much more attention to this issue than to the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This

can be seen when we take into consideration the answers to a question about the most probable potential conflict zone in the region, which clearly show that ethnic conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina are not in the forefront of public attention in Serbia.

The political scene of **Montenegro** is still shaking from the turmoil caused by the 2020 parliamentary elections. The period after the change of regime was marked by a great political instability with the fall of two governments, and the aggravation of identity-based conflicts, which spilled over to Serbia to a significant extent. The most important issue that fuelled ethnic tensions in Montenegro during the previous two years was the issue of signing the Fundamental Agreement with the Serbian Orthodox Church.⁶ Political elites in both countries built a campaign around this issue, often using inflammatory rhetoric.⁷ Although the political crisis was resolved by signing the agreement that guaranteed to the Serbian Orthodox Church the rights it requested, only every third citizen of Serbia believes that this had an effect on the thawing of relations between the two countries, while nearly half of citizens do not believe that this outcome has led to the improvement of bilateral relations. In addition, despite the fact that the media in Serbia insisted on this issue for months, one quarter of citizens did not have an opinion on this issue, which shows that a significant part of the public does not follow the events in the neighbourhood regularly. It is interesting that two years ago exactly one third of citizens perceived the conflict between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the then Montenegrin government as ethnically motivated, while more than half believed that it was primarily a struggle over material assets and political influence.

Inter-ethnic tensions were often fuelled from the highest government positions. The two presidents, Milo Đukanović and Aleksandar Vučić, regularly raised their approval ratings precisely through sharp conflicts that sometimes turned into personal fights.⁸ An important indicator of the political climate in bilateral relations is the way citizens perceive the relationship between the two central political figures. More than one-third of Serbian citizens believe that there is no direct relationship between the two leaders, while slightly less than one-third of citizens perceive them as political rivals. On the other hand, every fifth respondent believes that despite sharp conflicts in media appearances, Vučić and Đukanović are close political partners. This opinion is more frequent among opposition-minded citizens, among whom one in three believes that the two presidents actually have harmonious relations, while only one in six voters who support the government sees their relationship as friendly.

FIGURE 7 HOW DO YOU PERCEIVE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MILO ĐUKANOVIĆ AND ALEKSANDAR VUČIĆ?

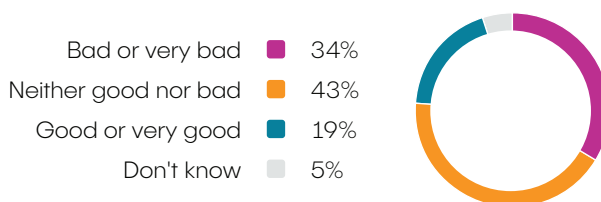


On the other hand, the close cooperation of the two leaders, Aleksandar Vučić and Edi Rama, as well as the bilateral relations that have been intensified through the Open Balkan

initiative have significantly changed the perception of Serbian citizens towards **Albania**. Although Albania used to be perceived predominantly negatively through the prism of the Kosovo issue, the change in the official discourse has contributed to the fact that an increasing number of citizens recognise Albania as a partner of Serbia. Two-thirds of respondents believe that relations between the two countries have improved to a greater or lesser extent over the past two years. An important indicator of the changed dynamics in relations is the fact that, despite increased tensions in Kosovo, the percentage of citizens who are concerned about the creation of Greater Albania has decreased in the last two years. Therefore, in 2022, exactly half of citizens are not afraid of the possibility of the creation of a state that would include all the territories with Albanian majority, including Kosovo, and only a quarter of citizens consider that possibility a real threat that could come true. This is a significant change that occurred in a period of only two years, having in mind that two years ago more than half of citizens stated that they were concerned about a potential creation of Greater Albania.

However, these changes should be seen only as a small shift in the still-strained relations between the citizens of the two countries. Only every fifth respondent perceives relations with Albania as good; every third respondent considers them bad, while the majority is undecided. In addition, there are still slightly more citizens of Serbia who do not welcome workers from Albania in Serbia (45%) than those who are open with respect to this issue (41%). However, it is encouraging to know that nearly three-quarters of respondents believe that relations between the two countries should be better. Citizens point out economic development and enhanced security as the most important conditions for the improvement of relations.

FIGURE 8 HOW DO YOU ASSESS THE RELATIONS BETWEEN SERBIA AND ALBANIA?

