Security Perceptions and Their Impact on Regional Cooperation in South East Europe

Predrag Jureković (Ed.)

Study Group Information

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48th Workshop of the PfP Consortium Study Group
"Regional Stability in South East Europe

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Table of Contents

Foreword

Predrag Jureković

This volume is composed of articles from the 48th workshop of the Study Group "Regional Stability in South East Europe". The workshop was conducted in Reichenau, Austria, from 15 to 18 May, 2025. Under the overarching title "Security Perceptions and Their Impact on Regional Cooperation in South East Europe" experts from the South East European region and other parts of Europe, international organizations and major stake holder nations met under the umbrella of the PfP Consortium of Defence Academies and Security Studies Institutes and the Austrian Ministry of Defence, represented through its National Defence Academy and the Directorate General for Defence Policy.

In recent decades, the Western Balkans have been the target of international peace support programs more than almost any other post-war region. The final goal has been to transform this part of South East Europe into an area of cooperative security in parallel with its integration into the EU and, in most cases, NATO. However, while NATO integration has partially taken place, EU integration remains a longer-term process in the case of the Western Balkans 6 (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia).

Moreover, peace consolidation in the Western Balkans has long ceased to be a linear process. Democratic setbacks in individual countries, unresolved bilateral and domestic conflict issues and a more uncertain international environment due to geopolitical antagonisms have significantly increased volatility in South East Europe in recent years. The transatlantic relationship, which is particularly important for progress in the consolidation process in the Western Balkans, has also been severely shaken by the shift in US foreign policy following the election victory of President Donald Trump.

Regional experts are even reporting a new "arms race" at regional level. Against this backdrop, the question arises as to how the Western Balkan

states perceive their neighbours in terms of security. How are these perceptions reflected in the strategic documents, in concrete security policy and overall neighbourly relations? Is the Western Balkans on the path to strengthening cooperative security or is there a risk of new dividing lines within this region? How are current international crises affecting regional security in South East Europe?

What instruments and programmes do important international organizations such as the EU, NATO and the OSCE have at their disposal to support security cooperation in South East Europe? In which areas would more targeted international support be necessary? What role do the international peace support missions EUFOR and KFOR still play in regional security in the Western Balkans? And finally, what about regional ownership? Are regional initiatives to promote security cooperation achieving what they set out to do?

These are some of the key questions that the authors of this Study Group Information address in their contributions. The first part of this publication includes the country studies of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. They addresses the perception of neighbors and the international situation in the area of security policy. Further, the impact of perceptions on strategic documents, the security policy and overall regional relations of individual countries is being analyzed as well as their impact on regional and international security initiatives and peace support missions.

The contributions of the second part describe and analyze the role of international organizations in strengthening regional security cooperation through concrete programmes. This is followed in part three by contributions about the role of regional initiatives in Southeast Europe in building confidence and strengthening regional security. The recommendations of the Study Group members are summarized at the end of this publication, in part IV.

The editor would like to express his thanks to all authors who contributed papers to this volume of the Study Group Information. He is pleased to present the valued readers the analyses and recommendations and would appreciate if this Study Group Information could contribute to generate

positive ideas for supporting the still challenging processes of consolidating peace in South East Europe.

Abstract

Ongoing conflicts and the volatile geopolitical situation are hampering the development of South-East Europe into a region of cooperative security. The security perceptions of individual regional states towards neighboring countries are sometimes negative. On the other hand, the NATO membership of some of the Western Balkan states has led to a strengthening of common security interests in the region.

As the contributions in this volume show, In terms of security, the region finds itself in a state between new dividing lines and regional cooperation. International support from the EU, OSCE and NATO, as well as existing regional initiatives, are indispensable contributions to improving security cooperation. However, the successful completion of the EU integration process, ensuring democratic development and resolving outstanding conflict issues are essential for lasting success.

PART I: Cooperative Security vs. Dividing Lines in South East Europe – Country Studies

Between Division and Dialogue: Serbia's Security Perceptions of Neighbours and Their Regional Impact

Ivana Ranković

Introduction

In the evolving geopolitical context of the Western Balkans, Serbia occupies a central and complex position. As the largest non-EU country in the region with an ongoing but stalled EU accession process, a declared policy of military neutrality, and close ties to both Western and non-Western powers, Serbia's foreign and security policy exerts significant influence on regional dynamics. Its political decisions, security partnerships, and public narratives not only shape domestic governance but also resonate across South East Europe, impacting neighbouring countries' stability and integration paths.

