

Raising Fear of Conflicts vs Raising Hopes in Collaboration and Solidarity

How the Serbian Public Perceives Regional Relations



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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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INTRODUCTION

In recent months, citizens in the Balkans have been talking intensely about whether there will be a new conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina or between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo. While democratisation and Euro-Atlantic integration were one of the main drivers of reducing tensions after the Yugoslav wars, the current context in the Western Balkans is characterised by democratic regression, and even the restoration of autocracy as ideologies of the 1990s resurface, accompanied by the negligence of the entire region on the part of the EU. The COVID-19 pandemic has only accelerated the overall trend of democratic erosion and exposed populist leaders willing to use every crisis to grab even more power and further undermine democratic norms and institutions, while exploiting long-standing ethnic divisions.

In such an environment, there is little room for genuine cooperation among the Western Balkan countries. In recent years, Serbia has worked intensively to improve relations with global and regional powers, and to turn old enemies into new friends, such as the United States, Turkey or Hungary, while Serbia's relations with most Western Balkan countries could be described as "one step forward, two steps back". Much of the incentives for regional cooperation and the improvement of bilateral relations between the Western Balkans countries has been driven by the EU or its members states. However, as the entire region became increasingly isolated due to the disappearance of the EU accession prospect in the near future, some Western Balkan countries have decided to launch their own initiatives.

To shed the light on the Serbian public views on regional dynamics, potential for conflicts in the region, but also regional cooperation and solidarity, the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) conducted a public opinion survey from mid to late September 2021, on a sample of 1,000 Serbian citizens. The results of the survey are presented in the following paragraphs.

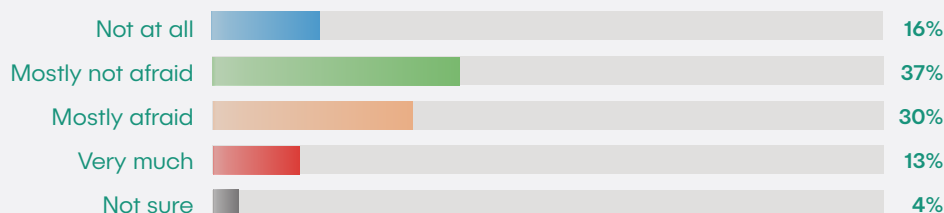


THREATS TO REGIONAL PEACE

Stability across the Western Balkans region has deteriorated greatly over the past few years. Reoccurring confrontations in Kosovo, such as the stand-off over the recognition of license plates¹ or the intervention of Kosovo's special police forces in the dawn of local elections in northern Mitrovica, the part of the city with a Serbian majority,² are adding fuel to the already boiling relations between Belgrade and Pristina. The fragile state architecture of Bosnia and Herzegovina is shaken to the core, with discussions of revived conflict becoming louder than ever since the signing of the Dayton agreement, both in the country and in the international community.³ Ethnic and political tensions in Montenegro, which were triggered by the controversial Law on Religious Freedom that led to mass protests and resulted in regime change at last year's elections, culminated over the issue of inauguration of the new local leader of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the town of Cetinje.⁴

Above all, the regime in Serbia has raised tensions with its highly belligerent narrative about regional actors in the pro-government mainstream media, which is at odds with the self-proclaimed image of a guarantor of regional peace and stability. It is therefore not surprising that, in such flammable circumstances, the overall results of the poll on the regional stability are quite worrisome. Only half of the people who participated in the survey have declared that they are mostly unafraid, or not at all afraid, of a potential conflict in the Balkans in the next five years. Approximately every third examinee mostly does fear the possibility of conflict in the foreseeable future, while 13 per cent said that they are very much afraid of such a scenario.

TABLE 1 HOW MUCH ARE YOU AFRAID OF THE OUTBREAK OF ARMED CONFLICTS IN THE BALKANS IN THE NEXT 5 YEARS?

