Research Article

Small States and Choices: Gambling on Security or Regional Cooperation under a Common Banner?

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Abstract: Since the 1990s, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Serbia have employed strategies and tactics to address insecurity dilemmas by establishing various international partnerships and foreign alignments, choices that impact security governance at both local and regional levels. These countries claim to pursue national security and prosperity through Euro-Atlantic integration. Yet some undermine one another through hybrid warfare, nationalism, hostile rhetoric, and fearmongering, despite participating in EU and NATO accession efforts.

This analysis examines whether such conflicting behaviors help these nations accomplish their stated objectives or, instead, inadvertently worsen the region's security predicament by inciting rivalries and raising tensions, despite common institutional and declared cooperative goals. Emphasizing the traditional security dilemma mindset, the research examines these issues by monitoring security developments and defensive/ offensive tactics in the Western Balkans. It demonstrates how historical and political legacies, combined with a fragmented foreign policy environment and various democratic deficits, can make certain states more likely to provoke responses from others, resulting in an arms race or insecurity dilemma. The study further shows that small states in the Western Balkans can enhance their security through coordinated responses to shared risks and institutionalized regional cooperation. Strategic frameworks aligned with EU and NATO principles enable these states to translate collective commitments into effective security measures, thereby strengthening national defense while fostering regional stability.

Keywords: insecurity, security dilemma, security governance, international actors, regional security cooperation, Western Balkans.

Introduction

Regional and global players have, for centuries, been interested in the pivotal Western Balkans to advance their goals and agendas. As the post-World War II global order developed—including the establishment of new international laws and standards focused on peace and security in Europe and globally—the region became the focus of numerous interests and conflicting ideologies.

The post-war international order, characterized by its political, economic, and military foundations, significantly transformed relationships between states and alliances. It also changed how nonstate actors became involved, thereby influencing collaborative initiatives and creating tensions and, at times, outright antagonistic situations. Indeed, during the Cold War, the region mirrored the sharp geopolitical divisions between the West and the East. Its incorporation (except for Greece) into the Eastern Bloc was not only a "systemic element of the Cold War itself" but also an "inside force of inherent regional realities and pressures," rooted in "complex religious, ideological, and nationalistic diversity." [1]

Within the communist space, Yugoslavia—under the regime of Josip Broz Tito—gained significant power and influence until 1948, when it was expelled from the Eastern Bloc by Stalin. Afterward, Yugoslavia followed a neutral path, adopting a policy of "socialist autonomy" and leading the Nonaligned Movement. During this period, Albania adhered rigidly to Marxist-Leninist principles but, disappointed with Soviet leadership, shifted its alignment in the 1960s, finding support from China.

Despite numerous reforms, the Party of Labour of Albania (PPSh) violated human rights, and living standards remained low. Yugoslavia, in contrast, adopted more liberal economic policies, allowing private ownership of small enterprises and promoting a competitive environment for larger companies. Albania, on the other hand, remained isolated, with China as its only ally. Tirana's destructive ideological alignments ultimately led to deficiencies in human rights, political pluralism, and national development.

Meanwhile, efforts to keep Yugoslavia's republics united did not succeed. The leadership of Slobodan Milošević since 1989 led to regional destabilization and fragmentation, even though he pursued the "creation of a new, enlarged Serbian state, encompassing as much territory of Yugoslavia as possible." The unitary model of "Yugoslavism" was dismantled by the early 21st century. [2]

Between the time Milošević first rose to power and the 2003 Thessaloniki Declaration, the former Yugoslavia region endured years of intensive ethnic and

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[1] Tomáš Madleňák, "Review: The Balkans in the Cold War by Svetozar Rajak, Kostantina E. Botsiou, Eirini Karamouzi, Evanthis Hatzivassiliou," *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs* 26, no. 3-4 (2017): 93-95, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26592060.

[2] Laura Silber and Allan Little, *Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 26.

nationalist tensions and war.[3] Western Balkan nations increased military spending, resulting in a classic security dilemma. Some countries became adversaries, making cooperative security arrangements difficult. International efforts to stop ethnic cleansing and restore stability were accompanied by the emergence of new states in the region after assertive movements for self-determination.

In the next phase, the European Union provided incentives encouraging regional integration and reconciliation, particularly following the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit.[4] However, longstanding territorial disputes and identity-based tensions persist, underscoring the need for more innovative strategies that address deeply rooted historical and sociopolitical issues.

Following the Thessaloniki Summit (2003), which introduced a cooperative model and a joint integration path, the security dilemma model faded to a certain extent at both the national and regional levels. These commitments laid the groundwork for the Western Balkan countries' path toward EU integration, emphasizing shared values and mutual responsibilities.[5] Still, transnational issues persist. The region faces internal political and security challenges, including organized crime, ethnic and religious tensions, violent extremism, cyber threats, corruption, identity politics, and geopolitical tensions. Accordingly, the security governance will continue to face challenges compounded by external interference, despite depoliticization being a key requirement for Western Balkan countries' integration into NATO and the European Union.[6]

Russia's territorial revanchism directly reverses "the general ethos in Europe [that is] strongly against disturbance of the territorial status quo." [7] Furthermore, it is hard to predict when, where, and how territorial demands will cease, or whether other states on the continent would prefer to follow suit.

Against the backdrop of Russia's prolonged war in Ukraine and rising global tensions, Western Balkan nations now face a pivotal crossroads. They can either continue gambling on short-term security calculations—prioritizing narrow interests that risk fracturing the region's delicate balance—or embrace a transformative shift toward collaboration. Choosing the latter would mean forging a united path: investing in trust-building measures, modernizing security sectors, nurturing good neighborly ties, and building resilience against common threats.

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[3] "EU-Western Balkans Summit, Thessaloniki, 21 June 2003, Declaration," European Commission, Press Release 10229/03 (Presse 163), C/03/163, June 21, 2003, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/document/print/en/pres_03 _163/PRES_03_163_EN.pdf.

[4] "EU-Western Balkans Summit, Thessaloniki, 21 June 2003, Declaration."

[5] "EU-Western Balkans Summit, Thessaloniki, 21 June 2003, Declaration."

[6] Mehmedin Tahirović, "The Main Security Challenges and Threats in the Western Balkans and Possible Model for Solving Them in the Process of European Integration," *Studia Europejskie – Studies in European Affairs* 28, no. 3 (2024): 27-54, 37, https://doi.org/10.33067/SE.3.2024.2.

[7] Kalevi J. Holsti, "International Theory and War in the Third World," in *The Insecurity Dilemma: National Security of Third World States*, edited by Brian L. Job (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992), 56-75.

