POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Study Group Regional Stability in South East Europe (RSSEE SG)

"Transatlantic Relations Under Scrutiny – Implications for the Western Balkans"

51st RSSEE SG Workshop
„Regional Stability in South East Europe"
21 — 24 September 2026
Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

PfP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes

Executive Summary of Recommendations

- **EU/US:** Establish a coordination format to align on essential WB issues.
- **EU/US:** Conclude the appointment of a new High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH).
- **EU/US:** Harmonise US energy, infrastructure and investment projects with the integration of WB states into the EU market.
- **EU:** Develop funding mechanisms that enable long-term civil society cooperation in the WB.
- **EU:** Finalize Montenegro's accession process so that it can become a member in 2028.
- **EU:** Offer credible integration safeguards against further bilateral vetoes.
- **EU:** Support all political actors in Serbia and other WB states that advocate democracy and equality before the law.
- **WB Governments:** Ensure transparency on foreign infrastructure and economic deals to align them with EU standards.
- **WB Governments:** Regulate surveillance technology received from China, Israel or other countries to protect privacy rights of citizens.

Situation Analysis

The transatlantic relations, which used to be very close, are being replaced by a new relationship between the US and Europe in an increasingly multipolar world. There is now hardly any coherence between the US under President Donald Trump and the EU when it comes to political objectives, particularly in the area of democracy. The normative priorities of most EU Member State are not in accordance with the US Government's transactional policy, which is geared towards economic deals. Despite this, a significant overlap in shared security interests persists. Even under the Trump II administration, the US has no interest in a completely destabilised Europe. Thus, the US remains a key factor in the functioning of the NATO alliance.

The current state of transatlantic relations is also reflected in the context of the still fragile peace-building process in the Western Balkans (WB). The EU's still-official claim of supporting democratic transition and regional cooperation in the WB stands in contrast to the current US position, according to which "local actors alone" must find solutions "for local problems" (i.e., internal conflicts in BiH, tensions between Belgrade and Pristina, etc.). Consequently, the US is increasingly distancing itself from international deterrence mechanisms, such as the "Bonn Powers" of the High Representative in BiH. Even the successful sanctions policy against the clientelist-autocratic system of Milorad Dodik, the key political figure in the Republika Srpska entity of BiH, was abandoned by the US due to successful lobbying activities from political figures from the RS – much to the detriment of the functioning of BiH as a state.

The EU, for its part, loses credibility due to the fact that, whilst it sets conditions on democratisation for the integration process of the WB candidate countries, there are significant differences between the European Parliament and the Commission regarding the implementation of these conditions. Thus, the Commission is accused of being too

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lenient towards governments in the WB that are moving towards stabilitocracy and are using authoritarian methods to crack down on independent media and civil society.

Generally speaking, the US and Europe continue to share common security interests in the WB with regard to the NATO-led KFOR mission in Kosovo and the EUFOR mission in BiH, which is supported by NATO under the Berlin Plus framework. However, particularly in BiH and Kosovo, concerns have emerged that a reduced US support for NATO could jeopardise the current peace-support missions. For example, a withdrawal of the still very substantial US contingent within KFOR (approx. 600 military personnel) would have a substantial negative impact on the already tense security situation in Kosovo.

Currently, the WB states are attempting to adapt their policies to the current geopolitical situation. Croatia, as an important regional EU neighbour of the WB states, is one of the driving forces behind the "Three Seas Initiative", together with Poland, which was launched in 2016. The aim is both to promote the security interests of Central and Eastern European EU and NATO member states and to incorporate US interests. For Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro and North Macedonia, the US and NATO are the most important strategic partners in matters of regional security, whilst the EU is regarded as their most important political and economic partner. Under Aleksandar Vučić, Serbia has pursued a multi-vector foreign policy, which regards China and Russia as partners on a par with the EU and the US. Under this concept, arms supplies from Russia and China to Serbia are entirely compatible with the Serbian Army's active involvement in NATO's Partnership for Peace programme and its cooperation with the Ohio National Guard. Lastly, BiH continues to face difficulties in establishing a common foreign and security policy due to ongoing internal conflicts. For this reason, the official EU and NATO integration policy is being thwarted primarily by the pro-Russian stance of the political leadership of the BiH entity Republika Srpska.

In the context of transatlantic relations, which are currently undergoing change, the lack of political support for the EU integration process in the WB under the Trump II administration could widen the gap between the regional "EU frontrunners", Montenegro and Albania, and the other WB states. A persistent lag in the EU integration process could have a negative impact on domestic reforms in these countries. North Macedonia, in particular, could see a resurgence of inter-ethnic tensions should its integration remain blocked in the long term due to unresolved bilateral issues with Bulgaria. Alongside the Ohrid Agreement from 2001, integration into NATO (which was already achieved) and the goal of EU membership form the unifying bond between ethnic Macedonian and ethnic Albanian politicians in North Macedonia.

Against this backdrop of geopolitical and regional instability, particular attention must be paid to additional international influences in the WB. This applies not only to Russian disinformation campaigns and measures to support nationalist actors. In the field of security in particular, the WB states are now subject to a wide variety of influences. Not only does the surveillance technology commonly used in the WB originate in China, a potential rival to the EU, but also Israeli companies are actively pursuing deals and partnerships in the security sector in the WB. Critics within civil society argue therefore that there are insufficient safeguards in place for such technologies, making the danger of misuse highly possible.

