

MESSY DIPLOMACY: **WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES FACING THE GAZA CONFLICT**

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BCSP Belgrade Centre
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The ongoing war that Israel is waging in Gaza against Hamas is one of the most consequential conflicts with serious political implications worldwide. The Gaza conflict has already diverted the world's attention from what has been the most dominant international conflict in the past year and a half: the Russian invasion of Ukraine.¹ Many countries in the Western Balkans are conflicted about what diplomatic stance to take on the Gaza war, primarily whether they should support Israel or Palestine or remain neutral since their decision-making will have to balance their domestic public, as well as their ties with Israel, Muslim countries and, most importantly, the US and the EU.

The vote taken on October 26 in the UN General Assembly (hereinafter: UNGA) on the resolution that called for a truce between Israel and Hamas with a strong emphasis on humanitarian factors demonstrated how conflicted the Western Balkan countries were on the current conflict in Gaza.

The pattern of division among the Western Balkan countries on this occasion somewhat diverges from the votes cast in different UN fora in the past decade. Whereas Albania and North Macedonia have continued with their previous positions when it comes to their foreign policy towards the conflict in the Middle East, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia have displayed an interesting change.

Balkan Diplomacy on Israel and Palestine is Always Messy – Brief History of Recent UN Votes²

The conflict in Gaza is already imposing a political challenge for the Western Balkan countries in terms of how they will diplomatically assert themselves regarding the ongoing war. The countries in question take into consideration their relations with the Islamic world, Israel, the EU, the US, and, to a limited extent, their domestic public. On October 26, the UN General Assembly voted on the so-called “Gaza resolution”, calling for an “immediate, durable and sustained humanitarian truce” between Israeli forces and Hamas militants in Gaza. The vote reveals an intriguing shift in the Middle East policies of the Western Balkans states. Whereas Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro voted along with the majority in the UN for the resolution, Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia abstained. How the candidate countries voted to an extent followed the changing pattern of the vote of the EU member states and was a consequence of the lack of unity among them. Out of 27 member states, eight voted for the resolution, four voted against it, and 15 abstained.³

A look into the UNGA or UNESCO votes of the Western Balkan and EU countries in the last decade (see the table below) exemplifies the aforementioned. Except for the votes threatening to challenge the idea of the two-state solution in the Middle East Peace Process (December 2017 and November 2023 UNGA resolutions), other votes show the malleability of individual Western Balkans countries’ vote.

EU+WB countries	Yes	No	Abstained
UNESCO General Conference vote to admit Palestine as a full member on 31 October 2011	Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta, Serbia , Slovenia and Spain. (11 +1)	Czech Republic, Germany, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Sweden (5)	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina , Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Montenegro , Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia and North Macedonia . (11 +4)
UNGA Resolution 67/19 of 29 November 2012 upgrading Palestine to non-member observer state status in the UNGA	Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal, Serbia , Spain and Sweden. (14 +1)	Czech Republic (1)	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina , Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro , Netherlands, North Macedonia , Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. (12 + 4)

UNGA Resolution 10/19 of 21 December 2017 declaring the status of Jerusalem as Israel's capital as "null and void"	Albania , Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro , the Netherlands, North Macedonia , Portugal, Serbia , Slovakia, Slovenia and Sweden. (20 +4)	0	Bosnia and Herzegovina , Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Romania. (7 + 1)
UNGA Resolution 77/247 of 30 December 2022 requesting the International Court of Justice an advisory opinion on the legal consequences arising from the policies and practices of Israel in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem.	Belgium, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Portugal and Slovenia. (7)	Albania , Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania and Romania. (9 + 1)	Bosnia and Herzegovina , Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Greece, Latvia, Montenegro , the Netherlands, Serbia , Slovakia, Spain and Sweden. (11 + 3) North Macedonia did not vote
UNGA Resolution of 13 June 2018 criticising the Israeli response to the 2018 Gaza border protests 10/20	Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina , Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland, Luxemburg, Malta, Montenegro , Portugal, Serbia , Slovenia, Spain and Sweden. (12 + 3)	0	Albania , Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and North Macedonia . (15 + 2)
26 October 2023 UNGA Gaza Resolution 10/21	Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina , France, Ireland, Luxemburg, Malta, Montenegro , Portugal, Slovenia, and Spain. (8 + 2)	Austria, Croatia, Hungary and the Czech Republic. (4)	Albania , Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, North Macedonia , Poland, Romania, Serbia , Slovakia and Sweden. (15 + 3)