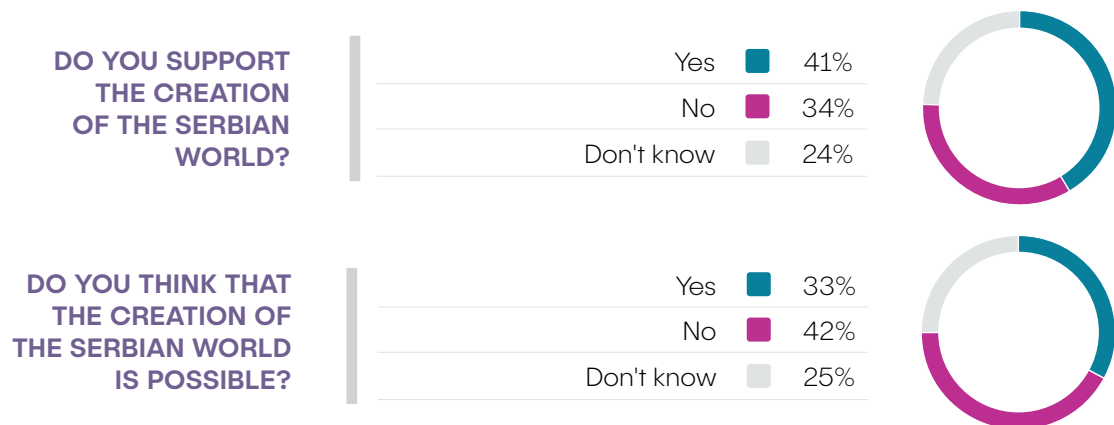


The narrative that has significantly marked regional relations in previous years is the concept of the Serbian world. The former Minister of Defence and current Director of the Security Intelligence Agency, Aleksandar Vulin, who imposed this topic in the public realm, defined the Serbian world as an intergenerational aspiration and a strategic direction towards the peaceful unification of all Serbs in one state.⁹ Political elites across the region used this concept to prove that Greater Serbia claims had never disappeared, and to formulate their national policies based on resistance to such aspirations.¹⁰ Perhaps it is most accurate to understand the Serbian world as a propaganda concept without any substantial strategy to back it up, whose sole purpose is to score nationalist points both in Serbia and among Serbs in the region. Simultaneously, it was readily used by the political elites in the region to inflame nationalist rhetoric within their ethnic communities. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that this idea stirred up some painful memories and brought additional instability to the already damaged inter-ethnic relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro

and Kosovo. Many actors in the region interpret the institutional measures such as the introduction of the Day of Serbian Unity, Freedom and National Flag as putting the politics of the Serbian world into practice, although no institution of the Republic of Serbia explicitly refers to this concept.

The Serbian public is almost entirely polarised about this kind of rhetoric. While slightly more than 40% of citizens support the creation of the Serbian world, one third of citizens are not in favour of such an approach. However, the situation is opposite when it comes to the perception on how realistic such a policy is, because only one third of citizens believe that the creation of the Serbian world is an achievable goal. This kind of rhetoric is most readily accepted by the youngest and oldest citizens, while the middle-aged are much less inclined to this idea. In addition, the idea of creating the Serbian world is popular primarily among the voters who most firmly support the government, more than half of whom support the concept, while only a third of opponents of the regime claim to agree with this policy. The part of the public that believes that Serbia should align itself with Russia with respect to the war in Ukraine is predominantly in favour of the idea of the Serbian world, while the majority of citizens who consider that Serbia should support Ukraine are mostly against such an idea.

FIGURE 9



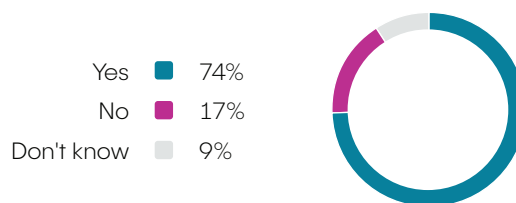
Also, we can clearly see the correlation between the citizens' views on the concept of the Serbian world and their views on regional relations. A significant majority of citizens who support the creation of the Serbian world believe that Serbia should intervene militarily if Serbs are attacked in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and a relative majority of citizens believe that the same should be done if Serbs are attacked in Montenegro, while in both cases two-thirds of citizens who do not support the idea of the Serbian world oppose such an intervention. In addition, most citizens who are in favour of the concept of the Serbian world support the separation of the Republic of Srpska from Bosnia and Herzegovina and its unification with Serbia, while as many as three-quarters of citizens who do not believe in the idea of the Serbian world find such a proposal unacceptable. The answers to the question about support for the idea of creating the Serbian world perhaps most clearly reflect the ideological polarisation in Serbian society when it comes to relations with neighbours, which could become even sharper in case of deepening ethnic tensions in the region.