This study critically analyzes how Western Balkan states strategically position themselves within security and defense ecosystems to address national insecurities influenced by past foreign policy alignments. It argues that aggressive or unilateral measures based on zero-sum mindsets exacerbate systemic weaknesses, invite external manipulation, and facilitate unstable cycles. According to the analysis, which highlights the region's acute geostrategic vulnerability, institutionalized collaboration—based on openness and shared threat assessments—is essential for sustainable security and a common strategic vision. Implementing comprehensive security sector reforms and multilateral trust-building mechanisms can help these states move from fragmented risk-taking to a unified governance model, reducing cross-border threats and strengthening regional resilience.

Theoretical Framework

This research employs a theoretical lens based on the security dilemma in international relations and insecurity dilemmas in internal and regional politics. The focus is on the regional level and regional cooperative tendencies. The theoretical framework of the security dilemma has been a cornerstone in the study of international relations, with its evolution marked by significant contributions from scholars such as Herz,[8] Jervis,[9] and Glaser.[10] Over time, these theorists have elucidated the paradoxical situation wherein states, in their quest for security, may inadvertently provoke a cycle of insecurity, misperceptions, and disposition to conflict, despite the absence of indicators of aggressiveness.

As Glaser[11] posits, the core issue is often rooted in wrong perceptions, underscoring the importance of clarity in understanding the intentions of other states and "avoid[ing] competition that would intensify causes of war."[12]

Contemporary scholars, including Ker-Lindsay,[13] have further refined the understanding of the security dilemma by highlighting how policies aimed at counter-recognition strategies (nonrecognition) can paradoxically lead to isolation, alienation, and the intensification of security dilemmas. Bechev's[14] analysis of

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8   John H. Herz, "Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 2, no. 2 (1950): 157-180, https://doi.org/10.2307/2009187.

9   Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978): 167-214, https://doi.org/10.2307/2009958.

10 Charles L. Glaser, "Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (Winter 1994/95): 50-90, https://doi.org/10.2307/2539079.

11 Glaser, "Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help."

12 Glaser, "Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help," 52.

13 James Ker-Lindsay, *The Foreign Policy of Counter Secession: Preventing the Recognition of Contested States* (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2013), 1-23, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199698394.001.0001.

14 Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia's Influence in South East Europe* (Yale University Press, October 2017).

external actors' roles, particularly Russia's influence in the Western Balkans, provides a regional perspective on how external involvement can shape the security dilemma within a specific geopolitical context.

While these authors may not explicitly engage with the insecurity dilemma concept, their analytical frameworks for the security dilemma implicitly address multilevel insecurity dynamics (domestic, regional, global). The strategies they advocate—transparency, communication, and institutionalized cooperation—remain vital in mitigating such dilemmas. By fostering mutual reassurance through shared assessments of intentions and capabilities, states can dismantle the systemic mistrust that perpetuates both security and insecurity spirals.

Securitization

According to the current state of affairs in the Western Balkans, the operationalization of "the securitization processes in a non-democratic context," as Vuori states, reflects "four strands of securitization: (1) securitization for raising an issue on the agenda, (2) the securitization for deterrence; (3) securitization for legitimating past acts or for reproducing the security status of an issue, and (4) securitization for control." [15] International actors involved and interested in peace and stability in the Western Balkans have continuously tried to operationalize securitization processes either by adding and raising issues on the agenda or by securitizing deterrence where necessary, such as in the case of Kosovo. The fact that KFOR changed its operations in Kosovo from traditional military duties to diplomatic and political instruments suggests a move toward long-term securitized governance, in which peacekeeping is seen as a constant reaction to a persistent sense of instability.[16]

On the other hand, leading agencies within the region, such as those in Serbia or Bosnia and Herzegovina, have engaged in different forms of securitization strategies. Whether in compliance with or under the influence of other actors, they have attempted to legitimize the past as a continuation of present actions, either discursively or through concealed practices, with the goal of "reproducing the security status of an issue." In doing so, they have diversified their efforts either to assert control or to legitimize specific political agendas or movements.[17]

In some cases, securitization emerges out of necessity for the common good at the national and regional levels – as a tool to avoid confrontation and maintain stability while preventing the spillover effects of destabilization. In other cases, or in parallel with such efforts, securitization is observed to be "a pragmatic tool of political enabling," "[…] implemented in a top-down manner in reflection of

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[15] Thierry Balzacq, ed., *Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve* (Routledge, 2010), 6-7.

[16] Edward Newman and Gëzim Visoka, "NATO in Kosovo and the Logic of Successful Security Practices," *International Affairs* 100, no. 2 (March 2024): 631-653, 633, 648-649, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiae014.

[17] Balzacq, ed., *Securitization Theory*.

the elites' agency and self-serving goals." [18] Although the concept of securitization and its use at the international and domestic levels can be subject to manipulation or selective application, what ultimately matters are the actions it generates and the outcomes those actions produce. In worst-case scenarios, led by questionable and self-serving intentions, securitization efforts may either amplify security issues or threaten stability through "security acts" [19] or by hybrid threats.

On the other hand, securitization can maintain stable conditions when efficiently employed for the common good. When citizens, however, "must cope and function within a unique and particularly troublesome security environment"—a condition underscored in the Western Balkans region—it can be aptly described as an "insecurity dilemma." [20] The competition between East and West can unfold as "a curious admixture of enhancement/provocation and of inhibition/insulation – enhancement of the incidence and severity of some conflicts." [21] Complex security challenges emerge in the Western Balkans through the interaction of historical tensions, ongoing incidents, external meddling, internal ethnic divisions, and hybrid regimes. The current geopolitical environment—characterized by multifaceted, unpredictable dynamics, shifting alliances, and ongoing external influence—increases the risk and heightens collective anxiety, even though this insecurity dilemma may not be inevitable or predetermined. These issues make it more difficult to establish long-term security and foster circumstances that, if ignored, may lead to even more instability.

Although the world is "witnessing a neo-Cold War fought in a multipolar environment" and "these rivalries are being echoed in secondary battlespaces," [22] the regional realities differ from those of the Cold War. The configuration of the Western Balkans has dramatically changed in terms of new states and new, joint perspectives. The Western Balkan constituent states can now benefit more if they adhere to the same vision. They are no longer adversaries, but neighbors, and past events can be viewed as lessons to be learned. Therefore, maintaining benign intentions among them—exemplified by regional cooperation as seen in the Nordic and Baltic regions—can only drive these countries toward the shared goals they aspire to achieve.