Serbia's perceptions of its neighbours and its regional relations cannot be understood without considering its broader foreign policy framework, often described as a "balancing act" or "multi-vector approach". Officially committed to European integration, Serbia simultaneously maintains deep political, economic, and security ties with Russia and China. This approach allows Serbian government, under the autocratic leadership of President Aleksandar Vučić, to navigate between competing interests, secure foreign investments, and appeal to diverse domestic audiences. However, this strategic ambiguity has also led to inconsistencies between Serbia's formal alignment with EU objectives and its actual policy behaviours, particularly regarding relations with Russia.

These contradictions are visible in Serbia's interactions with its neighbours. From supporting political allies in Montenegro and Republika Srpska, to engaging in symbolic defence cooperation with Hungary, Serbia's regional positioning reflects both strategic pragmatism and nationalist elements. These dual tendencies raise critical questions: Is Serbia a reliable partner for regional stability or a factor of division? How does it perceive regional security, and what does that mean for the Western Balkans' Euro-Atlantic trajectory?

**Serbia's Foreign Policy Framework:
Balancing between East and West**

Serbia's perceptions of and relations with the neighbouring countries should be viewed within the broader context of Serbia's strategic positioning, which is often characterised as a balancing act or "sitting on multiple chairs". In practice, this approach reflects Serbia's ambition to keep all options open – with both Western and Eastern powers and to avoid becoming too dependent on any country or bloc, hoping to benefit politically and economically from each. Specifically, Serbia officially aspires to join the European Union and continues formal accession negotiations, yet simultaneously nurtures close relationships with Russia, China, and certain Gulf states.

This foreign policy orientation is not something new. It evolved from earlier foreign policy approach pursued by previous democratic governments before 2012 and became more defined after Serbia's declaration of military neutrality in 2007. In the "Resolution on the Protection of the Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity, and Constitutional Order of the Republic of Serbia", adopted by the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, it is stated that due to NATO's overall role in Kosovo's independency, Serbia declares military neutrality with respect to existing military alliances.[1] In 2009, then-President Boris Tadić articulated the so-called "Four Pillars" doctrine, prioritising relations with the EU, the United States, Russia, and China, as the foundation of Serbia's international positioning. Although it has never been elaborated in written form, declaratively, it served as the main foreign policy doctrine.[2]

Upon coming to power in 2012, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) embraced and expanded this doctrine. Under the autocratic leadership of President Aleksandar Vučić, Serbia's political system has increasingly shifted

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[1]   Official gazette of the Republic of Serbia, *Resolution of the National Assembly on the Protection of the Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity, and Constitutional Order of the Republic of Serbia*, 26 December 2007, http://demo.paragraf.rs/demo/combined/Old/t/t2007_12/t12_0196.htm.

[2]   Aleksandar Gajić and Slobodan Janković, „Četiri stuba srpske spoljne politike" [The four pillars of Serbian foreign policy] in *Spoljna politika Srbije i zajednička spoljna i bezbednosna politika EU* [*Serbia's foreign policy and the EU's common foreign and security policy*], ed. Dragan Đukanović and Miloš Jončić, 2012, Belgrade, Institute of International Politics and Economics, http://repozitorijum.diplomacy.bg.ac.rs/369/1/22.%20Spoljna%20politika%Srbije.....%282012%29-176-199.pdf.

toward an electoral autocracy. The SNS has concentrated all the power in its hands and consolidated control over the judiciary, media, and security services, resulting in a highly centralised and personalised decision-making process, including in the foreign policy domain. Vučić plays a dominant role in shaping Serbia's international orientation, often prioritising short-term political gains over long-term strategic alignment.

In comparison to the previous governments, the current regime additionally strengthened relations with China and Russia and established economic cooperation with the United Arab Emirates. Serbia lacks a formal foreign policy strategy or similar strategic documents that would clearly define its international orientation. Instead, its foreign policy direction is primarily shaped by the public statements of state officials, while certain strategic elements can be found in other documents, such as the National Security Strategy and the National Defence Strategy. Although not officially defined as such, the balancing between Western and Eastern powers is reflected in Serbia's strategic documents to a certain extent. For example, Serbia's 2019 National Security Strategy highlights that Serbia should continue to improve its relations not only with the EU and the U.S., but also with Russia and China "in order to further promote democracy, stability, and regional prosperity".[3] It is also noted that Serbia's cooperation with NATO, "based on the policy of military neutrality and implemented through the Partnership for Peace programme, as well as its observer status in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), contributes to the stability of Serbia".

