

Commentary

UDK: 327(497):316.334

DOI: 10.5937/jrs18-46184

Received: 13 August 2023 / Accepted: 3 September 2023

Balkan Peace Index 2022: Trends and Analysis*

NEMANJA DŽUVEROVIĆ**

University of Belgrade – Faculty of Political Science, Serbia

Background

This year represents the year zero for the Balkan Peace Index (BPI). The Index represents an effort to assess the quality of peace and to quantify peacefulness in the region that is nowadays known by the politically coined term Western Balkans (see Petrović 2014) and encompasses seven countries and territories: Albania, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*,¹ Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia.

The BPI is not the first peace index. There are many other indexes launched in previous years, with the Global Peace Index² being the most famous one. What makes the difference between the BPI and the rest of peace indexes (Failed States Index, Positive Peace Index, etc.) is that it is the first locally designed and locally owned peace index that tries to respond to the critique pointed towards peace measurement without understanding a local context or without consultation with the local population what peace means for them (for the critique see Firchow 2018; Löwenheim 2007, 2008; Mac Ginty 2013a, 2013b). The BPI was created by a team of researchers coming from the University of Belgrade (Faculty of Political Science and Faculty of Organisational Sciences), and it is part of the wider research project that aims to introduce ‘local turn’ (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013; Džuverović 2021) in peace measurement. The project bears the name Monitoring and Indexing Peace and Security in the Western Balkans – MIND,³ and it is supported by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia.

The starting point for the BPI is that quantifying and scaling the peace in the Western Balkans is not the only important step needed to understand peace dynamics in the region

1 This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

2 See: <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/#/>

3 See: <https://mindproject.ac.rs>

* *This research was supported by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia [grant number 7744512] Monitoring and Indexing Peace and Security in the Western Balkans – MIND.*

** *nemanja.dzuverovic@fpn.bg.ac.rs*

that only 20 years ago experienced the most violent conflicts in Europe after World War II. Instead, what is equally important is to understand the quality of peace in the region and to recognise the key ‘infrastructures of peace’ (Richmond 2013). Accordingly, the BPI 2022 does not aim (only) to rank the countries of the region (with one being more peaceful than others) but to determine the quality and durability of peace in each of the countries.⁴ For the year 2022, Croatia and Albania are classified as countries with consolidated peace, followed by North Macedonia (Stable Peace), Montenegro and Serbia (Polarised Peace) and Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo (Contested Peace).

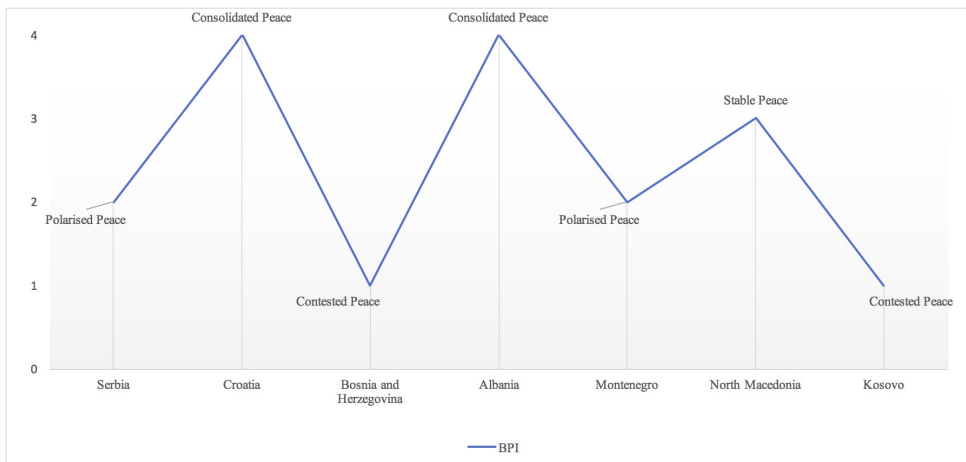


Figure 1: BPI 2022

Balkan Peace Index 2022

The BPI consists of seven domains, with each of them having three or more indicators and sub-indicators (Appendix 1). On the side of ‘negative peace’ are two domains (Political Violence and Fighting Crime), while on the side of ‘positive peace’, there are five domains: Regional and International Relations, State Capacity, Socio-Economic Development, Political Pluralism, and Environmental Sustainability. Out of these seven domains, Western Balkan countries in 2022 performed excellently in only one domain – (lack of) political violence. At the same time, most of them gained poor scores in environmental sustainability and fighting crime and average scores in regional and international relations, state capacity, political pluralism, and socio-economic development. Overall, the region can be considered peaceful in terms of negative peace or the absence of armed violence, but the level of positive peace remains between poor and average.