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[18] Tadek Markiewicz, "The Vulnerability of Securitisation: The Missing Link of Critical Security Studies," *Contemporary Politics* 30, no. 2 (2024): 199-220, 2, https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2023.2267371.

[19] Markiewicz, "The Vulnerability of Securitisation," 2.

[20] Brian L. Job, "The Insecurity Dilemma: National, Regime, and State Securities in the Third World," in *The Insecurity Dilemma: National Security of Third World States*, 14, 56-75.

[21] Job, "The Insecurity Dilemma: National, Regime, and State Securities," 13.

[22] Jose Miguel Alonso-Trabanco, "The Three Fronts of The Neo-Cold War," Backgrounders, *Geopolitical Monitor*, January 24, 2024, https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/the-three-fronts-of-the-neo-cold-war/.

Methodology

This qualitative study uses secondary sources to understand the complex security dynamics in the Western Balkans. It employs comparative analysis and case studies to contrast the security approaches and choices of different states, identifying unique patterns and decisions influenced by international actors such as the European Union, NATO, and third parties. This method enables the identification of distinctive patterns, choices, and decisions that emerge from these relationships. The analysis also employs case studies to narrow the geographical focus to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Serbia, demonstrating how each state's responses to insecurity dilemmas—through strategic partnerships and policy actions—have shaped their respective trajectories within the EU integration process. These case studies offer a detailed look at the mechanisms and outcomes produced at the regional level, providing a deeper understanding of the impact of such partnerships on national and regional security dynamics and divergences. The methodology combines comparative analysis with in-depth case studies, allowing for both a regional overview of security dynamics in the Western Balkans and a focused examination of specific national contexts. This approach highlights broader trends, behavioral patterns, structural pitfalls, and potential future trajectories, thereby providing a solid foundation for the study's findings and conclusions.

Strategic Choices and Security Dynamics in the Western Balkans

Since the dissolution of Yugoslavia, various international organizations and actors have been engaged in the region to stabilize the complex situations arising from protracted conflicts, aiming for their resolution. These organizations intend to guide these countries toward integration into international institutions such as the European Union, OSCE, NATO, and the "nascent European Defence Union."[23] This situation has led to the emergence of asymmetric security guarantees in the current security environment. In cases where non-NATO states—Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo—lack comparable guarantees, NATO members such as Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia can collaborate on smart defense measures to meet urgent demands and modernize their forces outside the Alliance's formal frameworks. Although Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia became NATO members in different years—2009, 2017, and 2020, respectively—they are all part of a collective defensive umbrella. The six Western Balkan nations (WB6) operate "under a cooperative security perspective," as all are members of the Partnership for Peace Consortium.[24]

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[23] Dylan Macchiarini Crosson, "Enlarging the European Defence Union to the Western Balkans," Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), January 22, 2021, par. 2, www.ceps.eu/enlarging-the-european-defence-union-to-the-western-balkans/.

[24] Emmanuele Panero, "The Western Balkans into NATO: Security Perspectives," Brief No. 12, CeSPI – Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale, December 2023, 4, https://www.cespi.it/sites/default/files/brief_n._12_panero_-_wb_into_nato_0.pdf.

Albania and Kosovo possess relatively lower military capabilities compared to other Western Balkan states, but have been actively revitalizing their military industries in recent years to strengthen these capacities within the NATO security framework. Fragmented or inconsistent deterrent postures at the national level have prompted Serbia to engage in military-technical cooperation with China and Russia. This reflects an effort to diversify its strategic partnerships and offset the limitations of its nonaligned status. Nonaligned governments may pursue alternative security alignments as a way to enhance autonomy and address perceived gaps in their national security strategies.

It is noteworthy that while there is a shared aspiration among these countries to integrate into the European Union, not all non-NATO Western Balkan nations share a desire to attain NATO membership. Serbia is reluctant to pursue NATO membership, and Kosovo's status remains unresolved, as it actively seeks membership in various international bodies, including the United Nations, OSCE, the Council of Europe, the European Union, and NATO. Bosnia and Herzegovina also represents a complex case as it seeks NATO membership; its full membership, however, is blocked by the Republika Srpska and NATO's poor reputation in Serbia.[25]

Given Russia's strategic interest in limiting NATO's influence in the Western Balkans, Milorad Dodik's opposition to joining the alliance can be understood within a broader geopolitical context. This position appeals to specific segments of the population in Republika Srpska, who remain undecided about whether to strengthen ties with Russia or seek closer ties with the European Union and the West. Persistent political, economic, and social issues in the area have added to this ambiguity and fostered a climate of disillusionment, lowering public expectations for significant change or improved living standards.[26]

After the 1999 NATO air campaign to end the ethnic cleansing that threatened to escalate throughout the region, specific political figures in power have persistently instrumentalized these events, preventing "any progress towards membership despite engaging in joint military exercises with NATO." [27] Additionally, Serbia has chosen to follow a neutral path, although it enjoys an observer status within the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization.[28]

Concurrently, NATO member states are continually undergoing reforms, defense capability development, and modernization to reach the desired level of standardization and an "orientation toward collective defense, cooperative security, and crisis management tasks." [29]

[25] Crosson, "Enlarging the European Defence Union to the Western Balkans."

[26] "Will Bosnia Join EU and NATO, or Veer Closer to Moscow Instead?" *Euronews*, July 15, 2024, https://www.euronews.com/2024/07/15/will-bosnia-join-eu-and-nato-or-veer-closer-to-moscow-instead.

[27] Euronews, "Will Bosnia Join EU and NATO, or Veer Closer to Moscow Instead?"

[28] Crosson, "Enlarging the European Defence Union to the Western Balkans."

[29] Panero, "The Western Balkans into NATO."

The security puzzle becomes even more complex when examining states' approaches to security and their varying degrees of alignment with international actors such as the European Union, NATO, OSCE, the United States, and Turkey on one side, and Russia and China on the other. These orientations reveal the unique patterns and strategies of each state.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

In recent years, security matters in the region have often been approached as high-stakes gambles, with outcomes perceived as either total victory (in terms of self-serving goals) or complete loss. This is exemplified in particular by the escalation of separatist movements, as seen in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina's Republika Srpska, which leverages its foreign and security ties with Russia to further its political agenda.[30] Serbian ultranationalist irredentism, which seeks the unification of all ethnic Serbs in the Balkans, remains a threat to Bosnia and Herzegovina.[31] Such an approach would require "redrawing borders" in a highly volatile region, where a domino effect could trigger very destructive scenarios.

