



## The Changing Relations Between Russia and Western Balkans

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Received: 17 January 2026 / Revised: 24 February 2026 / Accepted: 7 March 2026 / Published: 25 March 2026  
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Doi: 10.56345/ijrdv13n127

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### Abstract

*We have examined Russian intervention and how it has affected Western Balkans over three decades. We use secondary literature that describes the different areas of Russian influence in each country of the region. To gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and security dilemmas in the Western Balkans and how they are perceived by young people in particular, we aim first to measure the perception that exists regarding the Russia-Serbia relationship and the risks it produces in terms of destabilizing the Western Balkans. Second, we aim to measure how high the level of trust is in strategic partnerships with the EU, the US and NATO and how these relationships affect the stabilization of the region and its Euro-Atlantic future. This study provides an additional perspective on the processes in the Western Balkans through qualitative data and analysis. The quantitative analysis is based on a questionnaire designed by the authors that measures the perception of educated young people, specifically Albanian students, regarding Russian influence. The findings show that Russia is seen as an actor seeking to reposition itself geopolitically in the Western Balkans region. Its strategy, which includes not only the invasion of Ukraine, but also much more control over the Western Balkans region, is viewed with concern by young people. They assess that the Western Balkans still experiences tension and destabilization of integration processes in different parts of it. As a result, the security and stability of the region are seen as linked to the consolidation of a clear Euro-Atlantic perspective and the strengthening of the partnership with the SJBA. The recommendations can help to more clearly address the policy towards stability in the region, by regenerating hope and trust.*

**Keywords:** Western Balkans, instability, ethnic conflicts, international involvement, integration processes

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### 1. Introduction

The Western Balkans has been considered a region where the interests of Europe, the US, Russia and China have historically intersected. The issue of regional stability has become an imperative of the time, given Russia's aggressive actions against Ukraine.

Russia has been and remains the number 1 threat to the Balkans. Recent events and Russian interests in the Western Balkans require a substantive analysis to clarify the progress of processes and challenges. Efforts to incite disorder and chaos in Western democracies, and in particular in countries that are oriented towards the West or the EU, such as Albania, Kosovo or other countries such as Montenegro, Macedonia but also Serbia itself, leave us to understand that pan-Slavic goals are acting like dark clouds in the Balkans. Russia's claims to appear as a strategic competitor in the region remain the main threat to a stable Euro-Atlantic environment in this part, but also beyond. It continues its malign influence in Europe and beyond, especially in the area where it believes it should have greater influence along the line

where the US has invested heavily to create European security.

If we see the behavior of the great powers in the light of the realist theory in international relations, geopolitical interests are today more than ever revitalized and are lived out through the influence that the latter exercise in areas such as the Western Balkans, taking advantage of political, historical or economic ties. For decades, Russia has penetrated the region through these connections, seeking to strengthen its influence and at the same time weaken the Euro-Atlantic perspective of these countries.

Russian interventions throughout the Balkans are mainly being used in three forms: using the influence of corruption, dirty money to influence politics, and financing political parties, in such a way that even incited protesters are paid. Another form is also obtaining illegal information, to place in public opinion and manipulate them, especially by disinformation on social networks, traditional media, where they can.

Another perspective is obtained if we use a liberal approach. In this context, the EU, NATO and the United States of America are valued as actors that have been contributing to the stabilization and democratization of the Western Balkans for more than three decades through common security platforms, the consolidation of institutions and democratic standards and values.

The article examines Russian intervention, its intensity and further impact, and the ways in which the region is responding. Understanding the inherent complexity of these interests, this analysis will emphasize economic ties, and not only.

## 2. Literature Review

Studies show that the perspectives on international, regional and national security have changed with the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Ahić, Hodžić, 2022: 67). The new geopolitical era seems to have affected the Western Balkans too. The region is riviving the old conflicts undermining regional relations and the EU integration process of many candidate countries. Russia's interest to the region is based on a document called the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, 2013 (Hrabová, 2016 : 41). The opportunity for membership within the European Union has provided for three decades an incentive for reforms in the Western Balkans. But enlargement has dramatically dropped the list of EU priorities, while the EU is facing a significant number of internal and external challenges in a changing of international relations context and the needs to change itself.