⁴ For more details about BPI methodology, please see the Balkan Peace Index website: <https://mindproject.ac.rs> (Section BPI)

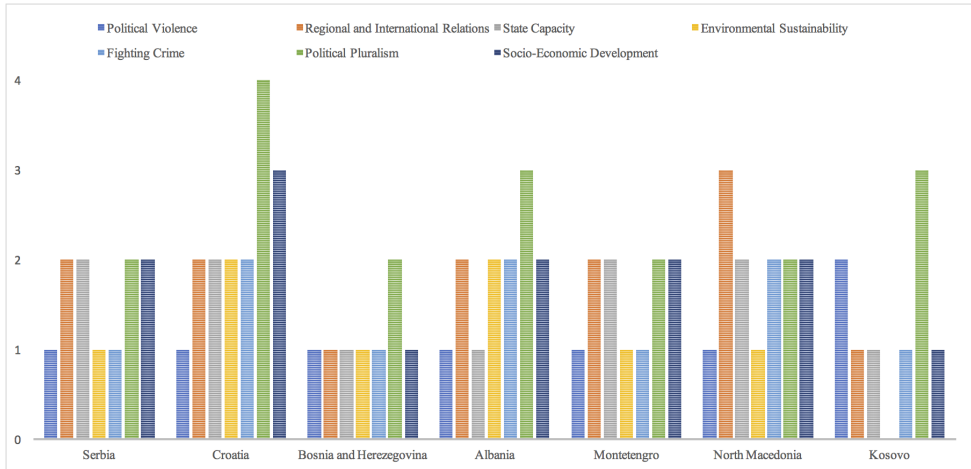


Figure 2: BPI Domains

So, what does Balkan Peace Index 2022 tell us about the peace in the region in the previous year? In a nutshell, the Western Balkans could be regarded as a peaceful region. It has been free of armed conflicts for more than twenty years now. Although still burdened by the 1990s war legacy and political and ethnic conflicts, it displays low levels of political violence. In 2022 only Kosovo was affected by the violent crisis (this continued throughout 2023), while all other countries in the region, including the highly polarised Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), experienced political disputes or non-violent crises. Still, Kosovo and BiH remain neuralgic issues in the region. Both are cases of permanent political crisis since the sovereignty of the former is contested from the outside, while the sovereignty of the latter is disputed from the inside. Clashes between the Albanian majority and Serbian minority in Kosovo, the Serbian and Kosovo government, or between Republika Srpska and the central government in BiH, and Croatian and Bosniak representatives in the Federation of BiH, are the main causes of instability in the region. Although long-lasting crises, these two cases have little potential to escalate into limited or full wars. The main reason is the presence of international peacekeeping forces that can contain the possible spread of violence.

Fighting crime in the Western Balkans remains a severe impediment to regional peace, security, and development. The overall capacities, efforts and results in fighting crime have been estimated as poor in four out of seven countries in the region (BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia), with the rest three (Albania, Croatia, North Macedonia) having only moderate success. While Croatia stands out in its progress, the entire region remains susceptible to all kinds of crimes, from conventional, via organised, to state crime. Post-conflict legacy, political instability, inter-ethnic tensions, and, above all, poverty and lack of employment opportunities keep the region in a vicious circle in which criminality does

not allow any significant progress in the consolidation of the peace and development on the local, national, and regional level.

When it comes to regional cooperation, BPI 2022 ranks it as satisfying, with most regional actors conducting interventions through proxies and foreign policy pressures (such as the imposition of the new election law by the Office of High Representative in BiH). Again, the disputed status of Kosovo, and the interference of Croatia and Serbia in the internal issues of Bosnia and Herzegovina, have limited the potential for the cooperation in the region. A political crisis in Montenegro in 2022 has also caused many turbulences. In addition, the war in Ukraine influenced the complicated ethnoterritorial dynamics in the region, as great powers perceived the entire region through proxy lenses. The most obvious case was the EU and the US's constant pressure on Serbia and BiH to impose sanctions against Russia and attempts to discredit Serbian politics in Kosovo, Montenegro, and BiH as pro-Russian. On the other side, the war created an opportunity for Russia to influence the region's politics and divert attention from its intervention in Ukraine. On the positive side, there were some successful regional initiatives regarding the status of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro and North Macedonia, and the 'Open Balkan' area between Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia.