Policy Recommendations

With Reference to Transatlantic Relations and General EU and US Policies toward the WB

To the EU and US Government:

- A standing EU-US coordination format on the WB at senior official level would be welcome, meeting at least quarterly, to align official positions on elections, sanctions, energy and security.

- Develop and share a single list of red lines when it comes to the WB. These should cover secessionism, Russian and Chinese malign influence, attacks on electoral integrity and attempts to undermine democracy. Back the list with joint messaging, especially around expected elections and malign hybrid influence.

- Establish a formal trilateral consultation mechanism including non-EU/non-NATO WB states (Serbia, BiH, Kosovo). Acknowledge divergent approaches: the US focuses on immediate stability and economic interests; the EU prioritises rule-of-law reforms and regional reconciliation. Ensure transparency to prevent mixed messaging among regional partners.

- Transatlantic partners have to continue their collaboration in South East Europe, thus contributing to security and stability of the WB region. This includes the continuation of successful multilateral initiatives, such as the US-sponsored Adriatic Charter, and a coordinated stance on KFOR and EUFOR deployments.

To the EU:

- Maintain strategic engagement with the US while preserving political autonomy. Coordinate where interests converge – particularly on counterbalancing Russian and Chinese influence – while advancing EU accession-linked democratic reforms that diverge from transactional US security priorities under the current administration.

- Complement US-led security architecture with targeted EU engagement addressing gaps in "non-integrated" WB states by fostering civilian security sector reform, cross-border judicial cooperation, and democratic resilience against foreign malign interference.

- Develop funding mechanisms that enable long-term civil society cooperation in the WB, particularly to build trust when dealing with the past and advancing reconciliation, but also to counteract the negative impact of the cutting of US funding for civil society and media.



Photo: Partnership for Peace Consortium/Olaf GARLICH

To the US Government:

- Focus on filling the vacant ambassadorial and senior administrative posts at important levels, since the absence of a strong diplomatic presence is interpreted as political disengagement.

With Reference to WB Policies regarding Transatlantic Relations

To the WB Governments:

- Revive regional cooperation. Use the EU Growth Plan to show absorption capacity and cut dependence on bilateral deals with outside powers.

- Ensure transparency on foreign deals. Energy, infrastructure and defence agreements with the US, China or Russia should be publicly scrutinised and aligned with EU standards.

With Reference to Bosnia and Herzegovina

To the EU and US Government:

- Conclude the identification and appointment of a new High Representative in BiH in close coordination with other members of the Peace Implementation Council. The High Representative must be able to react on subversive behaviour of local political actors by applying the Bonn Powers.

With Reference to Kosovo

To the EU and Member States:

- Take greater responsibility to support the reform pathway in Kosovo, but also increase your engagement in the NATO framework in order to overcome strategic insecurity.

- Railroad both Kosovo and Serbia into implementing the measures agreed upon in the Brussels negotiations from 2023 on normalisation of bilateral relations.

With Reference to Montenegro

To the EU and Member States:

- Take decisive actions without delay, close Montenegro's remaining chapters and finalize Montenegro's accession process to become a full-fledged member by 2028.

- Following the Montenegrin example, roadmaps for the other WB candidates should be followed by concrete steps, conditions to be fullfiled and clear deadlines.

To the Montenegrin Government and Parliament:

- Avoid all actions that could undermine Montenegro's political stability in the final stage of

negotiations with EU, and exercise caution on malign influence and hybrid actions coming from external actors, including regional players, aimed at hindering Montenegro from joining the EU.



Photo: Partnership for Peace Consortium/Olaf GARLICH

With Reference to North Macedonia

To the EU:

- Treat enlargement as a strategic security imperative to break the current deadlock by depoliticizing the accession process and offering credible, phased integration safeguards against further bilateral vetoes.

To the Government of North Macedonia:

- Maintain the reform momentum independently of negotiating chapters, and build cross-party consensus on constitutional commitments while leveraging full foreign policy and security alignment with the EU as an indispensable asset to European stability.

With Reference to Serbia

To the EU:

- All EU funds, as well as the accession negotiations process with Serbia itself, should be conditioned on substantial improvement of the situation regarding rule of law in Serbia, establishment of a free electoral process, freedom of media and sanctioning of the glorification of war criminals.

- Strongly support all political actors in Serbia who advocate the respect of core European values such as democracy, rule of law and equality before the law.

With Reference to International Actors outside the Transatlantic Framework

To the EU and US Government:

- US energy, infrastructure and investment projects should be built around EU market integration. US-backed projects in the region related to infrastructure and energy, such as the Southern Gas Interconnection between Croatia and BiH, can work best when they are coordinated with the EU. That serves both US commercial interests and regional diversification away from Russian supply, and sends clear signals to Chinese investments on the expected framework and context.

To the WB Governments:

- The usage of surveillance technology from countries such as China and Israel must be regulated and restricted in a way that data protection, basic human rights and specifically privacy rights can be guaranteed in accordance with EU standards.



Photo: BMLV/NDA/Agathe FORMANEK

These Policy Recommendations reflect the findings of the 51st RSSEE workshop on "Transatlantic Relations Under Scrutiny – Implications for the Western Balkans", convened by the PfP Consortium Study Group "Regional Stability in South East Europe" in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 21 – 24 September 2026. They were prepared by Predrag Jureković (Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna) on the basis of the proposals submitted by the participants. Valuable support in proofreading and layouting came from Agathe Formanek (Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna).