FULLY WESTERN BALKANS INTEGRATION AS A PRECONDITION FOR NATO'S EFFECTIVE ROLE IN THE REGION

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Abstract: Western Balkans region is a well-known politically constructed term within Brussels administration which implies political entities in the post-Yugoslav space, minus Croatia and Slovenia, plus Albania. Western Balkans region includes Belgrade, Skopje, Sarajevo, Podgorica, Tirana and Pristine. In the context of NATO, Skopje, Tirana, and Podgorica are already full members of this organization, while at the same time, Sarajevo and Pristina are tending to become members, and Belgrade has declared politics of military neutrality in the context of any potential membership in international or regional military and defense organization. The main thesis of this paper is that NATO is still incapable of establishing pervasive defense and security infrastructure within the region because of the partial integration from the perspective of ongoing challenges, risks, and threats, including those in cyberspace, as well as those, formulated as soft threats like imported malign influences, fake news, and institutional crisis. Further, the Western Balkan's comprehensive NATO integration will justify the NATO contributions in the region from a strategic perspective. Research questions would be: To what extend political disputes determine the comprehensive Western Balkans integration to NATO? What will happen, from the mid-term perspective, if further NATO integration of the region will miss? From theoretical point of view, contribution of the paper would be in the understanding the geostrategic concept on the case study of Western Balkans integration in NATO, respectively how much the geography, even in the modern, digital and cyber era, determines security and defense flows.
Key words: NATO, Western Balkans, integration, obstacles, geostrategic

Анотация: Регионът на Западните Балкани е добре познат политически термин от речника на Брюкселската администрация, който описва пост-югославското пространство без Хърватия и Словения, но включва Албания. Всъщност, Западните Балкани включват Белград, Скопие, Сараево, Подгорица, Тирана и Прищина. В контекста на НАТО, Скопие, Тирана и Подгорица са вече част от Алианса, Сараево и Прищина се борят за членство, а Белград е обявил политика на военен неутралитет и отказ от членство от всякакви регионални или международни военни съюзи. Основната теза на тази глава е, че НАТО все още не способно да защитава убедително членствете си и да поддържа регионалната система за сигурност, поради предизвикателствата, рисковете и заплахите от ново поколение като кибервойните, хибридните войни, фалшивите новини и институционалните кризи. Интеграцията на Западните Балкани в НАТО ще помогне на Алианса да изясни приоритетите си в стратегическа перспектива. Основните изследователски въпроси в тази глава са: до каква степен политическите диску-

сии предопределят членството на Западните Балкани в НАТО и какво би се случило ако - в средносрочна перспектива Алиансът спре да се разширява? От теоретична гледна точка, основният принос на това изследване е че то анализира геостратегическата концепция за присъединяването на Западните Балкани към Алианса през призмата на новото поколение заплахи, произтичащи от дигиталната среда и киберпространството.

Ключови думи: НАТО, Западни Балкани, интеграция, предизвикателства, геостратегия

Introduction

NATO, in the last decade, has faced contemporary challenges, risks, and threats that could not be compared with so-called traditional national threats related to territorial integrity. The majority of contemporary security challenges, risks, and threats are, first of all, connected to political sovereignty, which, in fact, implies institutional sustainability from the point of effectiveness and efficiency. Contemporary security challenges, risks, and threats are, therefore, systemic in nature. They do not directly threaten the territorial integrity of a sovereign political unit, but their impact and consequences are such that they make the institutional infrastructure unsustainable, even when it comes to preserving territorial integrity, as one of the postulates of statehood. In fact, current security challenges, risks, and threats are multi-layered and more complex than traditional ones. Traditional ones primarily involved the conquest/occupation of territory as a prerequisite for seizing power, as a key act of external aggression.

On the other hand, modern challenges, risks and threats destroy state systems through precise mechanisms infiltrated within those state systems that are the subject of external aggressive action. Most often, these are challenges, risks and threats without a physical and visible form, but with strong effects and consequences that collapse the state infrastructure from the inside.