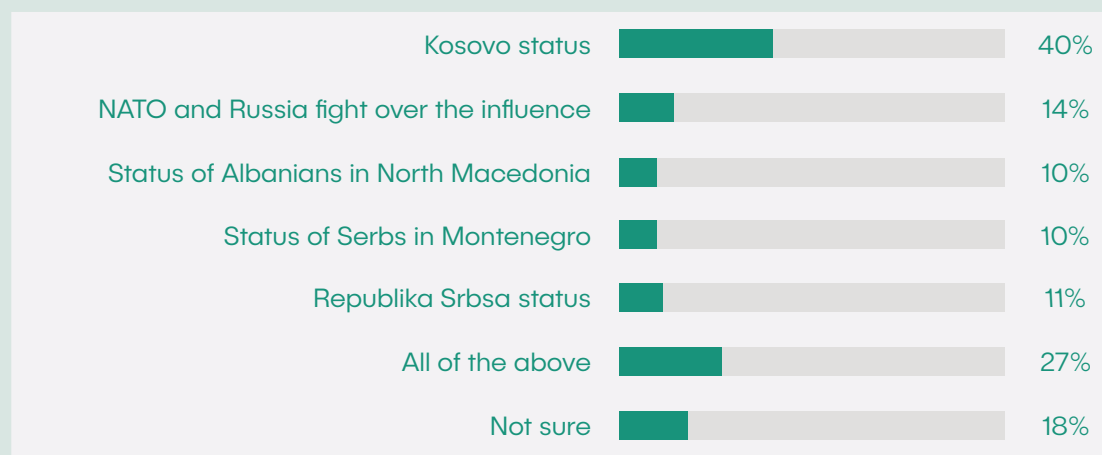


The Serbian public is very much aware of the multitude of crises that are erupting simultaneously across the region. The relative majority perceives the status of Kosovo as the most urgent threat to the regional stability. This is not surprising, as the issue of Kosovo still plays a major role in the Serbian public discourse, and the most recent conflict of 1999 is perceived as frozen rather than resolved. The image of the Balkans as a battleground for the geopolitical clash of the great powers, more precisely NATO and Russia, is also very much alive in the public perception.

However, other ongoing issues in the region are just as high on the list of potential

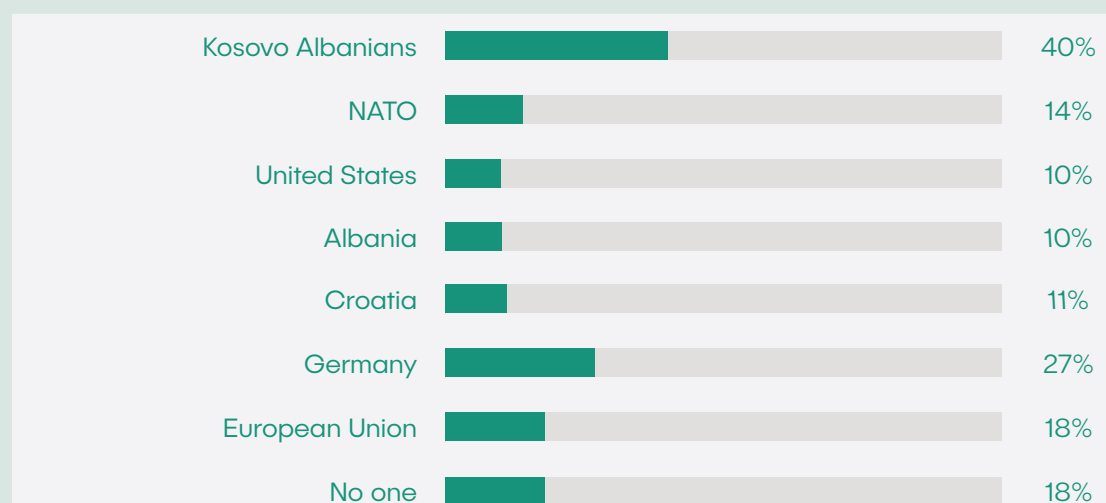
threats to the regional security. The status of the Republic of Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the status of Serbs in Montenegro, even the status of Albanians in North Macedonia – all are viewed as serious dangers to peace in the Balkans. Moreover, the fact that so many people see all the above mentioned crises as a possible spark that could cause a conflict shows that people understand the extent to which regional security is interconnected, and how easily a conflict in one country could spill over into others.