The conflict in Ukraine may change that calculus. Referring to old alliances like Serbia, Jagiello underlines that the presence of Russian influence in select Balkan states is causing significant turmoil and disruption (Boguslaw Jagiello, 2021). In the same line, other authors like McBride, define that Moscow aims to stoke tensions in the region by amplifying tensions between ethnic and religious groups too (McBride, 2022). As a result of blocking UN recognition of Kosovo's independence, Russia positions itself as supporter of the territorial integrity of Serbia.

The Kremlin is using connections in the Western Balkans to advance its agenda, which seeks to primarily align the interests of the European Union and NATO. Serbian leaders of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Serbia, are widely considered to be Russia's local allies in the region.

Russia is undermining the NATO membership for the countries in the region. The Russians openly opposed Montenegro joining NATO, threatening unspecified retaliation if it did so, which in fact it did in 2017 (Sestanovich, 2023).

Over the years, Russia has tried to undermine the region's integration into NATO, being behind clandestine operations in the countries of the Western Balkans, i.e., Montenegro and North Macedonia, or influencing election results (Bosnia and Herzegovina) (Stanicek and Caprile, 2023). Looking through to Russia's strategy in the Western Balkans, Asya Metodjeva (2019) underlines that Russia has sought to build a network of narrative proxies—domestic state and non-state information agents willingly promoting its interests throughout the region (Metodjeva, 2019).

With the invasion of Ukraine, there is a risk that Russia will use the existing tensions in the Western Balkans to destabilize the region (Ahić, Hodžić, 2022: 69).

IntelliNews, citing a new report from Clingendael, the Netherlands Institute for International Relations, emphasized that Russia sees the region as a tool that can be used to project its status as a great power on the one hand, while on the other to deter the West and sow the seeds of unrest (IntelliNews, 2023).

In this context, the European Parliament in 2022 through a resolution expressed "great concern regarding the Russian Federation's continued efforts to destabilize the Western Balkan countries and interfere in their democratic processes" (Civil.Today, 2022).

Lisen Bashkurti, an Albanian diplomat, speaking for Radio Free Europe, declared that the influence on the region is an important element of Russia's geopolitics (Balkanweb, 2019).

Despite all the efforts, Russia lacks the power to roll back EU and NATO influence in the region (Dimitar Bechet and Branislav Radelji, 2018).

Der Spiegel, referring to EU parliamentarian Elmar Brok points out that "Putin's goal is to exert so much pressure on Balkan states that they either back away from EU membership or that, once they become members, influence EU resolutions in a pro-Russian manner" (Der Spiegel, November 2014).

In these conditions for the EU it is crucial to transform the enlargement agenda being more persistently in order to advance the region (Bechev, 2015). Researchers like Galeotti (2018) are very optimistic because of the fact that Russia cannot match the EU in terms of economic relations and ties with the region (Galeotti, 2018).

The European Union's partnership with the Western Balkans has been based on support for the region's stabilization through partnership, integration and ultimately accession (Szczërba, 2022). It structures its cooperation with the region to promote effective political and economic governance, adherence to the rule of law, the promotion of media freedom and a vibrant and autonomous civil society (European External Action, 2022).

In the preliminary draft report of NATO Parliamentary Assembly in 28 March 2022, on Russia's war on Ukraine and the Western Balkans challenges it is underlined concern about the region's fragility, including growing vulnerability to penetration by Russia and China (Szczërba, 2022).

Indeed, in light of new developments, enlargement is once again being placed at the center of discussions about the future of the region. At an EU summit in May 2020, European leaders gave "unwavering support" for the eventual accession of the six Western Balkan countries and offered additional financial support to the candidate countries (Ibid).

This strategy will consolidate the European Union and create the premises for the adoption of an agreement that would ensure a new government.

On the security front, the EU is working to stabilize the situation in BiH increasing the presence of the international police as provision of more effective support to the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina and ensuring a safe and stable situation. The EU also increased the police presence in Kosovo too (Ahić, Hodžić, 2022: 76).