When it comes to the Western Balkans, i.e. the post-Yugoslav area without Slovenia and Croatia, plus Albania, we will use established public discourses regarding the interpretation of civil wars in the post-Yugoslav area, then the Ukrainian War, as well as regional disputes and open issues, as variables, in order to provide a valid explanation for the research question posed – why the "selective" NATO integration of the Western Balkans prevents the full efficiency and effectiveness of this organization in the context of facing contemporary security challenges, risks and threats. In fact, in the case study of the Western Balkans, we will provide a comprehensive answer to the thesis that contemporary security challenges, risks, and threats do not imply a danger to territorial integrity as the first line of danger but rather imply sovereign territorial frameworks as a kind of hybrid space in which external activities with security and comprehensive consequences are carried out both within a single territorial framework, but also within a wider geographical area, which in a geographical context will provide us with an answer to the question of why NATO, in terms of the Western Balkans, also

has a necessary geographical component, i.e. integration. Political actors in the Western Balkans are particularly important in understanding the contemporary NATO security mosaic, given the limited resources – political, security, economic, and institutional – faced by these actors, some of whom are already NATO integrated, while some aspire to become part of it, and some implement a policy of military neutrality, as we stated in the study abstract itself.

Ukrainian War

The beginning of the Ukrainian conflict "revived" all existing animosities in the Western Balkans. Political actors in the aforementioned region did not use the growing conflict, which was less than 1,000 kilometers away, for the purpose of cooperation, coordination, and potential integration in dealing with contemporary security challenges, risks, and threats. On the contrary, the Ukrainian war was used to "reinforce imported" discourses from both the so-called political East and the so-called political West.

At the official level, Tirana, Skopje, Podgorica and Pristina followed the European Union's policy towards the Ukrainian conflict. They unanimously joined the European Union's sanctions against the Russian Federation, unanimously suspended the import of Russian energy resources, unanimously began providing financial, logistical, and military assistance to Ukraine, unanimously implemented ad-hoc measures against Russian diplomatic personnel, using the practice in the European Union member states. To prove their alignment, in 2023, Podgorica, Tirana, Skopje, and Pristina launched a new regional platform called "Western Balkans QUAD – 100 percent alignment with EU foreign policy" in the capital of North Macedonia. As stated, the theme of this framework is "full alignment of the four participants of the group with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy in light of the new geopolitical reality, hybrid threats, energy crisis, and economic consequences caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine." In addition, it was noted that these four actors are "reliable partners of NATO and the EU," and that "after Russia's aggression on Ukraine, harmonization with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, but also more broadly with the positions and values of the democratic world, has become one of the most important priorities of countries aspiring to EU membership", and that this is also a clear message where these actors belong (Al Jazeera Balkans, 2023).

On the other hand, Serbia did not join this regional format, but immediately after the start of the Ukrainian conflict, it presented its positioning through the "Conclusion of the National Security Council of the Republic of Serbia adopted in connection with the armed conflict on the territory of Ukraine that began on February 24, 2022." There are two key points in this conclusion:

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- Point 5: In accordance with its previous policy of advocating for consistent and principled respect for the principles of international law and the inviolability of borders, the Republic of Serbia provides full and principled support for respect for the principles of territorial integrity of Ukraine (Gjurovski, Arnaudov & Hadžić, 2024: 19);

- Point 8: Proceeding from the fact that its basic duty is to devote all its forces to preserving the peace and well-being of its citizens, the Republic of Serbia, when considering the need to possibly adopt restrictive measures or sanctions against any country, including the Russian Federation, will be guided exclusively by the protection of its vital economic and political interests. As a country that experienced Western sanctions in the recent past and whose compatriots in the Republika Srpska are suffering sanctions today, the Republic of Serbia believes that it is not in its vital political and economic interest to impose sanctions on any country at this time, not even its representatives or economic entities (Gjurovski, Arnaudov & Hadžić, 2024: 19).

Point 5 testifies to a kind of regional coordination at the Western Balkans level on the issue of support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine. But point 8 testifies to disagreements, because the participants of the so-called QUAD platform applied European sanctions as a mechanism for punishing Moscow for aggression on Ukrainian territory, while Serbia rejected the introduction of economic sanctions, citing its negative experience with the same, as well as its national and economic interests, as justification for such an anti-sanctions policy.