TABLE 2 WHAT COULD BE THE REASON FOR THE OUTBREAK OF WAR IN THE BALKAN (MULTIPLE POSSIBLE ANSWERS)?

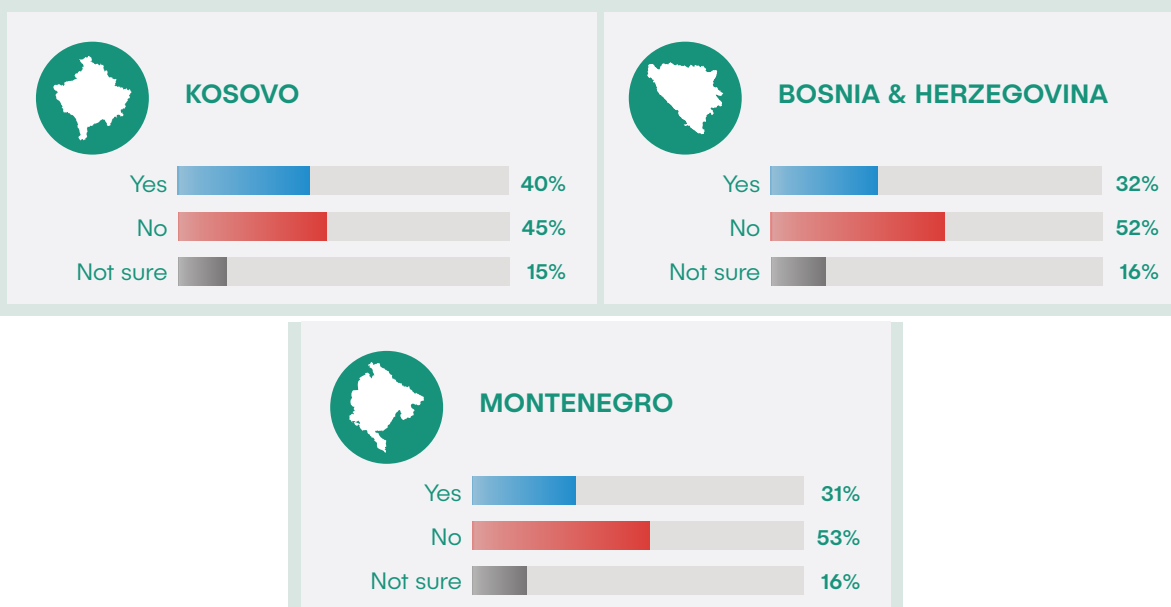


The fact that the painful memory of the Kosovo conflict is very much alive in the public eye is demonstrated in the most frequent answer to the question on actors who might have an interest in provoking a new conflict in the region. Kosovo Albanians are on top of that list, which is in line with the fact that Kosovo is perceived as the biggest threat to the regional security. NATO and the United States are viewed as actors from outside the region that could have an interest in triggering a conflict in the Balkans. This is clearly the result of a still vivid memory of the NATO bombing of Serbia, but also of the vocal US support for the independence of Kosovo.

In contrast with the high level of support for regional cooperation under the Open Balkan initiative, Albania is identified as a potential destabilising factor. Such a perception is linked with the Kosovo issue, as well as the fear of the hypothetical formation of Greater Albania. The only other regional player that is perceived as a threat to the regional peace is Croatia, largely due to the constant narrative of enemies and the arms race promoted by pro-government tabloids.⁵