The war in Ukraine in 2022 brought the attention of the media and EU governments and institutions back to the Western Balkans after years of marginalization, with references to the Western Balkans reappearing in European Council declarations in March 2022. With the launch of a new 'Enlargement Package' 24 (12 October 2022) and the EU Western Balkans summit held in Tirana (December 2022) calling for completion of the enlargement process, a plethora of declarations by EU representatives seemed to herald new momentum in EU policy on the Western Balkans (Benedetto Zaccaria, 2024:82).

Countries of the region should interact more with the public of the EU member states to support a positive image of their countries. The open-door policy of the EU and NATO for new members into a community is an important condition for their feeling of belonging and the creation of a European identity for the SEE countries (Judy Dempsey, 2019).

### **3. Research Aim and Objectives**

We have examined the Russian intervention and how it has affected the region over three decades, making a comparison with the Euro-Atlantic processes in all six countries.

It enables a deeper understanding of the Western Balkans challenges and security dilemmas and how they are perceived by people. We use secondary literature that describes the different areas of Russian influence in each country of the region.

Policy recommendations can help to address more clearly the policy towards stability in the region, regenerating hope and confidence.

#### *3.1 Objectives*

To measure the perception that exists about the Russia-Serbia relationship and the risks it produces in terms of destabilizing the Western Balkans

To understand how high the level of trust is in strategic partnerships with the EU, the US and NATO and how these relationships affect the stabilization of the region and its Euro-Atlantic future.

### 3.2 *Research questions*

Are there premises for the destabilization of the Western Balkans?

Is the presence of a power like Russia in the region seen as a cause for new conflicts?

How important is the role of NATO, the US and the EU in guaranteeing peace and stabilizing the region?

### 3.3 *Hypothesis*

Based on the realist and liberal theory of international relations, this study tests the following hypotheses:

H1 The growing influence of Russia in the Western Balkans constitutes a credible cause and real possibility for the destabilization of the Western Balkans.

H2: Students who see the role of NATO, the US and the EU as crucial and irreplaceable perceive a lower degree of risk for the incitement of conflicts in the region.

Independent variable 1: Perception of Russian influence

(measured through Likert questions on the possibility of conflict in the Western Balkans)

Independent variable 2: Perception of the role of NATO and the US

(measured through Likert questions on security, stability and conflict prevention)

The research hypotheses are tested through the analysis of data collected from the questionnaire with 171 students.

H1 is directly related to Realism

H 2 tests the stabilizing effect of Western actors

H1 and H2 are tested through correlational analysis

### 3.4 *Theoretical contribution*

Testing these hypotheses contributes to the theoretical debate on great power competition in the Western Balkans. The findings are expected to support realist assumptions about rivalry and uncertainty, while at the same time highlighting the importance of liberal security institutions in reducing the perception of conflict.

## 4. **Methodology**

Evaluation of the risk of a possible conflict in the region; Attitudes towards the role of NATO and the US in guaranteeing regional security.

The article uses quantitative methods with descriptive analytical approaches in order to recognize and assess the attitudes of students with different social, cultural and educational backgrounds, reflecting the diversity of the Albanian university reality on the relations of the Western Balkans with major powers and how much and how the influence of these latter indicates the present and future of regional stability.

The quantitative approach has served for a more systematic collection of information and for the ease of obtaining the models that prevail in a certain period.

This approach enabled the identification of main trends in students' perceptions. The main instrument used in this study is a structured questionnaire with closed questions, designed in accordance with the study objectives and the existing literature in the field of international relations, particularly on regional security, the influence of great powers and Russia-West relations.

No identifying information was collected and the data were used for academic purposes only.

### 4.1 *Study population and sample*

171 students participated in this questionnaire. The students are from the political science, history and diplomacy profiles. They were selected in both master and bachelor study cycles in order to provide the most valuable contribution.

The data were collected using a questionnaire, which was physically distributed to students at two universities in Albania. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous.

The sample is characterized by:

- gender diversity,

- students from urban and rural areas,
- different social, cultural and educational backgrounds.

The questionnaire includes several issues:

Assessment of a possible risk of new conflicts in the Western Balkans

Destabilization brought about by the presence of Russia in the region

Trust in NATO and the US for the Euro-Atlantic leadership of the Region

The collected data were analyzed through descriptive statistical analysis. This approach has enabled the identification of the main trends in the perceptions of the students.