The United States was a major donor to the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2022, described as "one of the top foreign donors." [32] Although the country progressed toward EU membership by gaining candidate status in 2022, "the deep divisions between Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (the two constituent entities) are evident in the lack of clarity over the country's strategic orientation." [33]

Kosovo

Similarly, Serbia's persistent tendency to reclaim Kosovo and its maneuvers in Kosovo's northern border region—despite prolonged EU-facilitated negotiations and signed agreements that have yet to be implemented—further underscore this zero-sum approach to regional security dynamics. Kosovo is "the theater of NATO's main and largest crisis prevention and management operation outside

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[30] Marina Vulović, "Western Balkan Foreign and Security Ties with External Actors: An Arena of Geostrategic Rivalry for the EU or a Local Power Struggle?" SWP Comment 2023/C 08, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), February 9, 2023, https://doi.org/10.18449/2023C08.

[31] Ismet Fatih Čančar, "Bosnia and Herzegovina at a Euro-Atlantic Crossroads: Introducing a 'New Security' Pact," New Lines Institute, April 10, 2024, https://newlinesinstitute.org/political-systems/bosnia-and-herzegovina-at-a-euro-atlantic-crossroads-introducing-a-new-security-pact/.

[32] Balkan Defence Monitor, "International Military Cooperation – Bosnia and Herzegovina – 2024," Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, https://balkandefencemonitor.com/international-military-cooperation-bosnia-and-herzegovina-2024/.

[33] Andi Hoxhaj, "Mounting Tension and Instability in the Western Balkans Is Playing into Russia's Hands," *The Conversation*, April 16, 2024, https://theconversation.com/mounting-tension-and-instability-in-the-western-balkans-is-playing-into-russias-hands-227491.

the Alliance's borders, thanks to the Kosovo Force (KFOR)," [34] which is responsible for maintaining a peaceful security environment. However, it has also proven to be a theater of proxy war or conflict aimed at destabilization.

Serbia

It is clear that the paths and tactics countries follow in foreign policy, security, and defense become even more pronounced when considering their level of alignment with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Serbia's persistently weak CFSP alignment highlights the fact that the European Union has been a passive observer that now needs to wake up and "set priorities that bind the WB6's outliers to the CFSP." [35] In terms of strategic partnership and foreign policy alignment, "Serbia has invited and accommodated powers with diametrically opposed geopolitical interests." [36] Playing between East and West gives Serbia a "buffer status" that is "supposed to help the elite's ambition to overcome the state's smallness" [37] and consolidate its grip on power.

Structural Cycles of Insecurity

The Balkans are facing two major conflicts: sovereignty disputes in Northern Kosovo and the constitutional crisis in Bosnia, fueled by Republika Srpska's secessionist rhetoric and representing an unprecedented level of attack on the Dayton Agreement.[38] These conflicts reflect structural insecurity cycles, perpetuating regional fragility and intensifying ethnonationalist mobilization, thereby exacerbating security concerns for the local populations in these states.

The longstanding security conundrum between Serbia and Croatia, rooted in unresolved legacies of the 1990s wars and mutual distrust, continues to shape military posturing in the Western Balkans. A low-intensity arms competition between Croatia and Serbia began to emerge around 2015, when Croatia expressed interest in acquiring 16 M270 Multiple Launch Rocket Systems from the United States. In response—interpreting this move as a potential threat—Serbia

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[34] Panero, "The Western Balkans into NATO."

[35] Vulović, "Western Balkan Foreign and Security Ties with External Actors."

[36] Vladimir Vučković and Branislav Radeljić, "You Are Either with Us, or against Us: The Small State of Serbia between Domestic Ambition and External Pressures," *Cogent Social Sciences* 10, no. 1 (2024), 2389479, 3, https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2024.2389479.

[37] Vučković and Radeljić, "You Are Either with Us, or against Us," 3.

[38] Stefano Fella, "Bosnia and Herzegovina: Secessionism in the Republika Srpska," Research Briefing, UK Parliament, House of Commons Library, 2024, par. 8, https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10013/.

sought support from Russia, which recommended the S-300 missile defense system as a countermeasure.[39] In light of Russia's war in Ukraine, more destabilizing developments may follow.

Serbia has reintroduced "compulsory military service consisting of 60 days of training and 15 days of exercises," a move coinciding with a similar decision by neighboring NATO member Croatia.[40] In an attempt to balance its international alignments—having signed various agreements with Russia and China in multiple sectors, including security—Serbia also signed a landmark agreement with France's Dassault Aviation for the purchase of 12 new Rafale fighter jets,[41] as did Croatia. Under such conditions, certain states with ambiguous interests may await the perfect occasion to become *fait accompli* players.

Serbia's recent actions must be interpreted as part of an emerging strategy that aligns with *fait accompli* behavior in Kosovo, combining military posturing, hybrid operations, and strategic partnerships. The deployment of advanced units near the Kosovo border in 2023,[42] the announced return to conscription, and a series of defense acquisitions reflect an effort to display readiness and deterrent capacity. Concurrently, incidents such as the sabotage of the Ibar-Lepenac canal and continued support for parallel institutions in Serb-populated areas suggest recourse to backdoor methods of influence without open escalation. While the possibility of open war remains low, these actions indicate a course that could be interpreted as an attempt to establish facts on the ground before international actors can respond, meeting the traditional hallmarks of *fait accompli* strategy while permitting plausible deniability.

Two Faces of Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans

Although all six Western Balkan states have joined the Alliance's Partnership for Peace Program[43] and continue to sit together and sign crucial agreements and declarations—as recently as October 2024, with initiatives such as the Common Regional Market and Access to Higher Education—the region still presents two faces.[44] When leaders are in the presence of the international community and

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39 Oliver Hegglin, "Understanding the Serbo-Croat 'Arms Race,'" Human Security Centre, December 14, 2024, http://www.hscentre.org/europe/understanding-serbo-croat-arms-race/.

40 "Serbia Moves to Reintroduce Compulsory Military Service," *Reuters*, September 20, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/serbia-moves-reintroduce-compulsory-military-service-2024-09-20/.

41 Reuters, "Serbia Moves to Reintroduce Compulsory Military Service."

42 RFE/RL's Balkan Service, "U.S. Urges Serbia To Pull Back Large Military Deployment Along Border With Kosovo," *Radio Free Europe*, September 29, 2023, www.rferl.org/a/vucic-kosovo-serbia-monastery-attack/32615778.html.