Although Serbia does not aspire to become a NATO member, its simultaneous engagement with the Russian-run CSTO as an observer, while framing both alliances as equally significant in its strategic documents, reveals inconsistency with the country's official EU integration goals. As an EU candidate country, Serbia is expected to demonstrate a clear and principled commitment to the EU's values, principles and foreign and security policy frameworks. Yet, the reality is different – Serbia's official declarations of pro-European alignment stand in contrast to its actual behaviour on the global stage.

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[3] Ministry of Defence, Republic of Serbia, *National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia*, Belgrade, 2021, https://www.mod.gov.rs/multimedia/dodaci/prilog2_strategijanacionalnebezbednostirs_eng_1731678276.pdf.

Serbian government has never officially rejected the policy of EU accession, primarily to maintain access to the EU funds. Instead, it formally names EU accession as the country's primary foreign policy goal, but in practice, it does the opposite and cultivates ties with authoritarian regimes such as those of Russia and China. This kind of balancing policy also means avoiding some of the responsibilities Serbia has towards the EU and the Western partners, like imposing sanctions on Russia following the invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, the Serbian government offers certain symbolic gestures to Western actors to keep up the image of cooperation and dedication to the EU accession process.[4]

The war in Ukraine has further exposed the contradictions of Serbia's balancing strategy. With the geopolitical divide between Russia and the West deepening, Serbia's attempts to maintain relations between both sides have become increasingly untenable. As a country that is already negotiating its accession to the European Union, Serbia is formally required to progressively align with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CSFP). However, in 2024, Serbia aligned with only around 47% of EU foreign policy declarations, a figure significantly lower than that of other candidate countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and North Macedonia aligned with 100% of them).[5] Serbia's refusal to adopt sanctions against Russia illustrates how geopolitical loyalty to Moscow often takes precedence over alignment with EU standards. While the government reiterates its commitment to EU accession, such inconsistencies undermine trust in Serbia's European ambitions. The country's leadership shows an ideological affinity for Eastern governance models, yet it is fully aware that it sits on the Western, Euro-Atlantic frontier.

Such multi-vector foreign policy has had a clear impact on public opinion. Survey data from 2024 reveals that population is divided in its foreign poli-

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4   Predrag Petrović, *Strategic (Dis)Orientation of Vučić's Serbia: Reluctantly Moving West, Willingly Embracing the East*, Atlantic Initiative, 2024, https://atlanticinitiative.org/policy-paper-strategic-desorientation-of-vucics-serbia-reluctantly-moving-west-willingly-embracing-the-east-by-predrag-petrovic/.

5   European Western Balkans, *Alignment with EU foreign policy in the Western Balkans: Serbia at 47%, other countries at 100%*, 19 September 2024, https://europeanwestern balkans.com/2024/09/19/alignment-with-eu-foreign-policy-in-the-western-balkans-serbia-at-47-other-countries-at-100/.

cy preferences, reflecting the ambiguity of the country's strategic direction. Most citizens believe that Serbia should align more or less with Russia – more precisely, 27% believe that Serbia's foreign policy should be pro-Russian but at the same time maintaining ties with the EU. Another 12% advocate for a complete pivot toward Russia. In contrast, only 10% of Serbian citizens support a full commitment to the EU and Western alliances, while 14% prefer a predominantly pro-Western foreign policy that still upholds relations with Russia. However, the dominant sentiment is balanced: two-thirds of the population believe Serbia should remain equally aligned with both East and West. This prevailing view also helps explain the declining support for EU accession, which now stands at approximately 40%.[6]

This foreign policy context is critical for understanding Serbia's security perceptions of its neighbours. Its approach to regional cooperation, as well as its perceptions of potential threats and alliances, are strongly influenced by its broader international positioning. While Serbia maintains diplomatic and economic relations with all Western Balkan states, its most strained and consequential relationships are with Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. These cases will be examined in more detail in the following sections, as they illustrate the tension between cooperative security and divisive strategies in Serbia's regional policy. Serbia's views on other neighbouring countries and how they are reflected in its strategic documents, will be briefly addressed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the regional relations.