The main instrument used in this study is a structured questionnaire with closed questions, designed in accordance with the objectives of the study and the existing literature in the field of international relations, especially on regional security, the influence of great powers and Russia-West relations.

Limitations of the Study

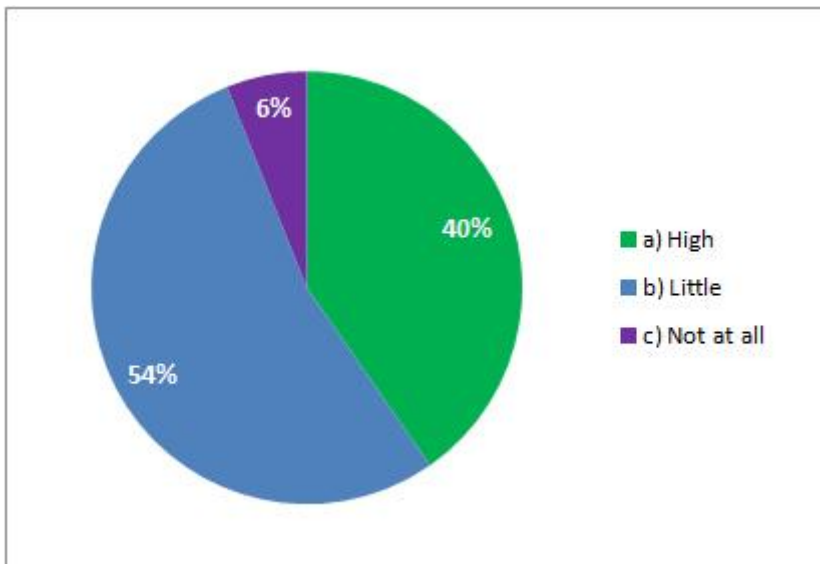
Despite the valuable data, the study presents several limitations. The respondents belong to only one country in the region. The respondents are of one age group. The survey period may have influenced respondents due to the intensity of developments in the international arena.

## 5. Findings and Discussion

We addressed the questions to a sample of 171 students. Students study in the first cycle of bachelor's studies and in the second cycle of studies, masters. With the aim of geographical expansion of the answers, we addressed the students of the University of Tirana and the Aleksander Moisiu University, Durres.

We asked the students: How many possibilities are there for a new conflict?

Even though most of the respondents value the situation in the region as safe, a high percentage of them fear about the future and the conflicts that could spread in the region. (Figure 1)



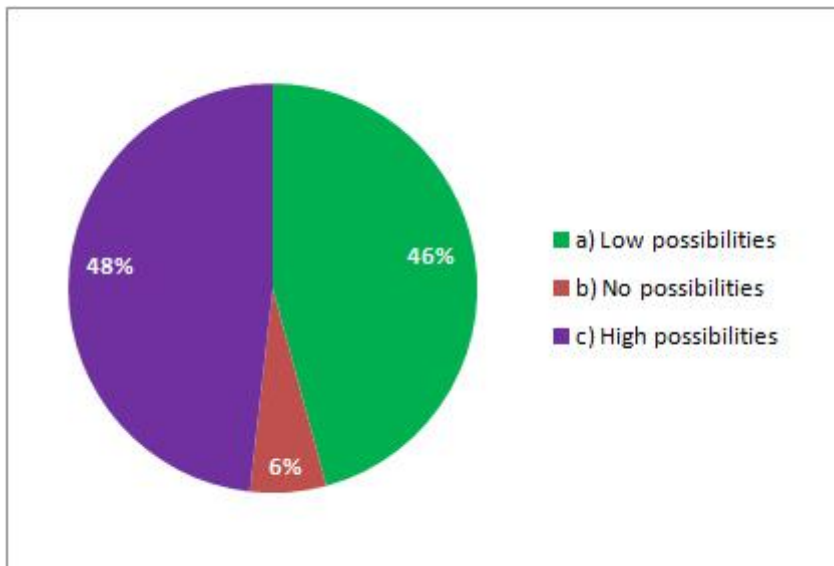
**Figure 1:** Comparison of options on the possibility of the region to be involved in new conflicts

The difficult Kosovo-Serbia relationship, the ethnic problems that characterize North Macedonia and the lack of stability that undermines the consolidation of the state of BiH are more than enough reasons to see the expansion of the conflict in the region as possible.