43 Panero, "The Western Balkans into NATO."

44 Regional Cooperation Council, "Agreement on Access to Higher Education and Admission to Study in the Western Balkans," October 14, 2024, https://www.rcc.int/pubs/

seated together for joint initiatives, they promise cooperation and commitment to regional efforts, envisioning a shared future.[45] However, once they return to domestic settings, some revert to the usual narratives and discourses that emphasize divisions and disruptive tendencies, and others continue the same politics as "status quo players."[46] Such a dichotomy hinders regional progress and sustains "stabilitocracy," which has been the worst option for over two decades.

Political instability in fragile nations often leads to the dismantling of public administration and security institutions, resulting in unfinished policies and difficulties in implementation.[47] While participating in EU-led CSDP missions, regional defense cooperation, and strategic dialogues, Western Balkan nations do not fully engage in core EU defense structures such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) on Security and Defense or the European Defence Agency. Their dedication and performance within the EU's defense framework remain restricted and selective, often more symbolic than transformative.[48] Their contributions are modest in scope due to limited capabilities, and frequently motivated more by political signaling—aimed at appearing aligned with EU values—than by genuine strategic defense integration.

Lessons learned from these missions have not been institutionalized domestically, and donor-driven defense reforms, capability development, and institutional restructuring in line with EU standards have predominated. Interoperability with EU forces, military education, defense industry development, and civil-military coordination remain underdeveloped. NATO or donor priorities are not driven by shared EU ambitions and often fragment the cooperation.

EU external governance has a significant influence on regional security cooperation and security reforms in the Western Balkans. It is essential for aligning Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo more closely with the frameworks guiding progress on the path to EU integration. Such reforms must be consistent

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[45] "At Berlin Process Summit, Western Balkans Leaders Discuss Regional Cooperation, European Integration," Center for Western Balkans Studies, October 17, 2023, https://cfwbs.org/at-berlin-process-summit-western-balkans-leaders-discuss-regional-cooperation-european-integration/.

[46] Dimitar Bechev, "What Has Stopped EU Enlargement in the Western Balkans?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 20, 2022, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2022/06/what-has-stopped-eu-enlargement-in-the-western-balkans.

[47] OECD, "Public Administration in the Western Balkans 2024: Regional Overview of Assessments against the Principles of Public Administration," SIGMA Monitoring Reports (Paris: OECD Publishing, March 2025), https://doi.org/10.1787/1ec4c18f-en.

[48] Filip Ejdus and Ana E. Juncos, "Security Sector Reform as a Driver of Resilience in the Western Balkans: The Role of the Common Security and Defence Policy" (Geneva: DCAF, 2018), https://www.dcaf.ch/sites/default/files/publications/documents/20181008_EU18_AUT_MoD_SSR_as_driver_for_resilience_DCAF_STUDIY.pdf.

with the principles of democratic governance and regional cooperation.[49] Security sector reform is inherently linked to regional cooperative security among neighboring states. While the international community supports Western Balkan cooperation programs, differences in interests and historical legacies can hinder regional stability. Efforts to foster mutual understanding and harmonize strategies remain challenging.[50]

Misleading tendencies are exemplified by recurrent incidents, culminating in the attack on September 24, 2023, by Serbian proxy groups on the village of Banjska in northern Kosovo, and the explosion on November 29, 2024, in the Ibër-Lepenci water channel in Zubin Potok, Kosovo.[51] The first incident threatened to destabilize the entire region, while the second aimed to damage what is arguably the most important infrastructure for water and electricity supply.

The "constant Serbian desire to replace the Western view of the foreign policy concept by relying on the East instead of the West"[52] remains a persistent obstacle to fostering regional cooperation based on shared principles and objectives. External actors are interested in developing or amplifying these entangled dynamics. "By using the rhetoric of maintaining supposed brotherhood, coupled with a shared sense of victimhood, the Kremlin has underpinned its foreign policy actions and initiatives to strengthen the politics of the alternative in Serbia."[53] To this point, Russian interests outweigh Serbian interests in the medium and long term.

By addressing the gaps and challenges in the region, NATO and the European Union can enhance the Western Balkans' defense and security by aligning strategic objectives, coordinating capacity-building, and harmonizing reform benchmarks. This includes creating joint platforms, co-financing defense modernization, and fostering a shared strategic culture.

Dissecting the Triadic Entanglement: Interlocking Tensions and Security Sector Implications

The ongoing debates about democratic backsliding in these countries have often remained confined to the minimal criteria for democracy. This served primarily

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49 Jelka Klemenc, Martin Hrabálek, and Vladimir Đorđević, "Regional Security Cooperation Revisited: The Western Balkans as the Future Security Provider," *European Security* 30, no. 2 (2021): 285-304, https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2021.1872545.

50 Engjellushe Morina, "Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans: Berlin Process and Open Balkan Initiative," *JIDEES Magazine*, January 23, 2025, https://revistaidees.cat/en/la-cooperacio-regional-als-balcans-occidentals-el-proces-de-berlin-i-la-iniciativa-balcans-oberts/.

51 Sofija Popović, "One Year since Banjska – Event That Permanently Changed the Course of the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue?" European Western Balkans, September 24, 2024, https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2024/09/24/one-year-since-banjska-event-that-permanently-changed-the-course-of-the-belgrade-pristina-dialogue/.

52 Vučković and Radeljić, "You Are Either with Us, or against Us."

53 Vučković, "The West Is Dear, but the East Is Dearer."

the interests of the ruling political elites and allowed them to maintain control.[54] Specific authoritarian elites in the Western Balkans regularly revert to fallback options, such as the manipulation of unresolved bilateral disputes, particularly during political crises or elections. As one analysis notes, "The first way in which they achieve this impact is by allowing political elites to instrumentalize security concerns and identity politics by placing them at the center of political discourse." [55] Autocrats frequently exploit unresolved bilateral disputes during times of political turbulence or electoral competition, exacerbating instability in the region's security institutions.