Another challenge for the peace in the Western Balkans is the state capacity which oscillates from low to medium. The main reasons for such low scores are conflicts in the 1990s and early 2000s, accompanied by a largely failed transition from socialist to capitalist economies. Still, reminiscence of a strong socialist state persists in some state capacity areas (depending on the country in question), thus preventing this domain from being described with only a low benchmark. In particular, Kosovo, BiH, and Albania are estimated to have a low capacity for supporting vulnerable groups, state provisions in education and health, and wealth redistribution (on this, see also socio-economic development domain). When it comes to the capacity of a state to control its territory and to deliver services to its citizens, the situation is worrisome. BiH and Kosovo are the most drastic cases since they host foreign troops on their territory and cannot control it effectively. Serbia is another case of low state control capacity, for it considers Kosovo its integral part and cannot exercise sovereignty over it.⁵ Next to this, other countries of the region also have numerous issues with state border demarcation.

The level of socio-economic development of the region is rated as medium. The economic outlook is mostly rated as intermediate, with one bad result (Kosovo) and only one good (Croatia). Nevertheless, the overall results should also be interpreted through the different contexts in which individual countries operate, from Croatia, which has achieved a high degree of international economic integration (as a member of the European Union and the Eurozone), to countries that are not sufficiently integrated into regional and global financial markets (such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo). Even though

⁵ For the issue of Kosovo state recognition, see the MIND Status of Kosovo database (<https://statusofkosovo.info>).

the inequality-adjusted Human Development Index of most Western Balkans countries' economies can be understood as high, it is still among the lowest in Europe, which is a sign of concern. In addition, corruption in the region is widespread. Except for Croatia and Montenegro, the level of corruption in the region ranges from medium to high and represents an important issue that impacts various aspects of people's daily life. On a more positive note, unemployment in 2022 declined to a historic minimum in the region, which led to significant labour shortages in certain sectors.

Four (BiH, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia) of the seven countries have problems with political pluralism. For Montenegro and North Macedonia, the score is lowered by high political polarisation, which blocked state institutions throughout 2022. All countries are marked by adverse political competition and polarised political culture but vary in degree. Elections are partly free or free but generally unfair, with medium or high levels of political polarisation. The only exception is Croatia, which has a high level of protection for freedom of expression and media, association and assembly, free and fair elections, and a low level of polarisation, which can be largely attributed to its EU membership. In multi-ethnic countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Kosovo, inter-ethnic cleavages spill over to the political sphere. Societies and political organisations remain divided by ethnic lines.

The Western Balkan region is one of Europe's most severely affected by climate change. Notwithstanding Croatia and Albania, all other countries have performed poorly in terms of environmental sustainability. The air quality seems to be at an all-time low, and citizens of the Western Balkans are being exposed to severely unhealthy air pollution, quite more than inhabitants of other parts of Europe. Also, water risks remain high due to more frequent droughts and flash floods and the alarmingly low wastewater treatment, notably in Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania. The entire region experiences significant deforestation tendencies that should be of enormous concern given the importance of forest areas and tree covers in tackling climate change and the preservation of biodiversity levels. Finally, the current tensions surrounding the war in Ukraine, which led to a substantial increase in the prices of electricity and derivatives, also affected the performance of the energy systems in the region.

Conclusion

The experience of the BPI clearly shows how important it is to have a context-aware and locally owned index that is trying to assess the peace by using local knowledge and expertise instead of universalistic logic and exclusively statistical analysis. By looking at universal peace indexes, such as Global Peace Index,⁶ one could get the impression that the region, compared with the other parts of the world, is doing rather well when it comes to

⁶ In the Global Peace Index for the year 2023, countries of the Western Balkans have the following rankings – Croatia (14th place/out of 163), North Macedonia (38th), Albania (40th), Montenegro (45th), BiH (61st), Serbia (65th), Kosovo (70th).

peace and security. However, deeper insight into the region (offered by the BPI) gives a more nuanced picture that shows how severe and protracted problems the region is faced with. It also shows that local researchers are better equipped to understand local realities and to suggest ways forward for problems the region faces. This applies not only to the Western Balkans but to all other regions where local knowledge is subsumed by universal thinking.