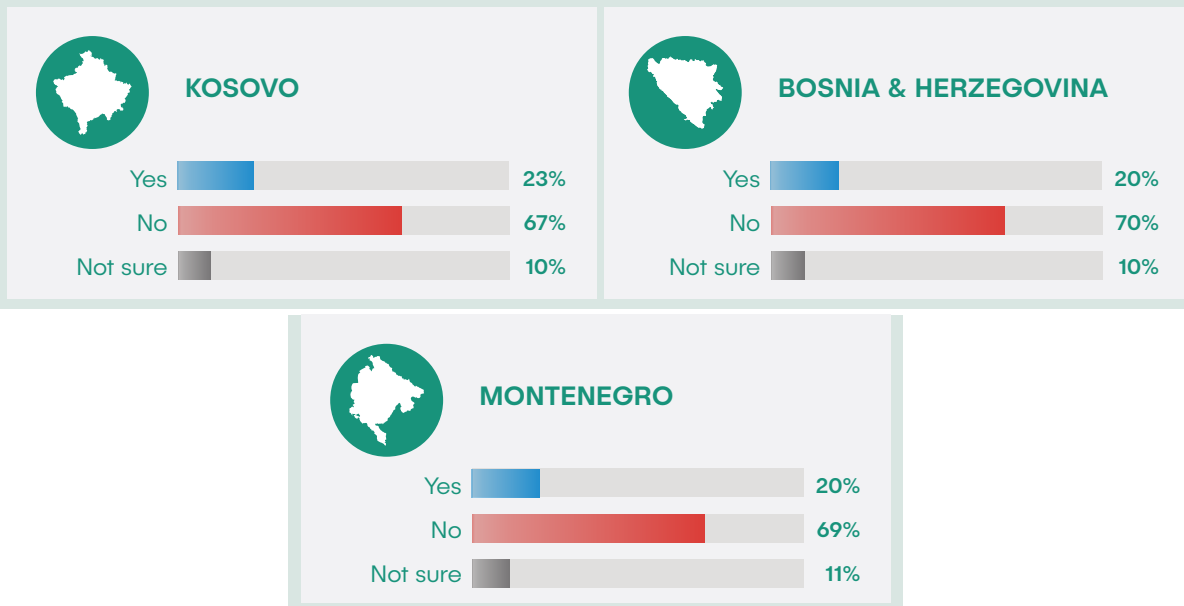
TABLE 3 WHO HAS AN INTEREST IN PROVOKING AN ARMED CONFLICT IN THE BALKANS (MULTIPLE POSSIBLE ANSWERS)?

The fact that the Serbian public takes the threat of conflict seriously is reflected in the number of people who think that Serbia should enter that potential conflict, even in the case a local Serbian community is directly targeted or affected by it. Although the possibility of a conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina or Montenegro is viewed as real, only one in three participants in the poll stated that Serbia should deploy its army to intervene and protect the local Serbian population there. The situation is somewhat different in the case of Kosovo, where 40 percent of those surveyed think that Serbia should respond to violence against Serbs, even by military means. This data is another confirmation that the position of Serbs in Kosovo remains the top priority of the Serbian public.

TABLE 4 SHOULD SERBIA INTERVENE MILITARILY IN CASE SERBS ARE AFFECTED BY THE CONFLICT IN

However, the number of people who would actually be willing to get personally involved in a military intervention to protect the Serbian minority in the region in case it is targeted, is significantly lower. Just one out of five would put on the uniform to protect Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina or Montenegro. The number of those who would take up arms to protect Serbs in Kosovo is only slightly higher. The overwhelming majority understandably prefers collaboration, solidarity and peace-building in the region over a threatening prospect of yet another destructive confrontation.