Populist leaders frequently align these causes with national interests, especially in the case of Serbia, where Kosovo is framed as a matter of state interest. Political strategies are centered on "protecting Kosovo Serbs, preventing the full secession of Kosovo and its admission to the United Nations, and buying time until a new balance of power emerges in world politics." [56] From the Serbian perspective, this "could lead to preconditions for a fairer resolution to the Kosovo issue." [57] However, the history of ethnic cleansing and violence during the breakup of the former Yugoslavia has made Kosovo a settled issue for many. It is no longer possible to govern a population composed primarily of Kosovo Albanians, who have fought for their independence, speak a distinct language, maintain a unique culture, and are committed to joining NATO and the European Union. In terms of threat perception, official and public views in Serbia diverge.[58] While Kosovo remains a national security concern and a major challenge in policy discourse, citizens are more preoccupied with issues such as inflation (83.0 %), the economic crisis (82.8 %), the energy crisis (82.1 %), organized crime (82.1 %), and illicit drug trafficking (80.5 %).[59]

Kosovo faces some difficulties, including the formation of a new government, the unwavering commitment to sovereignty, Serbia's continued refusal to rec-

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[54] Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG), "The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans. Authoritarianism and EU Stabilitocracy," Policy Paper, March 2017, www.biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/BIEPAG-The-Crisis-of-Democracy-in-the-Western-Balkans.-Authoritarianism-and-EU-Stabilitocracy-web.pdf; Marko Kmezić and Florian Bieber, eds., "The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans. An Anatomy of Stabilitocracy and the Limits of EU Democracy Promotion," Policy Study, BiEPAG, March 2017, 9, https://www.biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/The Crisisofdemocracy.pdf.

[55] Petr Čermák, Sofija Todorović, and Agon Maliqi, "8 Challenges for Democracy in the Western Balkans" (Prague: Friedrich Naumann Foundation & Forum 2000, June 2023), www.forum2000.cz/files/12639-8-challenges-for-democracy-in-the-western-balkan.pdf.

[56] Filip Ejdus, "Spinning and Hedging: Serbia's National Security Posture," New Lines Institute, May 8, 2024, https://newlinesinstitute.org/political-systems/spinning-and-hedging-serbias-national-security-posture/.

[57] Ejdus, "Spinning and Hedging."

[58] Ejdus, "Spinning and Hedging."

[59] Ejdus, "Spinning and Hedging."

ognize its independence, and the protracted non-implementation of the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities (ASMM), as required by the 2013 Brussels Agreement. Punitive actions and international censure over Kosovo's unmet commitments have resulted in the stalling of the EU's normalization framework.[60] Moreover, Kosovo's leadership has taken risky stances in response to electoral pressure and Serbian provocations, ignoring diplomatic pleas to advance the ASMM.

According to the West, Kosovo's compliance might shift the political onus to Serbia and open the door to normalization. Nonetheless, asymmetric tactics are still in use: Kosovo views the ASMM as a threat to its sovereignty, while Serbia employs revisionist narratives to expand its influence. The geopolitical shadow of Russia's war in Ukraine exacerbates the cyclical destabilization caused by this adversarial calculus. Importantly, organized crime networks continue to exploit institutional weaknesses in northern Kosovo, which remains a hotspot for instability. Deciphering stakeholder interests that sustain the region's liminal status requires detailed examination.

Kosovo's security is managed by the NATO-led KFOR, highlighting the need for a strategic military presence and diplomacy amid prolonged regional incidents. This hinders Pristina's interests and regional progress, as it underscores Kosovo's inability to manage security issues independently and limits its meaningful exercise of sovereignty While Kosovo relies on KFOR for security and the European Union supports its sovereignty, Serbia and Russia view KFOR's presence as a "foreign occupation," reflecting the deep geopolitical divide that complicates regional stability.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić viewed the March 15, 2024, defense cooperation memorandum between Albania, Kosovo, and Croatia as a regional security threat, stating, "They have opened an arms race in our region... We will protect our country and stop any potential aggressor." [61] While Vučić saw it as a challenge, the agreement aligns with an efficient Euro-Atlantic defense planning and security approach and reflects a broader strategic shift toward an integrated security framework in the region.

In a similar vein—but ironically—Serbia views the Republika Srpska as a vital element in safeguarding its own security, using it as a means to strengthen its influence within the Balkans and bolster its geopolitical position. As a result, the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina has worsened. Republika Srpska forms an

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[60] "Brussels Agreement: First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalization of Relations," The Government of the Republic of Serbia, April 19, 2013, https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/default/files/document/files/2024/05/brussels20agreement.pdf.

[61] "Why Is Serbia Concerned about Military Cooperation between Kosovo and Its Neighbors?" *Telegrafi*, n.d., https://telegrafi.com/en/Why-is-Serbia-concerned-about-military-cooperation-between-Kosovo-and-its-neighbors%3F/; "Vučić 'Hurts' about the Kosovo–Albania–Croatia Alliance, Complains to NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte," *Telegrafi*, n.d., https://telegrafi.com/en/vuciqit-i-dhemb-aleanca-kosove-shqiperi-kroaci-i-ankohet-sekretarit-te-nato-s-mark-rutte/.

obstructive security triangle in the region, encompassing Kosovo, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, due to its "dysfunctionality." [62] "Moscow's main goal is to freeze the status quo and make sure Bosnia remains in limbo." [63] Several incidents demonstrate this.

- In 2020, Bosnia's Serb and Croat representatives in the BiH presidency blocked critical reforms aimed at aligning the country with NATO in terms of military command structure and interoperability. According to Dodik, NATO's presence in BiH represented an imposition of foreign governance.[64]

- Also in 2020, RS leadership pushed for the de facto independence of Republika Srpska, advocating for a referendum on independence. RS leaders claimed that independence was a natural right and alleged that the EU and NATO were trying to weaken the Serb community.[65]

- Since 2018, Dodik has blocked Bosnia's participation in NATO's Annual National Programme, a key step toward NATO membership. His populist rhetoric portrays NATO as a tool of Western imperialism that threatens Bosnian Serbs.[66]

- In 2024 and 2025, BiH continues to play a problematic role in the regional triangle, supporting separatist tendencies in RS, delaying electoral reforms, blocking NATO-related reforms, and failing to recognize Kosovo's sovereignty. BiH has not been able to adopt a more neutral and cooperative foreign policy in the region.[67]

Regional Cooperation and External Actors

Foreign influence thrives in so-called gray zones where effective authority, governance, institutional control, and the rule of law are weak or absent. For exter-

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[62] Dimitar Bechev, "Between the EU and Moscow: How Russia Exploits Divisions in Bosnia," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 27, 2024, https://carnegie endowment.org/research/2024/06/bosnia-between-russia-eu.

[63] Bechev, "Between the EU and Moscow: How Russia Exploits Divisions in Bosnia."

[64] Rasid Krupalija, "Bosniak Leader: Bosnian Serbs Will Eventually Agree to Join NATO," Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), *Balkan Insight* Sarajevo, January 28, 2020, https://balkaninsight.com/2020/01/28/bosniak-leader-bosnian-serbs-will-eventually-agree-to-join-nato/.