Serbia's Regional Relations: Strategic Interests and Political Realities

According to the Serbian National Security Strategy from 2019, Serbia's relations with its neighbouring countries are largely stable, as they are not burdened by disputed issues that could lead to the use of force. Therefore, there are no military threats to its national security and "the likelihood of armed conflicts is significantly reduced".[7] However, this assessment does

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6   REUNIR, *Mapping existing surveys and perceptions that actors in EN and WB countries have (the policies and (in)actions of) the EU and other external actors*, 2024, https://reunir-horizon.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/REUNIR-D6.1–-MAPPING-EXISTING-SURVEYS-AND-PERCEPTIONS-1-1.pdf.

7   Ministry of Defence, Republic of Serbia, *National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia*, Belgrade, 2021, https://www.mod.gov.rs/multimedia/dodaci/prilog2_strategijanacionalnebezbednostirs_eng_1731678276.pdf.

not apply to Kosovo, because Serbia does not recognise its independence. Thus, it is not referred to in strategic documents as a neighbouring country, but as the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija.

Officially, Serbia promotes regional peace, cooperation, and good neighbourly relations as long-term strategic goals. These aims include advancement of cooperation and stability in the region through infrastructure development, trade, and investment partnerships with both EU member states and countries aspiring to join the EU. In principle, Serbia seeks to position itself as a constructive actor and trustworthy partner in bilateral and multilateral forums, as stated in the National Security Strategy.[8] Yet, the reality on the ground often reveals a more complex and politically charged set of relationships, marked by historical tensions, identity politics, and competing geopolitical interests.

Relations with Montenegro, for example, are less confrontational than with other neighbours, but being deeply influenced by identity politics and historical ties, they are far from uncomplicated. After the change of government in Montenegro in 2020, identity-based tensions with Serbia aggravated. The main issue revolves around Serbian involvement in Montenegro's affairs through the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) and pro-Serbian political parties that are currently part of the governing coalition. The extent of the SOC's influence in Montenegro and its ability to mobilise the population has been demonstrated in moments of political crises. For instance, in 2020, large-scale protests erupted in response to the 2019 Law on Religious Freedoms that sought to transfer ownership of religious property lacking proper documentation to the Montenegrin state. The SOC played a central role in organising and leading these protests, which ultimately contributed to the electoral defeat of Montenegro's long-standing ruling party and the formation of a new, ideologically diverse, and unstable government. This highlights not only the socio-political power of the SOC within Montenegro but also reflects the broader scope of Serbia's political leverage in the country through religious and ideological channels.

Currently, the presence of pro-Serbian parties in Montenegrin government, such as the New Serbian Democracy, Socialist People's Party, and

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8   Ibid.

Democratic People's Party, ensures a degree of political alignment, but also presents a source of potential problems. While these groups claim to legitimately represent the interests of ethnic Serbs, they are widely seen as closely aligned with, if not directly influenced by, Belgrade and President Vučić. Therefore, pro-Serbian parties in Montenegro are seen as beyond sharing ideological and national identity links with Belgrade – they are direct political allies of President Vučić. Their presence in government introduces potential channels for external interference, undermining Montenegro's governance and creating instability that could be intensified in times of political crisis in Serbia. Identity-based disputes, such as the question of language or citizenship, continue to fuel polarisation in both countries.

In contrast, Serbia's perception of North Macedonia in terms of security is relatively pragmatic and cooperative. While Serbia remains officially neutral regarding North Macedonia's NATO membership, it has not expressed strong opposition, despite its own non-alignment stance. Also, Serbian regime views positively the current government in North Macedonia, which is led by a nationalist-conservative VMRO-DPMNE. Following the May 2024 elections and VMRO-DPMNE's decisive victory, Serbian then-Prime Minister underlined the closeness of the two nations and expressed willingness to work together. It is often perceived that North Macedonia's new leadership looks to Serbia's foreign policy balancing act as a potential model, particularly in navigating its own pro-Russian domestic sentiments. Nonetheless, key differences remain. North Macedonia is already a NATO member and has shown a stronger institutional commitment to EU integration than Serbia. Moreover, while political styles may overlap, particularly in terms of populist governance, the two governments diverge on a critical issue for Serbia – the status of Kosovo.[9]

Serbia's relationship with Albania has gone through a period of cautious optimism, largely due to the launch of the Open Balkan initiative. Conceived as a regional economic integration project between Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia, the initiative aimed to enable the free movement of

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[9]   Politika, *Severna Makedonija nema bližeg prijatelja od Srbije* [*North Macedonia has no closer friend than Serbia*], 8 October 2024, https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak /636728/severna-makedonija-nema-blizeg-prijatelja-od-srbije.