On the third side, there is Bosnia and Herzegovina, as a state "conditioned" by the compromise of the political leaders of Serbs, Bosniaks, and Croats, as the constituent peoples of this state, along whose ethnic lines the institutional infrastructure of this political entity is defined. Officially, Bosnia and Herzegovina has joined the European Union (EU) sanctions against the Russian Federation through the BiH Mission in Brussels, but, on the other hand, an advisor to the former Serbian member of the BiH Presidency claims that "there is no decision, by any BiH institution, on the situation in Ukraine, and especially on the introduction of any sanctions (Zvijerac, 2022)." This is also supported by the statement of the current Serbian President who has confirmed that Bosnia and Herzegovina had adopted sanctions against the Russian Federation, but that he did not think that this had anything to do with BiH entity Republika Srpska, stating that neither the leaders of Republika Srpska nor the then Serbian member of the Presidency of BiH, Milorad Dodik, were consulted about this (Al Jazeera, 2022). Unlike the Bosniak and Croat political leaders in BiH, the current president of the BiH entity Republika Srpska, after the beginning of the Ukrainian conflict, held several meetings with the current Russian president, where he pointed out that the

entity headed by him opposes "Western sanctions against Russia", "that he does not want to join the NATO alliance," that he "confirms the good relations that Republika Srpska has and cultivates with the Russian state and that he rejects any possibility of joining Western sanctions against Russia" (RSE, 2024).

The Ukrainian war is a textbook example of the lack of cooperation, coordination, and alignment of Western Balkan actors towards current security challenges, risks, and threats. In fact, there is a pronounced tendency of political interpretation and positioning in relation to the Ukrainian conflict while ignoring the real security challenges that the conflict has brought with it, such as energy sustainability, economic shocks, the potential for a domino effect due to open regional disputes, and finally the potential for nuclear consequences, due to the latest momentum of the conflict.

NATO's role in the Western Balkans has not been strengthened due to the potential danger of the newly emerging circumstances, but rather, animosities towards NATO have been strengthened. Initially, within the Republika Srpska and Serbia, where the narrative emerged that it was actually a conflict between the West and the East, that the West, with its policy of integration with Ukraine, had actually forced Moscow to act aggressively, that Ukraine was merely collateral damage in order to avoid a direct conflict between the Russian Federation and NATO (Ranković, 2022). However, the root of the problem is deeper because a significant percentage of the population in North Macedonia also supports the military policy that Moscow is implementing in relation to the Ukrainian conflict (Libertas, 2022). Even political leaders in North Macedonia confirm the thesis that Macedonians are glorifying the Russian President Vladimir Putin on social media, but at the same emphasize that this is a consequence of the desire for a leader who will have a firm hand in the governance process and who will oppose "the injustices of the West" (Faktor, 2022).

Identical challenges are noticeable not only in NATO member states in the Western Balkans but also in the immediate neighborhood, in NATO and European Union member states such as Bulgaria. According to Bozhidar Bozhanov, Bulgaria's e-government minister, the problem is difficult to solve because, as he explains, Bulgaria has shown systemic weakness to Russian propaganda long before the war began (Blic, 2022).

Such circumstances make NATO's de facto strategic planning and action in the Western Balkans impossible. Given the strong influence of hybrid threats in state systems globally, and especially within weak and vulnerable systems such as those in the Western Balkans, NATO's challenge is triple – geographical due to the lack of comprehensive integration, political, due to the strong influence of Russian propaganda in scoring political points, and institutional, due to weak and unsustainable institutions.

Interpretation of the past

The interpretation of the events of the 1990s represents one of the most significant challenges in the post-Yugoslav region as a whole, but also within the Western Balkans, as a term accepted in the administration of the European Union. In fact, the essence of the problem is not the interpretation as such, but the lack of a comprehensive truth, and a common position, at the regional level, on establishing the truth. Such circumstances have allowed, in the past 23 years, since the end of the conflict in the post-Yugoslav region, including the armed conflict in the northwestern parts of North Macedonia, for war events and facts to be adapted to political interests, and thus to become the subject of daily political struggle.