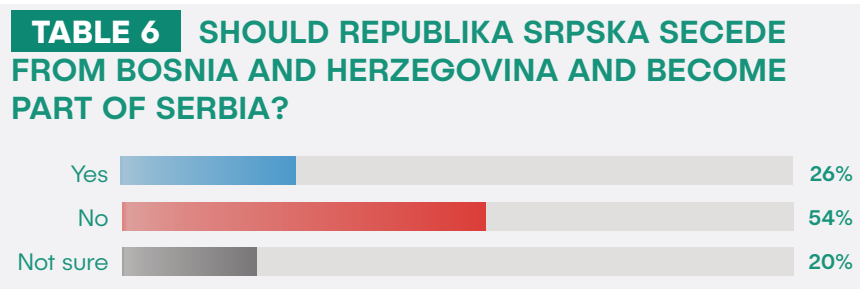
TABLE 5 WOULD YOU BE READY TO JOIN YOUR COMPATRIOTS IN THE ARMED CONFLICT IN





BILATERAL RELATIONS

Serbia's bilateral relations with most former Yugoslav republics are troublesome. However, in light of the recent crises, its relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro stand out. Therefore, it is important to know how citizens of Serbia perceive bilateral relations with countries in the region, especially those that have been facing serious challenges as of late. Bosnia and Herzegovina has entered the most serious political and constitutional crisis since the Dayton peace accords. In mid-October, Milorad Dodik, political leader of the Bosnian Serbs, announced that the Republic of Srpska will withdraw from federal state institutions that represent key pillars of the state security, the rule of law and the fiscal system.⁶ Dodik's threat to withdraw from the state level was prompted by UN High Representative Valentin Inzko's law which aimed to proclaim genocide denial a crime.⁷ Although the Republic of Srpska has a special place in Serbia's foreign policy, the survey shows that 54 percent of the people think that the Republic of Srpska should not secede from Bosnia and Herzegovina and become an integral part of Serbia.



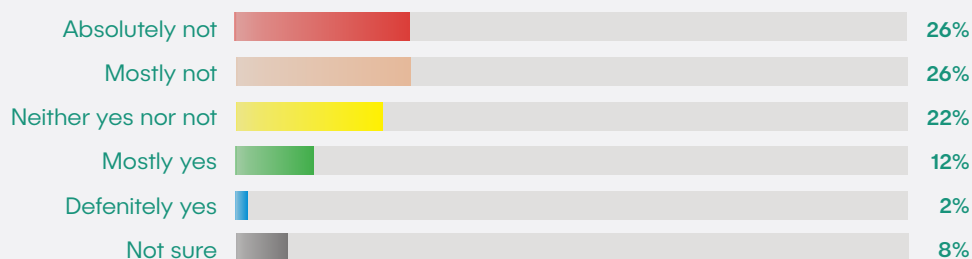
The idea of secession of the Republic of Srpska from Bosnia and Herzegovina and the right of Serbs to self-declaration has lately been repeatedly brought up by the leader of Bosnian Serbs Milorad Dodik, in light of the discussion about a territorial swap along the ethnic lines as the path towards the normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina.⁸ Still, more than two-thirds of the electorate dismisses the idea of getting the Republic of Srpska as compensation for Serbia's recognition of Kosovo's independence. This clearly demonstrates that, for the Serbian public, the status of Kosovo stands much higher on the list of national priorities than any regional security issue. Moreover, this data partly explains why they see the outbreak of a conflict in Kosovo as more likely than a potential conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which has lately been the main priority of the international community when it comes to the stability of the region.

TABLE 7 WOULD YOU AGREE FOR SERBIA TO RECOGNIZE KOSOVO IF IT WOULD GET REPUBLIKA SRPSKA IN RETURN?



As regards bilateral relations with Montenegro, they culminated over the enthronement of Joanikije II as the Serbian Orthodox Church's Bishop of Montenegro and the Littoral. However, the crisis in Montenegro and in mutual relations had little to do with the enthronement. The incumbent President Djukanović, whose Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) lost power in parliamentary elections after three decades, has showed readiness to politically instrumentalise the inauguration of the new top cleric of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, antagonise the Montenegrin society and provoke violence in an attempt to seize power in local elections and prevent long-awaited democratic and rule-of-law reforms.⁹ Members of the former ruling party and self-proclaimed patriotic groups have brought the atmosphere in Montenegro to a boil with hate-statements, presenting Joanikije's enthronement as the "crowning moment of Greater-Serbian assaults on Montenegro".¹⁰ On the other hand, the regime in Serbia led by President Vučić launched a slanderous campaign, accusing the Montenegrin government and their Prime Minister Krivokapić of allowing an alleged "lynching of Serbs" to take place.¹¹ This is because Prime Minister Krivokapić, although supported by the Serbian Orthodox Church, is not seen as an ally of the current regime in Belgrade. Both of these narratives have yet again fuelled tensions in both countries and largely influenced the perception of the Serbian public. According to the polls, more than half the citizens of Serbia believe that the current Montenegrin government is either mostly or completely hostile towards the local Serb population, while only 14 percent see their policies and attitudes as amicable.