goods, services, capital, and people.[10] While initially it was perceived as a further step toward regional cooperation, the project has since lost momentum and therefore, has not additionally contributed to improvement of relations between Albania and Serbia. Moreover, Albania is traditionally perceived as a hostile country in Serbia, due to historical tensions and mutual distrust. Public opinion surveys in 2024 revealed that only 10% of Serbian citizens held favourable views of Albania, underscoring the fragility of any political rapprochement.[11]

A particularly significant development in Serbia's regional discourse is the promotion of the "Serbian World" concept, first publicly articulated in 2020 by then-Minister of Defence Aleksandar Vulin. This idea envisions a form of political unification among Serbs across the Balkans, positioning Belgrade as the cultural and political centre of all Serbs.[12] While the concept does not appear in official strategic documents, it has been mentioned in public speeches by high-level officials and continues to shape public debate. It is often cited as a justification for policies aimed at consolidating Serbian influence in neighbouring countries, particularly where significant Serbian population live.

There is no direct reference to the "Serbian World" in the country's strategic documents. The only mention of such kind is underscoring Serbia's commitment to improving the status of members of the Serbian community in neighbouring countries, in the context of refugees and missing persons in the territory of the former Yugoslavia. Interestingly, the National Security Strategy does allude to similar ambitions elsewhere in the region. It warns of attempts by other states to pursue "large-state projects", particularly the creation of "Greater Albania", which would entail revising interna-

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[10] Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia, *Put ka četiri slobode* [*The Path to the Four Freedoms*], https://pks.rs/open-balkan.

[11] REUNIR, *Mapping existing surveys and perceptions that actors in EN and WB countries have (the policies and (in)actions of) the EU and other external actors*, 2024, https://reunir-horizon.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/REUNIR-D6.1—MAPPING-EXISTING-SURVEYS-AND-PERCEPTIONS-1-1.pdf.

[12] AlJazeera, *Vulin: Vučić je predsjednik svih Srba, treba da stvara srpski svijet* [*Vulin: Vučić is the president of all Serbs, he should create a Serbian world*], 27 September 2020, https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2020/9/27/vulin-vucic-je-predsjednik-svih-srba-treba-da-stvara-srpski-svijet.

tional borders. Such initiatives are perceived as threats to peace and security at the regional level, but also outside it, and are grouped alongside the rise of nationalist extremism and the erosion of political dialogue.[13]

Whether the idea of the "Serbian World" should be understood as a symbolic narrative or a concrete strategic objective, will be further elaborated in the text. What is evident, however, is its destabilising potential. The fact that such a concept is widely discussed in political discourse yet absent from national strategy documents highlights two issues. First, Serbia's strategic frameworks are outdated and in need of revision. Second, foreign and security policy in Serbia is increasingly driven not by institutional planning, but by the centralised leadership. This dynamic contributes to the unpredictability of Serbia's regional policies and complicates efforts to build lasting trust among its neighbours.

Relations between Kosovo and Serbia: A Persistent Regional Dilemma

Kosovo remains the most contentious issue in Serbia's regional security perception. Officially, Serbia does not recognise Kosovo's independence and regards it as an integral part of its territory. Strategic documents characterise Kosovo's "unilateral declaration of independence by the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government in Pristina" as illegal and illegitimate, positioning it as a major security threat and a destabilising factor for the entire region.[14] From Belgrade's perspective, Kosovo's international recognition and its efforts to join global institutions are seen as attempts to bypass negotiated solutions and diminish the role of international oversight, which Serbia sees as vital for protecting its interests and the rights of ethnic Serbs in Kosovo. Additionally, Serbia views the potential transformation of the Kosovo Security Forces into actual armed forces as a threat to Serbia's security.[15]

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[13] Ministry of Defence, Republic of Serbia, *National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia*, Belgrade, 2021, https://www.mod.gov.rs/multimedia/doda/prilog2_strategijanacional nebezbednostirs_eng_1731678276.pdf.

[14] Ministry of Defence, Republic of Serbia, *National Defence Strategy of the Republic of Serbia*, Belgrade, 2021, https://www.mod.gov.rs/multimedia/dodaci/prilog4_strategija odbraners_eng_1731678348.pdf.