9 November 2023 UNGA Israeli settlements Resolution A/C.4/78/L.15	Albania , Austria, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina , Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxemburg, Malta, Montenegro , the Netherlands, North Macedonia , Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia , Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden. (25 + 5)	Hungary. (1)	Czech Republic. (1)
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(*Significant UNGA and other UN votes on Israel-Palestine in recent history)

Bosnia and Herzegovina – Eternally Divided

Bosnia and Herzegovina remains divided between the Serbian entity, Republika Srpska, and the central government in Sarajevo, which the Bosniaks dominate. Whereas Bosniak Muslim public opinion tends to be supportive of the Palestinian cause, thus influencing the foreign policy, the question is less politically salient amongst the Bosnian Croats and Serbs. Still, their political elite tends to be more pro-Israel. Unsurprisingly, having in mind the extent to which the Bosniak voters overwhelmingly support the Palestinian side in the conflict, Bosnia and Herzegovina voted for the UNGA resolution. Yet, the vote did not account for the strongly pro-Israeli positions of the ruling elite in the Republika Srpska or the Croats from BiH.⁴

In the last several years, it has become customary that to whichever ethnic group the BiH ambassador to the UN in New York gives allegiance to, it is the political preferences of that ethnic group that get the upper hand when taking positions in the UN.⁵ Like with previous UNGA resolutions on Ukraine, in this case, the position of the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the UN ambassador was to support the Resolution. A creative interpretation to invoke previously adopted policies was employed to avoid asking the collective Presidency for approval for each specific vote at the UN.⁶

Like with previous UNGA resolutions condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine, BiH's vote in the UN did not follow the political wishes of the ruling elite in the Serbian entity. However, it is interesting that in the case of the October 2023 Gaza Resolution, BiH voted for a Resolution alongside with Russia, contrary to the wishes of the US that remained with the UNGA minority voting against the resolution.

This development of voting “against” the US is arguably the most interesting one regarding BiH. In 2011, on the occasion of the UN Security Council vote on the admissibility of the Palestinian request to become a Member State of the UN, the BiH vote was decisive in putting Palestine’s request off.⁷ Palestine needed 9 out of a total of 15 in the UNSC. This majority would force the US to veto the recognition of Palestine as a full member of the UN. On that occasion, even though the Bosniak member of the collective Presidency supported the Palestinian UN membership, the lack of consensus in the collective Presidency prevented BiH from supporting Palestine’s bid.⁸ The constitutional requirement of unanimity in the Presidency provided a convenient excuse (Bosnian Serbs sided with Israël) for Sarajevo to accommodate the Palestinians and the US and Israel simultaneously. Consequently, Palestine’s request got eight votes, falling short of the BiH’s support.

In reaction to the latest UNGA Gaza vote, the Serbian member of the Presidency, Željka Cvijanović, from Milorad Dodik’s party, accused the Foreign Ministry in Sarajevo of bypassing BiH’s constitutional order that gives the collective Presidency the power to define the country’s foreign policy.⁹ This is not the first time that the BiH Presidency has not been able to reach a consensus over the conflict in the Middle East. For the past twelve years, Israel has emerged as one of the main diplomatic backers of the Republika Srpska.¹⁰ After a 2011 visit of the then Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman to the Republika Srpska, the Serbian entity vetoed a state-level decision to support a Palestinian statehood bid in the UN.¹¹ As a sign of solidarity with Israel after the terror attacks of 7 October 2023, the palace of the President of the Republika Srpska was lit in the colours of the Israeli flag.¹² As the conflict progressed, Milorad Dodik made a more cautious statement condemning Hamas’s attack but warned about Palestinian civilian casualties. However, Dodik also used the opportunity to take a swing at the US for what he considered its policy of imposing a centralised Bosnian state.¹³ Israel and Palestine will remain another issue of division in Bosnian politics.