The most prominent example of this interpretation of events and the lack of real truth are the wars in the areas of present-day Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. For example, the police-military operation by Croatian forces, during which more than 200,000 Serbs from the territory of Croatia fled their homes in fear, is a cause for celebration for some and for sadness for others (Anđelković, 2022). Today, "Storm" is commemorated in Serbia as the suffering of the Serbian people, and the police-military operation itself is assessed as "the largest ethnic cleansing since World War II", while in Croatia the same operation is solemnly commemorated as a liberation action and the Day of Victory and Homeland Gratitude (Anđelković, 2022).

On the other hand, there are similar disagreements between Serbs and Bosniaks in Bosnia and Herzegovina and, more generally, between Serbia and the Bosniak-Croat leadership in Sarajevo. For example, the events in Srebrenica in 1995 are a point of incalculable disagreement because, on the one hand, it is claimed that genocide was committed against the Muslim population in that war zone, while on the other hand, it is claimed that it was a crime against humanity, and that genocide is being misused as a political qualification in order to damage the reputation and historical role of Serbs and Serbia. The extent to which this issue is a point of disagreement is evidenced by the Resolution adopted within the framework of the United Nations General Assembly – the Resolution on Srebrenica, which proclaims July 11th as the International Day of Remembrance for the Victims of the Srebrenica Genocide, condemns the denial of the genocide, as well as the glorification of war criminals (Maričić, 2024). Croatian member of the BiH Presidency said that the adoption of the Resolution on Srebrenica put an end to a decades-long process and that the process that began with the indictment of genocide continued with the pronouncement of final verdicts before international courts and finally ended with the adoption of the Resolution in the United Nations. In addition, he emphasized that "at the world level, after the legal consensus that was expressed through court verdicts, a political consensus was reached on the issue of the genocide in Srebrenica (Maričić, 2024). From

the other side, the Serbian president has asked whether this resolution will lead to regional reconciliation, as well as he reminded that "it has never happened in the General Assembly that the voting on genocide was not passed unanimously," adding that "some people wanted to use political power and politicize this topic" (RTS/RTRS, 2024).

But, in order to have a comprehensive understanding, we must not ignore the existing animosities and interpretations of the armed conflict in the northwestern parts of North Macedonia. While for most political leaders of Macedonian nationality, it is a conflict whose main goal was the secession of parts of the country where the dominant Albanian population lives, on the other hand, political leaders of ethnic Albanians claim that it is a civil conflict that was forced as the last instrument in the fight for basic human and civil rights. Ljubco Georgievski, who was Macedonian Prime Minister during the conflict, says that the goal of the conflict was to conquer as much territory as possible (Arnaudov, 2021: 73-74). A similar thesis is stated by the then leader of the most influential Albanian party in the Republic of North Macedonia, the Democratic Party of Albanians, Arben Xhaferi, who says that the beginning of the conflict in that country was a great absurdity because, as he states, wars are not started over political or civil rights (Arnaudov, 2021: 73-74). On the one hand, it is claimed that the goals were separatist, namely the occupation of the northwestern parts of Macedonia and their annexation to the territory of Kosovo and Metohija, and that this was abandoned after the lack of international support and the response of the Macedonian security forces. On the other hand, primarily the Albanian political and intellectual elite believes that the conflict was exclusively a fight for human rights, namely for the civil and political rights of Albanians living in the Republic of North Macedonia (Arnaudov, 2021: 75).

Based on the above examples in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia, we are witnessing far-reaching animosity and disagreement due to the lack of compromise for establishing the truth based on facts. The responsibility for the lack of truth lies largely in the circles of political elites, given the Machiavellian political struggle in the Western Balkans, which even exploits, or rather abuses, the aforementioned examples in daily political calculations.

