

Commentary

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The Balkan Peace Index 2023: Monitoring the Regional Peace¹

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Introduction

Building on scholarly inquiries into the characteristics of stable peace and the methodology for determining the stability of established peace (Caplan 2019), the Balkan Peace Index (BPI) presents a measurement framework that addresses the limitations of global peace indices such as the Global Peace Index (GPI) and incorporates the ‘local turn’ in its approach (Löwenheim 2008; Cooley 2015; Nair 2016; Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013; Džuverović 2021). It provides indicators and outcomes accessible to policy analysts and researchers worldwide while also integrating local perspectives. This entails understanding local concerns and incorporating them into the assessment of peace at national and regional levels, thereby enhancing the credibility of the research and its practical relevance.

The BPI is a unique algorithm-based barometer for measuring the level of peacefulness in the Western Balkans. It employs the DEX (DEcision eXpert), a qualitative, hierarchical, and rule-based multi-criteria decision-making method (Trdin and Bohanec 2018), to evaluate seven social-political domains (political violence, regional and international relations, state capacity, environmental sustainability, fighting crime, political pluralism, and socio-economic development) across the seven states and territories: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Kosovo². Based on this comprehensive evaluation, the BPI situates each country on a peace scale ranging from violent conflict to consolidated peace (Figure 1), with 2022 as the year zero (Džuverović 2023; Džuverović et al. 2023).

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2 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.

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Figure 1: *BPI Continuum*

According to the BPI 2023, the Western Balkan region saw a modest decline in peacefulness compared to the previous year (Džuverović et al. 2024). Serbia regressed from polarised peace to contested peace, aligning with Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina in this category. However, there were also positive changes, with Montenegro making significant strides from polarised to stable peace. Meanwhile, North Macedonia, Croatia, and Albania maintained their respective peace classifications from 2022. Specifically, North Macedonia was designated as stable peace, while Croatia and Albania were classified as cases of consolidated peace (Figure 2).

From a global perspective, the Western Balkan region has maintained a commendable level of peace (IEP 2023). Despite the lingering effects of the 1990s conflicts and ongoing political tensions, the region has not experienced a full or limited war in over twenty years. While there has been some political unrest, it has been relatively minimal, with only Serbia and Kosovo facing a minor violent crisis in 2023. The remaining conflicts in the region, such as the deeply divided situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, are categorised as political disputes or non-violent crises (HIIK 2023).

Nevertheless, the issues concerning Kosovo and Bosnia remain highly sensitive subjects. Both territories have endured persistent political unrest, with Kosovo's independence being challenged externally and Bosnia facing internal disputes. The root of instability in the area stems from conflicts between the Albanian majority and Serbian minority in Kosovo, as well as disagreements between the Serbian and Kosovar governments, and the entities and federal government in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Clashes between Serb protesters and KFOR soldiers, Kosovo police and Serb paramilitaries in 2023 have resulted in violent incidents, placing the region on the brink of armed conflict. Despite the longstanding nature of these conflicts, they have not escalated to the critical point of limited or full-scale war, primarily due to the presence of international peacekeeping forces capable of containing the potential spread of violence.

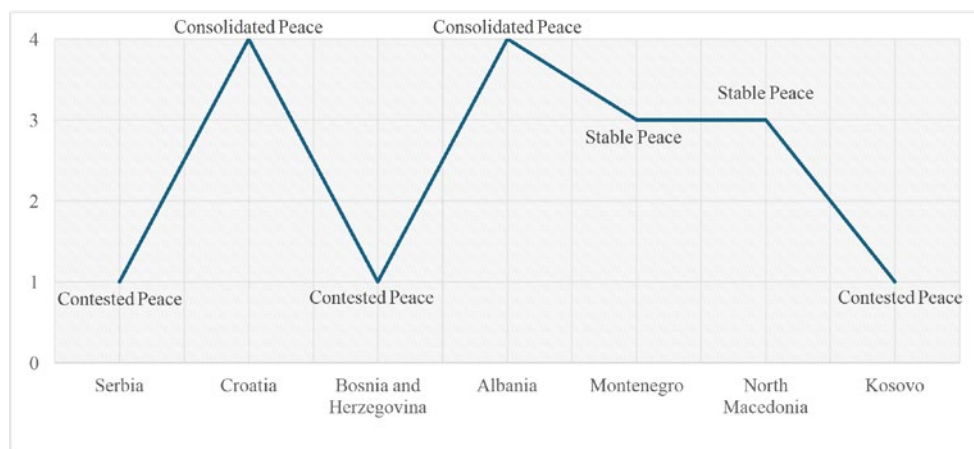


Figure 2: *BPI 2023*

BPI 2023: From Political Violence to Socio-Economic Development

According to the 2023 report (Džuverović et al. 2024), the Western Balkan region maintains relatively low levels of political violence and receives high scores in this domain. However, it has received below-average ratings in environmental sustainability and fighting crime. The region has attained moderate scores in regional and international relations, state capacity, political pluralism, and socio-economic development (Figure 3). While the absence of direct (armed) violence points to a high level of negative peace, the level of positive peace (the absence of indirect violence) in the region remains inadequate.