Montenegro – outgoing Prime Minister Abazović Makes the Call

In the case of Montenegro, relations with the EU with a small influx of domestic politics have been a decisive factor in shaping the country's reaction to the Gaza conflict. Not having a clear unanimous or overwhelming position of the EU member states which it could easily follow, Montenegro was left in an uncomfortable position to take sides on the occasion of the 2023 "Gaza Resolution". Previously, at the time of the 2012 UNGA Resolution 67/19 upgrading Palestine to non-member observer state status in the UNGA, the 2011 UNESCO vote on Palestine's membership in the organisation, or the 2022 UNGA ICJ resolution, Podgorica abstained from the vote. This time, it voted for the "Gaza Resolution" opposed by the US and Israel. Whereas the professional diplomats would have probably continued with the old practice and opted for abstention, the outgoing Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dritan Abazović, supported the yes vote. Excluded from the new coalition government and not having to account for the country's relations with the US and other international actors, Abazović prioritised his personal political sensibilities or the attitudes of his political base concerned over the humanitarian disaster in Gaza.¹⁴

Serbia – Israel Opening the Door to the White House

Serbian diplomacy is facing a new challenge as Serbia traditionally takes pride in being on friendly terms with both Israelis and Palestinians. In 2012, Serbia was the only Western Balkan country that voted in favour of the Palestinian bid for non-member observer status in the UN.¹⁵ However, Serbian leadership has become increasingly aware of the ability of Israel and its pressure groups in the US to open the door for Serbia to the White House, particularly in the case of Republican administrations. In March 2020, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić was a guest speaker at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) annual conference, the US' most powerful Israeli lobby group.¹⁶ In September 2020, as part of the failed re-election bid, Donald Trump's administration mediated an economic normalisation agreement between Serbia and Kosovo that was deliberately linked with Trump's Middle Eastern policies. The agreement stipulated that Serbia move its embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and designate Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation, while Kosovo agreed to the mutual recognition with Israel, followed by the opening of an embassy in Jerusalem.¹⁷ Serbia thought these were sacrifices worth making if that meant an alliance with the Trump administration and the US. The electoral loss of Donald Trump made these sacrifices futile, and Serbia decided finally not to move its embassy to Jerusalem, to avoid complicating relations with the Islamic world, with Serbo-Israeli relations being damaged over the latter's recognition of Kosovo.¹⁸ Moreover, taking into account the EU split over the Gaza conflict and a realisation that support for Israel would anger the Arab countries, including numerous Kosovo non-recognisers, Serbia has maintained its balanced position towards the conflict in the Middle East.

Still, Serbia has not fully given up on ties with Israel. In 2021, the Serbian Chamber of Commerce opened its innovation and trade office in Jerusalem.¹⁹ In the wake of Hamas's attacks, Jahel Vilan, Israel's ambassador to Serbia, called on Serbia's tennis player Novak Đoković to help release an Israeli boy, Đoković's fan, held hostage by Hamas.²⁰ The famous Israeli basketball club Maccabi Playtika Tel Aviv will play its international home games in Belgrade for security reasons.²¹ Simultaneously, Serbian leadership is awaiting the 2024 presidential elections. If Donald Trump or another Republican wins the presidency, Israel and its lobby will grow in importance for the Serbian leadership. As such, abstaining from the UN General Assembly vote was Belgrade's least risky option.

Albania – A Full-Blown Pro-Israeli Policy on Hold for Now

Although extremely secular, Albania is a majority Muslim country, a fact that would suggest allegiance to Palestine. Still, it has at the same time been a pro-Israel country ever since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the democratisation of the country. Partly in reaction to the Marxist regime's hostility to Israel, later democratic Albania tilted towards Israel.²² On the other hand, in 1992, almost immediately after the first democratic elections, Albania joined a military agreement with Turkey and the Islamic Conference Association. Yet, ever since, Albania has been somewhat of a reluctant member of the grouping, often expressing reservations on joint resolutions.

In its foreign policy, Albania must navigate between different allegiances regarding the Middle East conflicts. Still, the most important balancing is that between the US and Turkey and between the US and the EU. Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama is known to be fiercely pro-Israel. Still, he also nurtures a very close personal relationship with the pro-Palestine President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.²³ So, these two considerations need to be taken into account when deciding on the Israel-Palestine conflict, often leading towards abstention in international fora.