In the context of security, these disagreements contribute to two negative consequences:

> ● the lack of truth and the political interpretation of events during the wars in the post-Yugoslav region make it impossible to achieve substantial regional reconciliation. Referring to the conflict on the Croatian teritory, Denise Kostovic, a professor at the European Institute at the London School of Economics and Political Science, says that the greatest challenge in addressing the legacy of war crimes and suffering

in the conflict in Croatia in the 1990s is erasing the complexity of the dynamics of violence. She emphasizes that such erasure produces dominant national narratives on both sides that are short-sighted and strategically focused only on the suffering of their own side – while denying or marginalizing their own responsibility (Anđelković, 2022). Almost the same thesis can be done when it comes to other conflicts in the post-Yugoslav region, namely in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the territory of Kosovo, and Metohija, as well as in North Macedonia. Today, we are witnessing dominant national narratives of the former conflicting parties that do not move their established positions. Animosities rise and fall depending on political circumstances, while negative peace has become a constant in a case study geographical area. As a result of political abuse and negative peace, trust as a basis for any form or level of regional cooperation, coordination and ultimately integration is absent. In the context of contemporary security challenges, risks and threats, especially in the domain of hybrid threats, these regional disagreements are being abused, and political entities in the Western Balkans are further vulnerable. Because modern security challenges, risks and threats (energy, economic, health, cyber) do not recognize state and national borders, and as such they become even more dangerous for the Western Balkan six due to the lack of cooperation, coordination and integration for coordinated action and potential joint response and confrontation.

● Vulnerability to external threats in the form of fake news and political manipulation is more pronounced because there is no regional consensus on key issues concerning the sustainability of the region as a geographical entity. Thus, we witness that the "great powers" support one or the other side that participated in the conflicts during the 1990s. Such support serves to increase the animosity that the great powers instrumentalize in pursuing their interests in the post-Yugoslav region. On the other hand, the positioning of fake news is also simplified due to the already existing disagreements and animosities. In the context of the Ukrainian conflict, on the one hand, the thesis is put forward that the peoples of the Orthodox faith are threatened in the Western Balkans, just as the Russians are threatened due to so-called Western imperialism, while on the other hand, the thesis is put forward that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is a repetition of the political discourse of the so-called West that will "justify" the actions of individual countries from the so-called West in the post-Yugoslav region.

In such a political, social, and geographical environment, NATO's "room for maneuver" in terms of strategic security and defense is significantly limited. The

existence of open animosities on a daily basis, a strong negative peace, and the prevalence of fake news, narratives, and political manipulations make it impossible for NATO to act in a case study region, regardless of whether it concerns the Alliance's member states or the states with which NATO cooperates on the basis of the Partnership for Peace program. If the Western Balkans is analyzed as a political, economic, and security entity, NATO's role within these frameworks in the domain of security is reduced to ad-hoc actions and adjustments, with the absence of coordination and synchronization as a basis for dealing with contemporary security challenges, risks, and threats.

<u>Ongoing regional disputes and open issues</u>

Besides the unresolved questions from the period of wars during the nineties at the post-Yugoslav, within the Western Balkans there are substantial open questions closely related to the statehood of the political entities which also implies pervasive consequences in the context of the creation of regional sustainability from the security perspective which in contemporary international relations includes topics from the politics, defense, as well as economy, migration, health.

Dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina is the most prominent regional dispute, which implies pervasive consequences on the national, bilateral, and regional levels, as a whole. According to the Constitution of Serbia, official Belgrade does not recognize the official Pristina as a political entity with state attributes, but as an autonomy province within the territorial integrity of Serbia (Ustav Republike Srbije, 2006: 1). From the other side, current Pristina's authorities claim that they are democratic state, as well as referring that the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina is not related to the status of Pristina, but to the status of relations between Belgrade and Pristine (Kossev Portal/Nova, 2024). Such diametrically opposed positions preclude any basis for potential cooperation. Although numerous agreements, status-undefined, have been signed between Belgrade and Pristina, the expressed animosities crowd out any format of closer cooperation that would "reach" the security domain.

We can see from the example of the regional initiative Open Balkan, which has caused numerous political classifications of the process, even at the beginning of its promotion. Although Serbian officials have declared that they do not object to Pristina's potential participation in the Open Balkan (Kosovo Online, 2021), on the other hand, Pristina refuses to join this initiative because, as the Pristina authorities state, Serbia does not treat Pristina as an equal party. However, it is not just a matter of refusing to participate, but also of attacking the existence of such a regional format, bearing in mind the statements of Pristina officials that "the Open Balkans looks more like an initiative for the influence of the East, rather than an initiative for a common regional market" (Arnaudov, 2023: 54 i 55).