On the other hand, we see that only 6% of them consider the region stable and consolidated. The number of young people leaving their countries towards Western Europe is increasing. Albania is one of the countries in the region that is

suffering from such a phenomenon. All this is due to the fact that it seems that the political class itself has chosen the means to prolong the difficult period of transition (Marku, Teqja, 2023:252). For the most, we see that well educated people are considering to live abroad since they believe that their countries doesn't offer any stability or a bright perspective for them and their families too.

When asked: **How many opportunities does Russia have through Serbia to destabilize the region and have a new war in the region?** 46% responded with low possibilities and 48% responded with high possibilities, thus showing a lot of doubts about the future of the region's stability. (Figure 2)

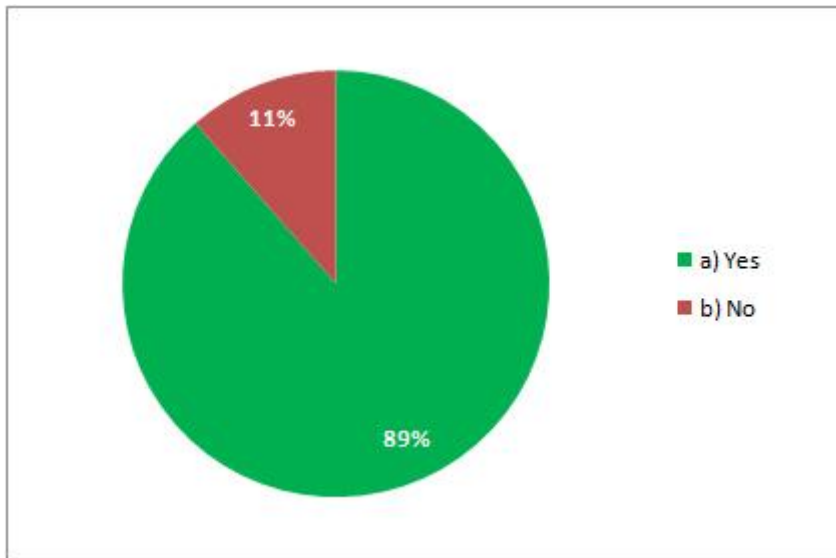


**Figure 2:** The possibilities of Russian influence to destabilize the region

The answers to the second question consolidate even more the attitude of the young people, clearly expressed in the determination of the answers to the first question. In fact, their skeptical attitude deepens even more in these answers. The weakening of Western attention to the Balkans, or even worse, the tolerance of crises, even if latent, creates a favorable ground for the penetration of Moscow and the strengthening of its influence in the region.

However, this attitude is also influenced by the new geopolitical situation and the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the fears that this conflict produces in the direction of expansion in other regions.

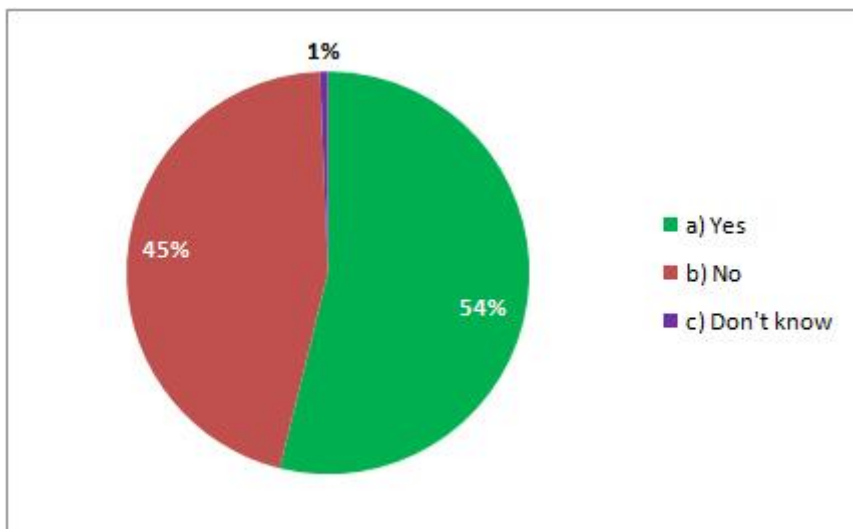
**Do you think the Russia-Serbia partnership endangers Kosovo? This question measures** the perception of the Russian, Serbian partnership as a real threat for Kosovo. A great number of responders, 89%, found this alliance dangerous for Kosovo and its future. (Figure 3).