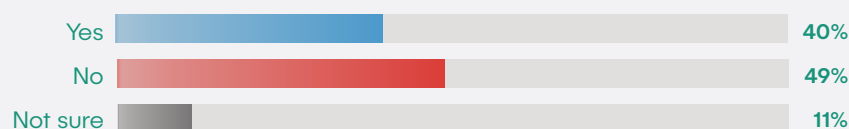
TABLE 8 IS THE CURRENT MONTENEGRIN GOVERNMENT FRIENDLY TOWARDS SERBS IN MONTENEGRO?



Finally, the topic that has been re-actualized in the Serbian public over the last few months is the narrative of fear towards the creation of Greater Albania. While leaders in Pristina and Tirana deny pan-Albanian ambitions, their recent statements at an intergovernmental meeting between Albania and Kosovo in Elbasan have raised some red flags in Serbia. After signing 13 agreements with Kosovo and agreeing to remove border control,¹² Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama said that he would vote in favour of the unification of Albania and Kosovo should there be a referendum on

the matter.¹³ This announcement echoed one of the first statements of the Kosovar Prime Minister Albin Kurti after the landslide electoral victory in early 2021.¹⁴ A day before the meeting in Elbasan, Euronews Albania released the out-of-context results of a public survey showing that four in five Albanians would vote for reunification with Kosovo in a referendum, but also that less than half of the population believes that such unification could occur within ten years.¹⁵ Several Serbian officials reacted to the statements and the survey, including Prime Minister Ana Brnabić who said that they constitute “another stone pulled from the foundations of regional stability and security.”¹⁶ Despite the engagement of key political leaders in Serbia in fearmongering about the potential threat of Albanian nationalism through the Serbian mainstream media, the survey conducted by BCSP shows that only 40 percent of the Serbian population sees the threat of the creation of Greater Albania as realistic, while almost half is not afraid of it. This might also be the result of the ambivalent approach of the regime in Belgrade, which is promoting the Open Balkan initiative based on good relations with Albania while at the same time spreading the narrative of fear against the unification of Albanians in the region.

TABLE 9 ARE YOU AFRAID OF THE POSSIBILITY OF CREATING GREATER ALBANIA?



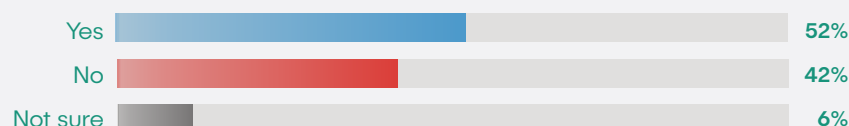


THE OPEN BALKAN INITIATIVE

The idea of launching a mechanism of regional cooperation driven internally by the countries of the region instead of external actors such as the European Union has first materialised in 2019, with the creation of the Mini Schengen.¹⁷ Although it was announced as a major step forward in regional integration that should propel future accession to the common European market, it has mostly remained at the level of vague political declarations between just three of the Western Balkans countries, with very few tangible results.¹⁸

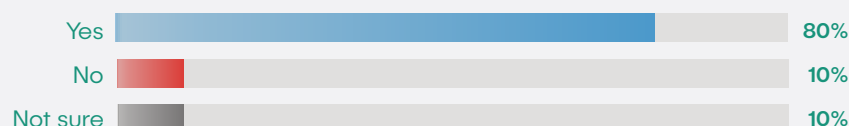
In July 2021, state officials of Serbia, Albania and North Macedonia announced that they would change the name of the initiative to Open Balkan, as a symbolic step forward in the deepening and concretisation of cooperation.¹⁹ The new name was deliberately chosen to send the message that other Western Balkans countries were also welcome to join, and to counter the narrative that the project was exclusive. The three agreements that should serve as grounds for future collaboration are: the Memorandum of Understanding and Cooperation on Facilitating Import, Export and Movement of Goods in the Western Balkans; the Memorandum on Free Access to the Labour Market; and the Agreement on Cooperation in Disaster Protection.²⁰ Regardless of the intense campaign by the Government, which called the initiative a major driver of future development, just slightly more than half of the population is aware of its existence.