3. REGIONAL COOPERATION THROUGH THE OPEN BALKAN INITIATIVE

Finally, as regards regional cooperation, in previous years the media focused mainly on the Open Balkan initiative. The first year of the regional initiative under the new name (previously known as Mini Schengen) was remembered primarily for the meetings of the leaders of the countries that had launched the initiative – Serbia, North Macedonia and Albania. The events received a lot of media attention, which led to an increase in the number of Serbian citizens who were familiar with the idea of the Open Balkan. Compared to the public opinion survey conducted in 2020, when more than half of respondents were not aware of the existence of this initiative, this year’s findings show that the percentage of those who are informed about the initiative has almost doubled.

However, apart from the successful media promotion, there are still no concrete and publicly visible results of the initiative. Nearly one-third of respondents specify free trade and movement of people as the main reason why they support the Open Balkans. Other frequently mentioned reasons are the improvement of cooperation and relations between the countries, as well as economic cooperation and development. Such answers of respondents are in line with their general support for regional economic cooperation. Nearly three-quarters of citizens are in favour of free movement of people, exchange of information and a common market for goods and labour in the Western Balkans.

FIGURE 10 DO YOU SUPPORT FREE MOVEMENT OF PEOPLE, EXCHANGE OF INFORMATION AND A COMMON MARKET FOR GOODS AND LABOUR IN THE WESTERN BALKANS?



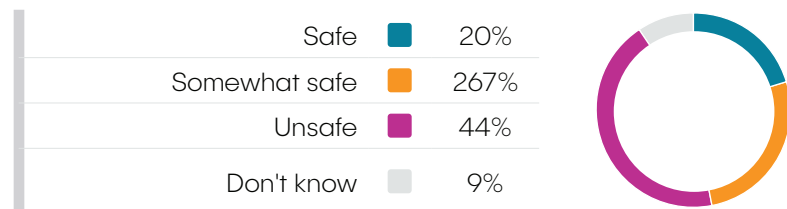
On the other hand, only 2% of respondents see the Open Balkan initiative as a greater opportunity for employment, despite the fact that an agreement for the mutual recognition of diplomas within the Open Balkans was signed in June 2022, which should speed up the process of obtaining work permits.¹¹ In addition, although 13 agreements, 6 memoranda of understanding and one operational plan have been signed since 2019 when the initiative was launched, only Serbia has ratified 5 documents, while no documents have been ratified by Albania and North Macedonia, which confirms the lack of tangible results.¹²

We can say that one of the contributions of the Open Balkan initiative is a partial improvement of relations between Serbia and Albania, especially noticed among the young population. The promotion of tourism and a joint tourist offer of the Open Balkans contributed to the fact

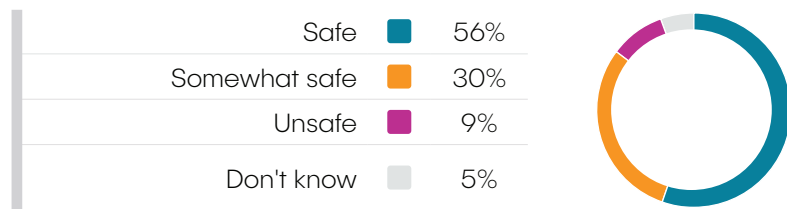
that more than half of young people aged 18-29 feel safe when traveling through Albania with Serbian vehicle licence plates, while more than half of respondents over 65 years of age feel unsafe. Conflicts from the past are still recognised as one of the main obstacles to closer cooperation between the Western Balkan countries, which can be seen in the answers of less than a quarter of respondents who state that they do not support the Open Balkans because they are unwilling to cooperate with Albania specifically. Although more than three-quarters of respondents believe that Serbia and Albania should further improve their relations, the ethnic distance towards Albanians is still big, primarily due to tensions over the Kosovo issue. That is why a quarter of citizens believe that the status of Kosovo should be solved first to allow progress in relations between the two countries and more substantial support to the Open Balkan initiative. Other reasons for not supporting the Open Balkans include the lack of benefits for Serbia from this type of regional cooperation, the Serbia's need to cooperate primarily with strong countries, as well as poor border control and the possibility of misuse.

FIGURE 11

HOW SAFE WOULD YOU FEEL TO TRAVEL THROUGH ALBANIA WITH SERBIAN VEHICLE LICENCE PLATES?



HOW SAFE WOULD YOU FEEL TO TRAVEL THROUGH NORTH MACEDONIA WITH SERBIAN VEHICLE LICENCE PLATES?