Although the region mainly remained peaceful in 2023, it exhibited a moderate potential for conflicts. This suggests that existing nonviolent disputes could escalate into violent confrontations, necessitating a cautious approach. Apart from Croatia, all countries in the region struggle with political and ethnic tensions. Power struggles, issues of identity, and territory serve as primary sources of contention. Additionally, instances of indirect violence, such as radicalisation and extremism targeting the governments or minority groups, as well as political oppression of the opposition, further contribute to the complex landscape of peace and conflict in the region.

In 2023, the regional and international relations within the Western Balkans were assessed as fair. Nonetheless, there was an observed escalation in nonviolent interventions executed by both regional actors and major global powers through proxies and foreign policy actions. The enduring territorial conflicts arising from the dissolution of Yugoslavia continue to be significantly impacted by ethnopolitics, contributing to the protraction of the Kosovo secessionist conflict, ethnic tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, territorial claims against neighbouring nations, and disputes pertaining to collective ethnic rights. The conflict in Ukraine has further complicated the ethnic dynamics of the region, leading

to increased involvement of great powers in the Western Balkans, as they see the region as a potential site for a proxy conflict between Russia and the West. On the positive side, regional cooperation remained relatively good in 2023, easing tensions between some countries, such as Croatia and Bosnia, as well as Serbia and Montenegro.

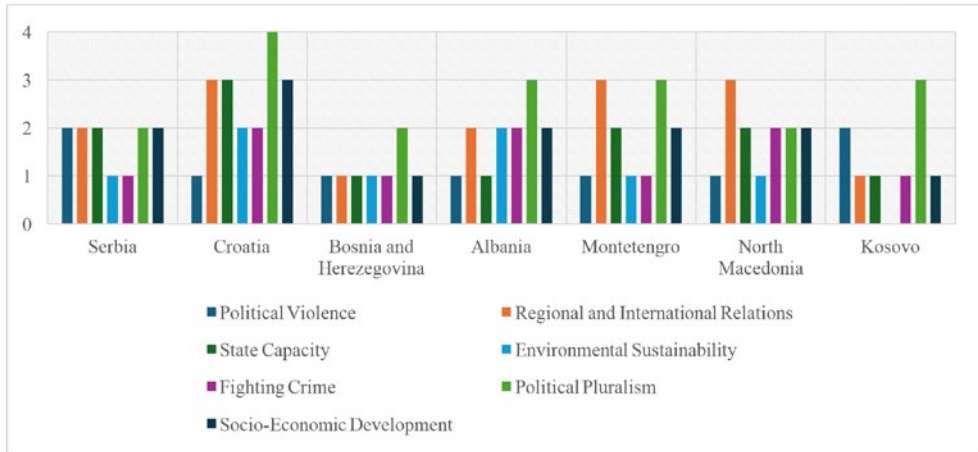


Figure 3: BPI 2023 Domains and Scores

The Western Balkans exhibits varying levels of state capacity, with Croatia standing out as the only country to achieve a high level in 2023. This disparity can be attributed to the lasting effects of the 1990s conflicts and the subsequent transition from socialist to capitalist economies. Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia have followed Croatia's trend with limited success, resulting in medium levels of state capacity. Unlike the other countries, Serbia faces challenges in maintaining state control over the territory of Kosovo, which further undermines its state capacity. Lastly, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Albania show low capacities in supporting vulnerable groups, delivering education and healthcare, implementing redistribution, and asserting control over their respective territories.

In the domain of environmental sustainability, the Western Balkan region has experienced disproportionately severe impacts of climate change compared to other parts of Europe, which represents a serious threat to the region. Except for Croatia and Albania, the region has faced challenges in upholding environmental sustainability standards. Air quality is a significant concern, as are dangerously high pollution levels. The region's high rates of premature deaths can be attributed to an overreliance on the outdated, anachronistic coal industry and inefficient individual combustion plants. Moreover, the recent conflict in Ukraine has resulted in increased electricity and derivative prices, presenting additional challenges to the region's energy systems.

The assessment of the crime situation in the Western Balkans remains consistent with that of 2022. This indicates that various forms of criminal activity in the region continue to

pose a significant challenge to attaining peace, security, and developmental goals. Among the seven countries, Croatia, Albania, and North Macedonia have demonstrated moderate efforts, capabilities, and outcomes in combating crime during the reporting period. The remaining four countries have exhibited poor performance. While some countries have improved specific sub-indicators and indicators, no government has substantially progressed in the past year. While Croatia stands as the best-ranked country in the region, the entire area is susceptible to a wide array of crimes, ranging from conventional to organised and state-sponsored. This susceptibility is rooted in a pervasive cycle perpetuated by enduring consequences of historical conflicts, political instability, ethnic tensions, widespread poverty, and limited employment opportunities. The prevalence of criminal activities within this cycle hinders substantial advancements towards peace and development at local, national, and regional echelons.