TABLE 10 ARE YOU FAMILIAR WITH THE MINI SCHENGEN/ OPEN BALKAN INITIATIVE?



However, although people are not familiar with the concept of the Mini Schengen or Open Balkan, there is a clear general support for the regional economic collaboration and integration of the market. Four out of five examinees state that they support the free movement of people, goods, services and capital across the regional borders. The fact that many supporters of the regional economic cooperation are not aware that such initiative already exists is not the consequence of a poor campaign by the Government to promote the project, but rather of the complete lack of transparency and the absence of tangible results of this initiative to date.²¹

TABLE 11 DO YOU SUPPORT THE FREE MOVEMENT OF PEOPLE, GOODS, CAPITAL AND SERVICES, AS WELL AS THE COMMON ECONOMIC MARKET IN THE WESTERN BALKANS?



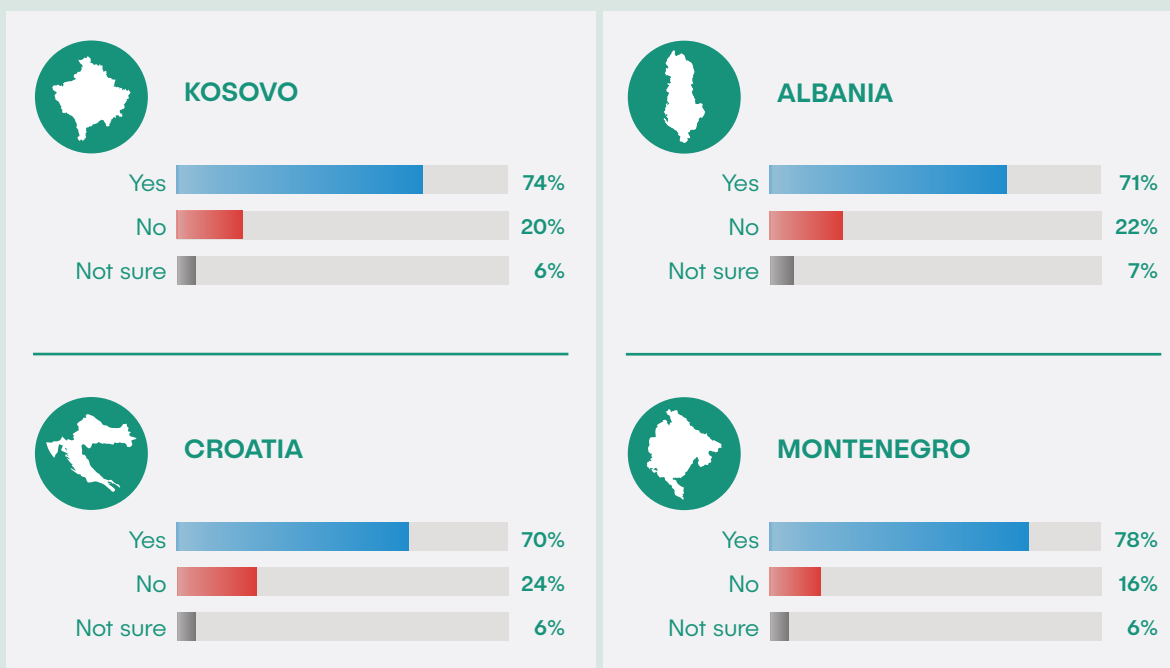


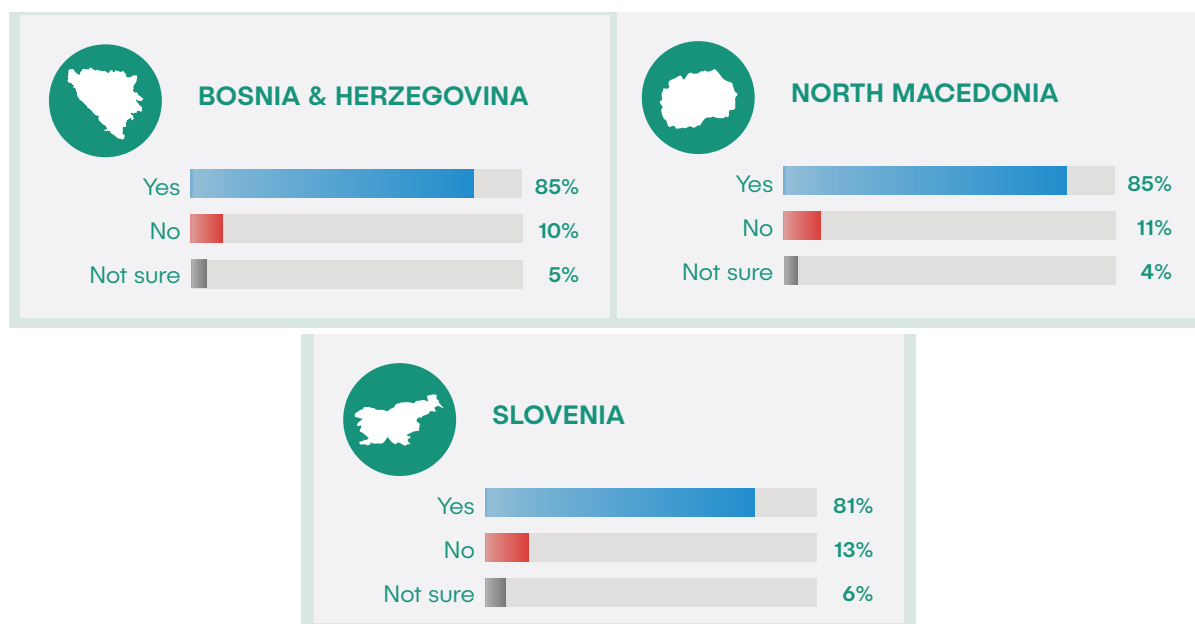
REGIONAL SOLIDARITY

The survey shows that Serbian citizens understand the importance of regional cooperation and solidarity in times of crisis. The turning point for such a perception might have been the massive floods that hit the region in 2014, when help circulated among the countries that were most impacted. Most recently, the medical aid and vaccine distribution within the region, although displayed primarily as vaccine diplomacy of the Serbian government aimed at promoting soft power in the region, once again raised the question of the need for a coordinated regional response to natural disasters and other emergency situations. The first institutional steps in this regard, initiated directly by the countries in the region, have been made with the Agreement on Cooperation in Disaster Protection in the Western Balkans, signed under the umbrella of the Open Balkan initiative.²² However, much like other aspects of the Open Balkan initiative, it is currently a mere a political proclamation whose practical implications remain unclear.