[15] Ministry of Defence, Republic of Serbia, *National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia*, Belgrade, 2021, https://www.mod.gov.rs/multimedia/dodaci/prilog2_strategijanacio

The balancing approach is reflected on the relations between Serbia and Kosovo as well. Serbian leadership strives to create the impression that it is still very cooperative regarding Kosovo. For example, it has formally engaged in dialogue initiatives, including the Brussels Agreement (2013), the Washington Agreement (2021), and the EU Agreement on the Path to Normalisation of Relations between Kosovo and Serbia (2023), but the implementation has been partial and often symbolic. Also, by creating controlled crises incidents in Kosovo, president Vučić seeks to delay their implementation. Events such as the orchestrated withdrawal of Serbs from Kosovo institutions and boycotting local elections, at the initiative of the Serbian List, and then the armed confrontation in Banjska (September 2023) reflect a strategy of crisis management rather than genuine conflict resolution. These actions serve to strengthen nationalist support domestically and delay political settlements that could force recognition.

Serbian public opinion backs this kind of approach. Citizens believe that the top priorities of Serbia's foreign policy should be the protection of Serbs in the region (82%), the fight for Kosovo (77%), and strengthening cooperation with Russia (72%) and China. A majority of Serbian citizens remain opposed to recognising Kosovo's independence, even if doing so would secure EU membership and substantial economic aid.[16] This resistance, combined with slow progress in the EU-facilitated Dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina and a lack of political will on both sides to de-escalate tensions, suggests that a resolution remains out of reach, leaving Serbia-Kosovo relations as one of the greatest sources of instability in the Western Balkans.

Serbia and Republika Srpska Relations: Strategic Alignment and Regional Risks

Serbia's relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina are complicated by its special ties with Republika Srpska (RS). Serbian officials have repeatedly ex-

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[16] REUNIR, *Mapping existing surveys and perceptions that actors in EN and WB countries have (the policies and (in)actions of) the EU and other external actors*, 2024, https://reunir-horizon.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/REUNIR-D6.1--MAPPING-EXISTING-SURVEYS-AND-PERCEPTIONS-1-1.pdf.

pressed political and material support for RS leader Milorad Dodik, whose rhetoric increasingly includes secessionist threats, advocating for the independence of RS, which threatens the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina and undermines regional stability.

At the heart of this evolving relationship lies the concept of the "Serbian World". Events such as the 2022 "Pan-Serbian Assembly" could illustrate the beginning of operationalisation of this idea. On the initiative of Aleksandar Vučić and Milorad Dodik, a "Pan-Serbian Assembly" was held under the slogan "One People, One Assembly – Serbia and Srpska", during which the two governments adopted a joint "Declaration on the protection of national and political rights and the common future of the Serbian people". This document proclaimed the inseparability of the Serbian people, called for shared celebration of Serbia's Statehood Day in both Serbia and Republika Srpska, and emphasised symbolic unity across borders.[17] These initiatives undermine the sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina, contributing to political deadlock in Sarajevo.

A crucial external actor shaping this dynamic is Russia. Moscow has consistently backed Dodik, using Republika Srpska as a channel to obstruct Bosnia and Herzegovina's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. Russia's support of Dodik and the "Serbian World" mirrors its own nationalist agenda, drawing parallels with the "Russian World" – a concept aimed at consolidating Russian identity and influence across post-Soviet states. By invoking and supporting the idea of the "Serbian World", Russia is sending a clear message that it can exploit ethnic and political tensions in the Western Balkans to destabilise the region.

Whatever Dodik's plans really may be – adopting unconstitutional laws in the entity parliament merely to avoid judicial prosecution, or pursuing a more calculated and dangerous political strategy, he is gaining support from Serbia and Russia. Serbia's support illustrates the fine line between promoting regional cooperation and advancing divisive strategies. On one hand,

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[17]   BBC, *Balkan i politika: Koje su poruke „Svesrpskog sabora" u Beogradu i šta su rekli Vučić i Dodik* [*The Balkans and politics: What are the messages of the "Pan-Serbian Assembly" in Belgrade and what did Vučić and Dodik say*], 8 June 2024, https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/balkan-69102260.

Serbian formal documents point out to secessionist ambitions as the main threats in the region (primarily referring to Kosovo), but on the other hand, the rhetoric and actions from Serbian leaders suggest otherwise. It is important to ensure that regional peace is not jeopardised by nationalist narratives and external manipulation.

Hungary in Serbia's Regional Playbook: Practical Cooperation and Political Symbolism

Though not a Western Balkan neighbour, Hungary has emerged as one of Serbia's most significant political and security partners. Over the past several years, the two governments have established extensive collaboration in different areas, including migration control, energy cooperation, infrastructure projects, and more. This deepening partnership has also extended into defence cooperation. One recent example of such cooperation perfectly showcases Serbian relations to Hungary, but other neighbouring countries as well.