Now, once the BPI is finally in place, it is up to the academic community to persuade policymakers in the countries of the Western Balkans about the importance of local knowledge and expertise. Researchers need to clearly show how these findings could be translated into evidence-based policies that will have real and everyday impact on citizens of Western Balkan countries. On the other hand, instead of trying to get points with public opinion when some index shows up with favourable results for a country of the region, policymakers and the policy community should pay attention to local researchers, their expertise and their findings. Instead of looking for public relations solutions, policymakers should put much more effort into formulating policies that will be based on evidence and reliable data. Only by doing this, policies in the countries of the region could have a chance for meaningful change. Otherwise, they will stay what they are today – copy-paste solutions from European legislation with no real prospects for implementation.

MIND project has been very vocal in responding to the criticism regarding the lack of local knowledge in debates and discussions about the Western Balkans. The Balkan Peace Index and the Status of Kosovo Database are good examples of how the criticism could be translated into meaningful alternatives. What remains to be seen is if these alternative instruments (and the others that are yet to come) will be recognised and used by those for whom they are designed. The jury is still out on this matter.

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Appendix 1

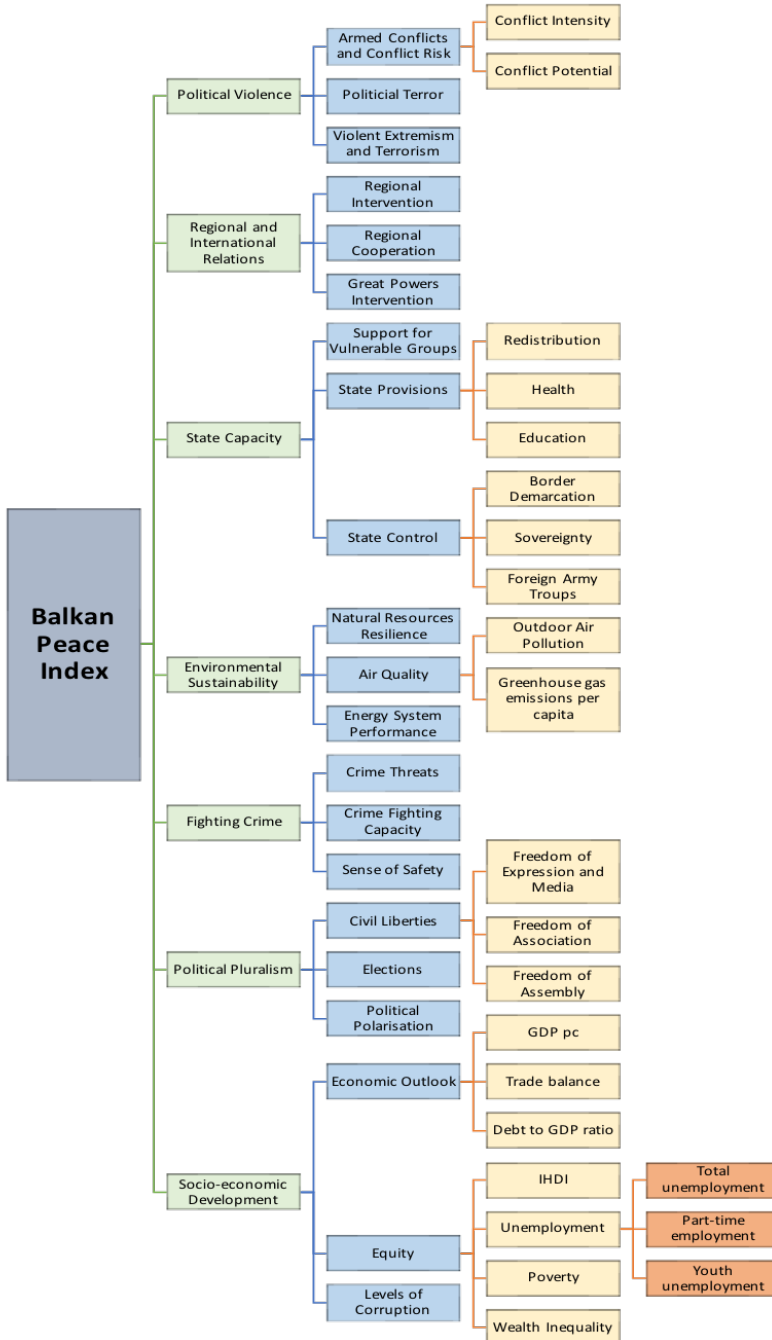


Figure 3: BPI indicators