The mostly positive public perception of the Open Balkan initiative is the result of a wider positive and successful presentation of regional cooperation, both in pro-government and independent media. The findings of the survey show that more than three-quarters of respondents who trust Radio Television of Serbia as source of information support regional cooperation in the Western Balkans. The same percentage applies to respondents who trust other information channels, such as N1, Nova s, Pink, Prva, Blic and Kurir. The only data that stands out from this trend is slightly lower support for regional cooperation by the respondents who trust most Happy TV, two-thirds of whom support cooperation in the Western Balkans.

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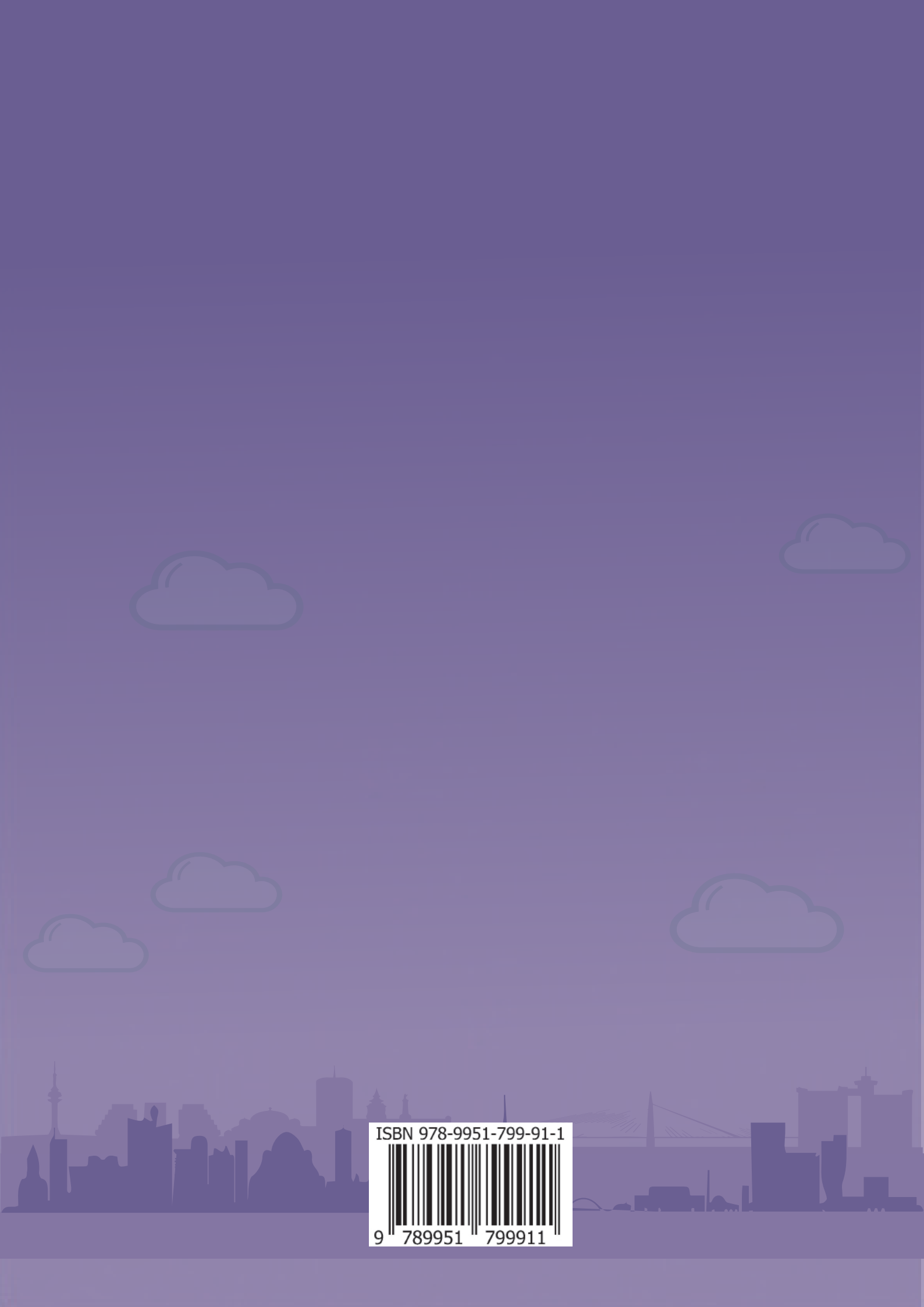
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Pebić, Gorana

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