In early April 2025, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić announced the possibility of a military alliance with Hungary during a meeting between the countries' defence ministers. The occasion marked the signing of a document that operationalises the 2023 Strategic Defence Cooperation Agreement, outlining 79 joint activities – from military exercises and training to equipment procurement. On paper, this document resembles a standard bilateral defence cooperation plan. Yet, Vučić's remarks went further, expressing hope that this cooperation could evolve into a military alliance.[18]

The announcement came shortly after Croatia, Albania, and Kosovo signed a declaration to deepen defence cooperation.[19] Serbian officials framed this agreement as a possible threat from "potential aggressor" in the region.[20] In

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[18] Ministry of Defence, Republic of Serbia, *Predsednik Vučić: Danas gradimo najbliže strateške odnose u oblasti odbrane sa Mađarskom* [*President Vučić: Today we are building the closest strategic relations in the field of defence with Hungary*], 1 April 2025, https://www.mod.gov.rs /lat/22150/predsednik-vucic-danas-gradimo-najblize-strateske-odnose-u-oblasti-odbrane-sa-madjarskom22150.

[19] Radio Free Europe, *Šta sadrži deklaracija o vojnoj saradnji između Kosova, Albanije i Hrvatske?* [*What does the declaration on military cooperation between Kosovo, Albania and Croatia contain?*], 22 March 2025, https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/deklaracija -vojna-saradnja-kosovo-albanija-hrvatska/33355940.html.

[20] AlJazeera, *Šta donosi deklaracija o jačanju odbrambene saradnje Hrvatske, Kosova i Albanije*

this light, the announced intensified cooperation with Hungary can be seen as a response to the trilateral initiative. It was also understood as a signal to both domestic and international audiences that Serbia too has a defence partner with whom it maintains a special type of cooperation. Equally important was the internal political message, underscoring the government's capacity to protect national security in a regionally complex environment.

The prospect of a Serbia-Hungary military alliance should not be interpreted as a concrete shift in defence policy, but rather an exploitation of security topics for political manipulation. The document itself contains no provisions for formation of a military alliance, and no new developments have occurred since the announcement. Serbia's 2007 policy of military neutrality, reaffirmed in its 2019 Defence Strategy, formally rules out joining any military-political alliance, even as it maintains cooperation with NATO through the Partnership for Peace programme. Meanwhile, Hungary's obligations as a NATO member take precedence over any bilateral military arrangements, especially with a non-member state.

Beyond its legal impracticality, the alliance narrative served a symbolic function: the creation of an external threat narrative and military challenges is often used to mobilise public support for the government. Defence-related issues are frequently politicised and instrumentalised for short-term political gains (another example is a recurring narrative about an arms race between Serbia and Croatia). The president's announcement will soon be completely forgotten, having served also as a diversion from other pressing challenges facing the Serbian government.

This example reveals two more things. Firstly, Serbian leadership still nurtures the narrative among its citizens that the three mentioned neighbours – Croatia, Kosovo and Albania, are hostile to Serbia. This narrative is reflected in polling data showing persistently low public favourability toward these countries. Only about a quarter of Serbian citizens have a positive view of Croatia and Kosovo, and just 10% view Albania favourably.[21] Sec-

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[*What does the declaration on strengthening defence cooperation between Croatia, Kosovo and Albania bring?*], 20 March 2025, https://balkans.aljazeera.net/teme/2025/3/20/sta-donosi-deklaracija-o-jacanju-odbrambene-saradnje-hrvatske-kosova-i-albanije.

[21] REUNIR, *Mapping existing surveys and perceptions that actors in EN and WB countries have (the policies and (in)actions of) the EU and other external actors*, 2024, https://reunir-

ondly, Serbia's defence partnership with Hungary illustrates that NATO membership is not the deciding factor in how Serbia chooses its allies. Despite a generally negative attitude toward NATO among the Serbian public and political elite, bilateral defence ties with individual NATO members are not only accepted but actively pursued. This offers potential openings for constructive regional security cooperation, even in the absence of Serbia's NATO membership aspirations.

Potential Dividing Lines: Serbia's Relationship with Russia

Serbia's alignment with Russia represents one of the most significant dividing lines in the Western Balkans. Unlike the rest of the Western Balkans countries, which have aligned themselves with the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and adopted sanctions against Russia following its invasion of Ukraine, Serbia has taken a different path. Belgrade maintains close political, economic, and security ties with Moscow, a stance that carries serious implications for regional unity, EU integration efforts, and democratic reform across the Western Balkans, especially in countries such as Montenegro, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Serbia is perceived as a regional platform for Russian influence.