[65] "Dodik's Repeated Calls for Republika Srpska Secession Raise Alarm," *Al Jazeera*, February 18, 2020, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/2/18/dodiks-repeated-calls-for-republika-srpska-secession-raise-alarm.

[66] "Bosnia: Republika Srpska Stands Firm in Resisting the Push into NATO," *Lalkar*, January/ February 2022, https://www.lalkar.org/article/3843/bosnia-republika-srpska-stands-firm-in-resisting-the-push-into-nato.

[67] Antonio Bhardwaj, "Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2025: Navigating Political Turmoil, EU Aspirations, and Socioeconomic Challenges," Foreign Affairs Forum, March 8, 2025, https://www.faf.ae/home/2025/3/8/bosnia-and-herzegovina-in-2025-navigating-political-turmoil-eu-aspirations-and-socioeconomic-challenges.

nal actors, such zones provide ideal conditions to establish and strengthen networks of influence and cooperation. Evidence of this can be seen in the presence of "unregulated Chinese surveillance technology in Serbian-majority municipalities in northern Kosovo," as well as in the observed increase in Russian influence among political leaders and organized crime groups within the Serbian community.[68] In such a context, improvements in security sector governance and the development of stable institutions become critical components of broader efforts to address the root causes of instability and build resilience against borderless threats promulgated by external interference.

Based on ethnic, political, and security concerns, Russia uses "proxy state actors" and "proxy nonstate actors"—such as political parties, organizations, churches, media outlets, and other interest groups—to project its power and destabilize the region through both direct and indirect means.[69] These dynamics detract from efforts to foster regional stability, leading to setbacks in democratic and security reforms, often due to inconsistent institutional commitment and persistent gaps in various areas of public governance. Strategic documents often lack a clear focus on how to implement plans and measure results.[70]

The European Union struggles to fulfill its promises in the Western Balkan region, often prolonging hopes through its "open doors" policy and slow integration process.[71] Despite this, societies in these countries—with their collective memory of violent conflicts—support regional cooperation. An overwhelming majority—76 %—believes that regional cooperation can improve political, economic, and security conditions. Moreover, 69 % believe that what unites Western Balkan citizens is more important than what divides them.[72]

The European Union aims to resolve conflicts through negotiation and dialogue, often in collaboration with international organizations such as the United Nations and NATO. However, a realistic approach is crucial, with each country closely observing its internal and external course. Western governments can strengthen their authority and defend their interests by aligning their actions with their stated values.[73]

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[68] Shpat Balaj, "Unpacking Political Dynamics in the Serbian Community in Kosovo," Kosovo Center for Security Studies, July 31, 2023, https://qkss.org/en/blog/unpacking-political-dynamics-in-the-serbian-community-in-kosovo.

[69] Gurakuç Kuçi, "Russia's Hybrid Warfare in the Western Balkans: Geopolitical Strategies and Proxy Actors," *Octopus Journal: Hybrid Warfare & Strategic Conflicts* 3 (October 2024), https://doi.org/10.69921/29031991.

[70] OECD, "Public Administration in the Western Balkans 2024: Regional Overview."

[71] Andrea Bogoni, "Is the EU (Dream of) Enlargement in the Western Balkans Fading? Discussion with Francesco Trupia," *Blue Europe*, February 7, 2025, https://www.blue-europe.eu/analysis-en/interviews-discussions/is-the-eu-dream-of-enlargement-in-the-western-balkans-fading-discussion-with-francesco-trupia/.

[72] "Balkan Barometer 2023 Public Opinion: Key Findings," Regional Cooperation Council, https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/key_findings/2/.

[73] Duncan Allan and Annette Bohr, "Myths and Misconceptions in the Debate on Russia: How They Affect Western Policy, and What Can Be Done," Report – Russia and Eurasia

Addressing states that openly shift away from the EU course indirectly involves dealing with their mentor states and global actors. This means the European Union and other Western actors "should deal with Russia as it is, not as they might like it to be." [74]

Consequences of Disunity and Lack of Trust in Regional Security Cooperation

Small states often align with foreign partners due to limited capabilities and resources. However, they must choose international actors that are willing to engage in joint initiatives and adhere to the integrative plan. The European Union and NATO emphasize respect for international law, including territorial integrity, sovereignty, and the non-use of force. The EU's approach is based on values such as the rule of law and the protection of human rights, while NATO's approach is grounded in deterrence and defense, crisis management, and cooperative security. These values can lead to stability if embodied and effectively implemented.

Russia, however, has been accused of violating international law and norms, particularly through its actions in Ukraine. At a time when the European Union promotes a cooperative security order based on treaties, international cooperation, and support for democratic governance, Russia advocates for a "new pan-European security" architecture that would replace the existing cooperative security order with a system based on a balance of power.[75] Russia's strategy focuses on gaining privileges, restricting the sovereignty of neighboring states, and avoiding criticism for violations of human rights and legal principles. This 19th-century approach contrasts with Western ideals, as it prioritizes security measures over democratic governance and human rights.

At the same time, EU-led Security Sector Reform (SSR) programs are strongly linked to broader sustainable development goals, aiming to integrate security reforms into comprehensive plans for inclusive political, social, and economic advancement.[76] While each state has the right to make independent decisions, these actions must be undertaken within the framework of a shared path anchored in the Stabilization and Association Agreement, the EU CFSP, NATO principles and partnership programs, and other initiatives for enhanced regional security, political dialogue, reform support, and sustainable development in the Balkan region.

Programme (London: Chatham House, May 2021), https://www.chatham house.org/2021/05/myths-and-misconceptions-debate-russia/myth-05-we-need-new-pan-european-security.

[74] Allan and Bohr, "Myths and Misconceptions in the Debate on Russia."

[75] Allan and Bohr, "Myths and Misconceptions in the Debate on Russia."

[76] Allan and Bohr, "Myths and Misconceptions in the Debate on Russia"; European Union, "Security Sector Reform," Capacity4dev, accessed December 4, 2024, https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/resources/results-indicators/security-sector-reform_en.

The security challenges are numerous and affect all of these states, ranging from classical threats to newer ones such as climate change and environmental degradation, managing high levels of emigration, pandemics, arms control, transnational organized crime, and cyber threats.[77] These threats, both old and new, should be continuously addressed under cooperative frameworks.

Serbia's alignment with the EU CFSP has not yet reached the 50 % threshold. It is further complicated by external pressures exerted by actors whose geo-strategic interests contradict those of the European Union and NATO. Serbia re-inforces its close ties with China and Russia in the fields of security, energy, infrastructure, military, and economy. This is part of a broader strategy in which China views Serbia as a gateway to the European market,[78] while Russia sees it as a regional bastion to undermine the EU and NATO integration projects and mount solid opposition to the United States.