Nevertheless, these past decade's developments strongly impacted the public perception of the necessity for mutual assistance in times of crisis. More than two thirds of the citizens believe that Serbia should help any country in the region in the case of emergency or disaster. However, there are certain slight variations when it comes to the willingness to support neighbours in their time of need. While 85 percent of the population approves assistance to North Macedonia or Bosnia and Herzegovina, about 70 percent believe that Serbia should do the same for Croatia or Albania.

TABLE 12 SHOULD SERBIA SEND AID TO THE FOLLOWING COUNTRIES/ TERRITORIES IN THE EVENT OF A STATE OF EMERGENCY OR NATURAL/ HUMANITARIAN DISASTER?





The percentage was almost identical when the question was posed the other way around. More than 70 percent of the people would accept aid from any country in the region in the event of floods, earthquakes, fires, future pandemics, etc. Still, there are 10 to 15 percent who would accept help from North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina or Montenegro, but not from Kosovo, Albania or Croatia. These differences are reflective of the general differences in views that the Serbian public has towards its neighbours. As evident from the question on regional actors that might have an interest in initiating a conflict in the Western Balkans, Albanians and Croats are perceived as those who pose the greatest threat to regional peace. For this reason, it is that much more surprising to see that percentages do not vary greatly, and that the overwhelming majority of the people support the distribution of aid across the region.



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