The region has shown some advancement in political pluralism compared to the previous year. According to the BPI 2023, six out of seven countries maintained their previous scores, with Montenegro notably improving from a problematic status to a fairly good ranking. This progress can be attributed to reduced political polarisation, stemming from well-managed and free elections that led to appointing a new president and government, ultimately resolving the political crisis in Montenegro. However, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Serbia are still categorised as problematic, while Albania and Kosovo are considered fairly good. Most of these countries continue to grapple with challenges related to freedom of expression (Albania, Bosnia, Serbia, Kosovo), freedom of association and assembly (all except Croatia), political polarisation, and the regularity of elections (especially in Serbia and Bosnia). Notably, Croatia stands out as the only nation in the region to uphold good political pluralism for two consecutive years.

In the realm of socio-economic dynamics, the Western Balkans has recently undergone a double-dip recession characterised by a decrease in economic output, a subsequent modest recovery, and then another downturn. This crisis has laid bare the vulnerabilities of the regional economies, encompassing low levels of economic development, deindustrialisation, rigid labour markets, malfunctioning social protection systems, a substantial informal economy, and elevated levels of corruption. The regional actors have also been impacted by global pandemics, as evidenced by the closure of businesses stemming from reduced domestic and foreign demand for their goods and disruptions or halts in worldwide production chains. These factors have resulted in job losses within both formal and informal economies. The region's overall socio-economic development level has been categorised as medium. This assessment is based on the average values of socio-economic development across four regional actors (Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia), with two registering poor results (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo) and only one achieving a high outcome (Croatia). While the BPI 2023 has shown relatively satisfying results in most domains, it is important to note that three countries and territories are currently experiencing a state of contested peace (Höglund and Kovacs 2010). This state of peace is characterised by low-intensity conflict, distrust, propaganda, ideological competition, political terror, societal radicalisation, and sporadic violent incidents. In

contested peace, at least one party involved is dissatisfied with the current situation and challenges the existing political order and peace arrangement. In the case of Serbia and Kosovo, the conflicting sides have differing views on the current political order. Serbia considers Kosovo part of its territory, a view rejected by the Kosovo government and other states that recognise its independence. On the other hand, the Albanian side sees Kosovo as an independent state, a stance opposed by Serbia and the Serbian minority in Kosovo. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the secessionist government of the Republic of Srpska is the leading actor challenging the current status quo. Given the vulnerability of peace to various external and internal pressures in these cases, further peace negotiations, reconciliation, and confidence-building are necessary.

Conclusion

The BPI exhibits apparent advantages compared to global indices/barometers such as the GPI and Conflict Barometer (CB). For instance, according to the GPI and CB, the Western Balkans is perceived as a highly peaceful region affected only by political disputes and non-violent incidents (IEP 2023; HIIK 2023). While this may hold true from a global standpoint, the absence of proper contextualisation and local knowledge could lead to erroneous conclusions. The BPI, in contrast, offers contextual and in-depth knowledge, shedding light on relatively high or medium levels of conflict potential and the vulnerability of peace arrangements in the region.

Nonetheless, this knowledge is both quantitative and qualitative, trying to compromise between the numerical representation of a complex phenomenon such as peace and its in-depth interpretation in a narrative form. That is to say that BPI produces results simple enough to be utilised in different policy-related processes but still meaningful in a given context, focused on outcomes and impacts rather than just inputs, and scientifically rigorous. Furthermore, BPI aims to avoid the ethical issues commonly associated with the GPI and other global indices. This includes preventing the “naming and shaming” of lower-ranked entities and the stigmatisation of “deviant” states or groups. The BPI is not just another set of indicators produced by the global North to be applied to the global South. It is provided by the locals for the locals, as well as for anyone interested in the Western Balkan region.

It is worth noting that the BPI contributes to the ongoing debates about the concept of peace, as it is still considered a contested term. Instead of simplifying peace into merely negative and positive categories, the BPI views peace as a continuum rather than an entity. It introduces a new peace scale with violent conflict at one end and consolidated peace at the other, using empirical ‘anchor cases’ to define different states of peace. This peace continuum and peace proxies (domains and indicators) of the BPI reflect the specific dynamics of the Western Balkans, including the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the secessionist conflict between Serbia and Kosovo, ‘continuation of war by other means’ in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and other particularities of the region.

As one of the few peace indices in the world and the only peace index in the Western Balkans, the BPI represents an inevitable source of data for both policymakers and researchers interested in the sustainability of peace in the region. Furthermore, by incorporating various social and political domains, such as domestic and foreign politics, economic development, statebuilding, and environmental sustainability, this index transcends the boundaries of peace research, welcoming scholars from diverse academic fields.

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