Despite these entanglements, Serbia continues to pursue EU integration, using its relationships with these external actors as a balancing act, although it has increasingly favored alignment with the East. Nevertheless, Serbia has prioritized its commitment to freedom and European principles and values, enshrining this dedication in Article 1 of its Constitution. This further suggests that the most effective response for Serbia is to align its foreign and security policy with the European Union as swiftly as possible.[79] The potential for increased security and defense convergence with the rest of Europe is significant and would certainly contribute to lasting peace in the region.[80]

If the geopolitical landscape sees no amplification of power politics associated with the use of hard power, and Russia's war in Ukraine does not further escalate, Kosovo represents a foregone conclusion for Serbia. The status quo of the region at this phase is a testament to international interventions that sought to save a region embroiled in longstanding conflicts and ethnic cleansing, which violated basic human rights. In 1999, NATO decided to act without UN authorization out of overwhelming humanitarian necessity – a situation where a "humanitarian emergency" marked a turning point in the evolution of international humanitarian law.[81]

The region represents a *de facto* reality shaped by aspirations for independence and self-determination rooted in ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identities.

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[77] Mentor Beqa, "The Future Is Cooperative!? Perceptions and Reality from the Western Balkans," CSDG and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2022, https://csdgalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Paper-01-Mentor-Beqa.pdf.

[78] Vučković and Radeljić, "You Are Either with Us, or against Us."

[79] Nikola Lunic, "Can Kosovo Join NATO Ahead of Turn?" *Kosovo Online*, March 19, 2024, https://www.kosovo-online.com/en/news/analysis/can-kosovo-join-nato-ahead-turn-19-3-2024.

[80] Crosson, "Enlarging the European Defence Union to the Western Balkans."

[81] Albert Legault, "NATO Intervention in Kosovo: The Legal Context," *Canadian Military Journal* (Spring 2000): 63-66, 64, https://www.journal.forces.gc.ca/vo1/no1/doc/63-66-eng.pdf.

Simultaneously, it reflects the international community's sustained investment in a *de jure* configuration aimed at promoting peace and stability. As one observer notes, the region remains a key site of NATO's political engagement, where its core tasks—deterrence and defense, crisis management, and cooperative security—converge with the evolution of international humanitarian law.[82] Apart from that, "all the security cooperation initiatives and mechanisms in the Western Balkans can hardly be described as offering any kind of cooperative security, not to mention a 'security community'." [83]

It is evident that persistent gaps and divergent perspectives exist among Western Balkan states—such as between Serbia and Kosovo—and within states, such as the intrastate divides in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is widely acknowledged that these security issues, which affect all Western Balkan states similarly, cannot be effectively addressed without establishing, fostering, and operationalizing two essential principles: trust and solidarity.

The absence of a unified security community and a cooperation framework based on trust and solidarity exacerbates instability by encouraging nationalist rhetoric, authoritarianism, and public manipulation. This, in turn, makes the Western Balkans more vulnerable to fear-based governance, outdated security measures, and democratic backsliding. Weak security cooperation sustains authoritarianism and enables political tactics based on fear and offensive measures. Addressing these challenges requires reinforcing democratic norms, depoliticizing security institutions, and cultivating a shared vision to promote regional dialogue across various sectors as a synergistic engine for enhancing resilience, inclusiveness, and reciprocity.

Conclusion

Hard power dynamics at the international level challenge even major actors such as NATO and the European Union in fully asserting their regional influence in the Western Balkans. Their efforts often clash with populist and nationalist local leaderships, while institutional, legal, and governance weaknesses remain key sources of insecurity. External actors that oppose integration further hinder progress. Prioritizing narrow interests undermines broader security goals, highlighting the need for good governance reforms. Although cooperative security may seem the most appropriate course of action in the Western Balkans, states often shift toward divergent values, risking increased insecurity as they prioritize individual interests over regional cohesion.

The three states analyzed here—often seen as sources of instability in the region—remain at the forefront of regional security efforts. NATO member states in the Western Balkans, however, should not be discouraged by current challenges or politically charged rhetoric when initiating projects; instead, they should set good examples through effective cooperation. By continuing to drive

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[82] Panero, "The Western Balkans into NATO."

[83] Beqa, "The Future Is Cooperative!? Perceptions and Reality," 8.

smart defense policies and joint infrastructure and technology investments, they can contribute to the development of integrated defense systems. Integrated responses—rather than fragmented or duplicative ones—will help build a coherent regional security network. Their strategy for constructing cooperation and resilience can reshape the regional narrative into one of greater trust, integration, and long-term stability.

The defense approach can be more efficient in advancing the principles of "combining, integrating, and sharing" within the guidance set by NATO for a smarter, cooperative defense planning and action mandate.[84] The focus of NATO members in the Western Balkans should be on fulfilling national needs while also expanding beyond the regional market. In this context, investments in armaments—both individually and collaboratively—continue to support NATO's goals of promoting peace and stability.

The international community and civil society must demonstrate greater dedication to sustaining regional multilateralism and cooperation frameworks such as NATO and the European Union, especially in the face of widening geopolitical divides between the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian spheres. This calls for concerted efforts, including strategic financing and renewed EU diplomacy, particularly in providing tangible guarantees for the mediation of bilateral disputes. Political limitations, leadership egos, lack of trust, and inefficient—often biased—negotiation strategies that ignore implementation and follow-up actions are the main causes of persistent failures.

Instead of engaging in dangerous security games and tactics that foster fear and insecurity, states should be encouraged to pursue dialogue, address common challenges, and establish platforms for cooperation while aligning their security policies and other crucial policies in related sectors. To tackle common issues, states should place more emphasis on communication, collaboration, and coordinated policies rather than on fear-based security measures. Building a shared security vision requires setting specific objectives and cooperating on defense projects, cyber defense, logistics, and countering disinformation. Since acting alone only leads to isolation, outdated political mindsets must evolve to embrace trust, mutual reliance, and collective action. By supporting ongoing initiatives, combining resources, and establishing an open, predictable, and effective security community based on shared interests, Western allies can improve regional stability in the Western Balkans.

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[84] "Chicago Summit Declaration on Defence Capabilities: Toward NATO Forces 2020," https://otan.delegfrance.org/Summit-Declaration-on-Defence; "NATO 2022 Strategic Concept," adopted at the 2022 Madrid Summit, https://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/.

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