On the other hand, except for a "bilateral" momentum between Belgrade and Pristina, the status of Pristina also represents the subject of regional disagreements. While Serbia, re-calling to UN Charter and UN Security Council Resolution 1244, claims that the status of Pristina is defined within the mentioned resolution and the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, other regional actors (North Macedonia, Montenegro, Albania), except Bosnia and Herzegovina, are accepting the unilateral self-proclaimed declaration of independence adopted by temporary Pristina authorities in 2008 (Tanjug/RTV, 2022). In this regard, there are continuous tensions on the regional level when it comes to the participation of Pristina in certain regional processes or initiatives or the membership of Pristina in regional, European, or international organizations. However, in Pristina, there are continuous security tensions that represent a potential threat to the whole region, bearing in mind the experience from the nineties. Also, the current UN Secretary-General, in his annual report for Kosovo and Metohija, has reported that "the atmosphere in northern Kosovo remains tense, and the potential for escalation persists (Maroević, 2024). Bearing in mind the spillover effect from the nineties, ongoing war zones on the European continent, and, most important, persistent tensions on the territory of Kosovo and Metohija, especially in the northern parts, there are justified reasons for potential risks and threats to regional stability and sustainability. Such risks and threats are additionally reinforced by the strong regional mistrust, animosities, and the political speech of hate and blaming between different national, ethnic, and religious groups.

In the context of NATO, the alliance is not able to play a security mediator role due to three factors: 1) uncompromising regional disagreements; 2) different big powers are also interested in security flows in the region (as it it Russia with evident role and China with more diplomatic approach); 3) mistrust in the role of NATO as a common security denominator because of the different and opposite interpretation of local actors about the NATO activities in the region during the last 35 years.

Conclusion and recommendations

Security cooperation in the Western Balkans in the last 30 years, after the collapse of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, has been marginalized in such a way that there has always been a more pronounced interest in cooperation in this domain with partners outside the region, as opposed to a pragmatic approach and the creation of regional security infrastructure (Gjurovski & Arnaudov, 2024: 2). From today's perspective, regional cooperation in the Western Balkans is conditioned and at the same time determined by political decisions. Regional cooperation, coordination, and integration are not the subject of logical decision-making processes but rather an instrument in the hands of political

leaders in daily political games. Although a significant degree of economic cooperation, coordination, and synchronization has been achieved, we could not mention deeper integration because it is already conditioned from the very beginning by open issues related to statehood issues and sustainability. In such circumstances, cooperation in the security domain is further limited. Although we are witnessing significant cooperation in the domains of confronting and preventing cross-border criminal activities, substantive cooperation in the domains of defense and security, and even when it comes to contemporary challenges such as migration, is, to a significant extent, limited and conditioned by political popularity. In this context, cooperation with NATO as a whole, but also between NATO member states in the Western Balkans region, as well as those that are not part of the Alliance, could be interpreted. Considering the conflicts of the 1990s, the inconsistent security policy between regional actors, the existing animosities, as well as the different relations with NATO over the past 35 years, we come to the conclusion that cooperation with NATO is limited at the level of the existing Alliance member states, and at the same time conditioned by interpretations of NATO's role in the past period.

In this context, NATO is not able, as a security and defense organization, to conduct strategic, long-term and comprehensive activities. First, due to geographical limitations. Second, due to internal regional disagreements. Third, due to the lack of a stable and sustainable relations between NATO and all six actors in this area.

Therefore, the authors of the study have prepared several recommendations that would contribute to a more efficient, and thus more effective, role of NATO in the Western Balkans region:

> 1. Relativization of the insistence on comprehensive integration of the region in the medium term.
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> 2. Creation of programs that will enable integrated cooperation between member states and non-member states on security issues related to migration, hybrid threats, health challenges, and regional criminal and terrorist threats.
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> 3. Revision of NATO's role in the region in modern history in the context of providing comprehensive and precise answers to all stakeholders as to why the Alliance took certain actions.
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> 4. Project-based engagement of NATO through higher education systems within Western Balkans in order to provide better and clearer information for young people about what this organization is and what its purpose is.5. NATO's impartiality in relation to regional disagreements and disagreements in order to create space for authentic regional interpretation of disputes and their overcoming.

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