The support for the international recognition of Kosovo remains a constant element in Albania's positioning towards the conflict between Israel and Palestine and overall relations with the Arab and wider Islamic world. Albania strongly supports Kosovo's recently gained sovereignty and thus encourages its international partners to recognise its north-eastern neighbour. On the other hand, Albania, with Kosovo amongst the most pro-US countries in Europe, is inclined to follow Washington's foreign policy course, but it needs to balance it with the interests and positions of the major EU member states on whose support its future membership in the club depends. In this sense, there have been cases where Albania voted with the EU majority and against the wishes of the US, notably the UNGA Resolution 10/19 of 21 December 2017 declaring the status of Jerusalem as Israel's capital "null and void".

Pragmatically, both Albania and Kosovo like to ingratiate with Israel as they believe it is also a way to get on good terms with Israel's main backer, the US.²⁴ In 2012, the same year Israel opened its embassy in Albania, then Albanian Prime Minister Sali Berisha compared the then-Iranian hardline President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Adolf Hitler.²⁵ A public opinion poll conducted on October 13 2023, four days after the Hamas terrorist attack on Israel, showed that 50% of Albanians said they were pro-Israel, 36% identified as pro-Palestine, and 14% remained "undecided."²⁶ It remains to be seen whether Israel's retaliatory offensive in Gaza will shift the public attitudes further towards the support for Palestine.

North Macedonia – Steer Clear of Trouble

Similarly to Albania, North Macedonia's foreign policy towards the Israel-Palestine conflict can be characterised as balancing between the two sides of the Transatlantic partnership, the EU and the US, leaving no room for rash diplomatic decisions. Learning its lesson from the past on how diplomatic adventurism can have negative implications on the internal political situation, Skopje, irrespective of the political leadership, has mastered weighing its foreign policy decisions carefully.

In 1999, North Macedonia entered a serious diplomatic war with China. Presented as part of a 1 billion USD aid and investments package from Taiwan, North Macedonia's government established diplomatic relations with Taiwan on 27 January 1999. Lacking support from any of the big powers, Skopje's move provoked the ire of Beijing. China broke diplomatic relations with North Macedonia on 9 February 1999 and struck back at Skopje by vetoing a UNSC resolution that would have kept the UN peacekeepers at the border between North Macedonia and Kosovo.²⁷ The consequences of such decision were felt on the ground two years later in 2001, when a nine-month-long conflict between the Macedonian security forces and Albanian minority insurgents erupted.

Since then, North Macedonia has carefully weighed its foreign policy options strictly within the limits of the defined US and EU general lines. When these two diverge, as often is the case in the Israel-Palestine conflict, North Macedonia is careful not to take sides. In this way, unlike Albania (1988), Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992), Montenegro (2006), and Serbia (1988 – as Yugoslavia), the country has never established diplomatic relations with Palestine. Yet, when the Trump administration advocated for countries to move their diplomatic representations to Jerusalem, North Macedonia refused. In UNGA or UNESCO, it meant a consistent refusal to take sides. So was the case with the latest 26 October Gaza Resolution. Despite the public opinion tilting towards sympathy for Palestine²⁸ as a consequence of the massive civilian toll of the Israeli bombings of Gaza, North Macedonia's diplomacy refused to take sides.

Conclusion

As the conflict in the Middle East continues, Israel can be expected to energetically pursue what has always been the hallmark of its foreign policy in the Balkans, lobbying for support among the Balkan countries, both the EU members and membership candidates, to dilute the EU's unity on the Palestinian issue.²⁹ Islamic countries will not be passive on this issue either and will try to influence the Balkan countries to be more sympathetic towards the Palestinians. As long as the EU remains divided on the ongoing conflict, this will continue to pose a challenge for the Western Balkans countries' decision-making on the issue. The US will also frequently factor in when the Balkan capitals decide on their policies towards Israelis and Palestinians. A possible victory of Donald Trump or another Republican candidate in next year's presidential elections in the US may only enhance the importance of the Middle East conflict in US relations with the Western Balkans countries. This international constellation will continue to pose a diplomatic challenge for the local nations on what stance to take in light of their diverse international partnerships.

The voting patterns do provide valuable lessons. The Western Balkan countries remain aware that they are small players on the world's stage and all of them either try to avoid taking clear positions on big global issues or simply assess their repercussions on domestic or regional environment. However, when facing the global environment becomes unavoidable, local elites will always try to use global geopolitics to promote their regional or internal political agendas. As usual, for the leaderships of the Balkan countries, foreign policy is always about causes closer to home.

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