**Figure 3** Perception of the Russian-Serbian partnership as a danger for Kosovo

The reason why this large number of respondents think so is mostly related to two factors: First, the proven interests of Russia in the region; secondly, with Serbia's strong ties with Russia and the continuous support that the latter has shown in relation to the clear determination against the state of Kosovo.

And finally, we see hope about the prospect of a future of the region, when to the question: **Is NATO and the strategic partnership with the USA enough to guarantee security in the region?** 54% of the responders have answered with optimism. (Figure 4).



**Figure 4** The level of trust in NATO and the USA as guarantors of security in the WB

As a result, we can conclude that respondents see the new geopolitical development and their impact in the region with a

real preoccupation. But despite the worries about the region's fragility, NATO's presence in the Western Balkans is a precept like a guarantee for a region's security and stability.

Dynamism of Euro-Atlantic integration processes is crucial for the future of the countries. The stabilization of the region is the key word of the cooperation between the European Union and the Western Balkans.

On this purpose, EU more determined than ever, is taking steps to faster the European future of the region. The project of membership in the EU, increases the premises for extinguishing conflicts over borders in the region.

## 6. Conclusions

The students in this questionnaire reacted in direct proportion to the developments in the international arena. They clearly read the situation in the Western Balkans as well, as long as they perceive Russia as a power with interests in this region. Understandably, the fact that the surveyed students mostly have a profile in political science, international relations, history or communication helps in the broader and deeper understanding of the relationships that the great powers seek to build with the region at a time when rapid geopolitical developments speak of a strong return to realist politics.

To a considerable extent, the respondents are concerned about the growing influence of Russia in the countries of the region through political and economic ties or influences.

This concern is also growing due to the fact that some conflicts in the region are not decreasing or even closing, exposing it to the risks of their further expansion.

On the other hand, the findings of the questionnaire also speak of some hopeful indicators related to a clear perspective inextricably linked to coexistence in structures such as the EU and NATO, which guarantee economic prosperity and security in the region.

This liberal approach pushes the region to work through common platforms with these institutions as the only way to prevent falling into chaos.

This study shows that through realist and liberal theories in international relations we can analyze the trends of the region's relations with world powers and vice versa.

A more extensive analysis in other social groups, as well as a deeper one, referring to each country in the Western Balkans would allow us for a more complete framework of these relations.

## 7. Recommendations

The EU should strengthen ties with the countries of the region. European policies should be more determined and concrete with the countries of the Western Balkans. The integration processes of these countries must be accelerated. The more determined and supportive European policies are in this direction, the more enthusiastic and dedicated the countries of the region will be in fulfilling the criteria and standards for membership.

Euroscepticism on the one hand would increase the disappointment of these countries towards the EU and on the other hand would make it easier for powers like Russia to penetrate the region.

As the post-communist history of these countries has shown, the presence of the US in the region is a key factor in increasing stability, but also in building more democratic societies in all the countries of the Western Balkans. Therefore, this contribution should continue to be present, especially in strengthening democratic institutions.

Another crucial factor for the region is the contribution and presence of NATO as a continuous guarantee of stability and peace even in areas of the region where ethnic conflicts still fester and are fueled by actors outside the region who try every day to destabilize the latter in all forms and ways.

Membership and cooperation with NATO undoubtedly remains decisive for the countries of the region in their efforts to withstand external pressure.

Increasing cooperation between the countries of the Western Balkans through common platforms, starting from the need for economic cooperation to the fight against terrorism, trafficking, etc., should be and remain the prerogative of the day for these countries.

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