One of the main reasons why Serbia maintains close ties with Russia is because it provides Serbia with diplomatic support on the Kosovo issue. At the United Nations Security Council, Russia (along with China) consistently blocks Kosovo's efforts to gain international recognition and UN membership. This support is critical to Serbia, which continues to view the UN framework and traditional interpretations of international law as central to defending its interests and territorial claims.

Beyond diplomacy, Russia's influence in Serbia is deeply embedded in media, cooperation among security services, history, and cultural and religious closeness of the two nations. Russian media outlets such as Sputnik and RT, operate freely in Serbia, disseminating narratives that are anti-Western and often aligned with Serbian nationalist perspectives. These messages are then echoed in Serbian pro-government tabloids and television pro-

horizon.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/REUNIR-D6.1—-MAPPING-EXISTING-SURVEYS-AND-PERCEPTIONS-1-1.pdf.

grammes, which are widely consumed across the region as there is no language barrier. The result is a powerful propaganda campaign that fosters scepticism toward the EU and NATO and undermines regional efforts toward Euro-Atlantic integration.

Security cooperation between Serbia and Russia has also raised concerns. In 2021, the two countries formed a joint working group tasked with countering so-called "colour revolutions" that, according to Serbian officials, "aim to undermine sovereignty and statehood under the pretext of democratisation". This group's activities include preventing mass demonstrations and monitoring opposition activists, NGOs, and journalists, thus institutionalising cooperation between Serbian and Russian security services.[22] One illustrative incident involved the surveillance of a meeting of Russian opposition leaders in Belgrade. The surveillance data, gathered by Serbian intelligence services, was reportedly delivered personally by then-Minister of the Interior Aleksandar Vulin to Russian officials, which was later used as evidence to sentence the Russian opposition leaders to prison.[23] Because of this and Vulin's vocal promotion of the "Serbian World", it is often believed that Vulin is the one acting on behalf of President Vučić when it comes to maintaining relations with Russia.

Serbian government has a central role in spreading pro-Russian propaganda and nurturing pro-Russian sentiments, not only in Serbia but also beyond. While Russia's direct presence in the Western Balkans has diminished somewhat since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Serbia continues to act as a key amplifier of Russian influence. For instance, Belgrade imposed a moratorium on all international military exercises, including those with Russia, yet the perception of Russia's ongoing presence persists largely because Serbia actively sustains it through political messaging and strategic alignment. This alignment is not incidental. By maintaining the current am-

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[22] European Western Balkans, *Saradnja Srbije i Rusije protiv „obojenih revolucija": Politički marketing ili ozbiljna namera?* [*Cooperation between Serbia and Russia against "colour revolutions": Political marketing or serious intention?*], 14 December 2021, https://europeanwestern balkans.rs/saradnja-srbije-i-rusije-protiv-obojenih-revolucija-politicki-marketing-ili-ozbiljna -namera/.

[23] Radio Free Europe, *I dalje otvoreno pitanje o Vulinovoj ulozi u hapšenju ruskog aktiviste* [*Still an open question about Vulin's role in the arrest of the Russian activist*], 22 August 2024, https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/rusija-vulin-aktivista-hapsenje/33088964.html.

biguity – accepting EU financial support while avoiding deeper reforms – Serbia preserves its foreign policy flexibility. Yet, Serbian-Russian entanglement has slowed down the regional EU accession momentum and hindered regional reconciliation and cooperation.

Opportunities for Cooperation

Despite the challenges in Serbia's regional positioning, there are opportunities for constructive regional engagement. Serbia's regional influence and geopolitical centrality make it an indispensable actor in any durable security arrangement in the Western Balkans. Serbia's cooperation with NATO member states, particularly Hungary, illustrates that its policy of military neutrality does not rule out productive defence partnerships. These bilateral engagements show that Serbia is capable of pragmatic security cooperation even outside formal alliances. Structured dialogue platforms and joint exercises could foster trust and transparency.

Public sentiment is gradually shifting in support of such mechanisms. According to the SecuriMeter 2024 survey, NATO remains the most trusted framework for regional security, with 31% of respondents identifying it as their preferred cooperation model. This confidence reflects NATO's perceived capacity to uphold stability, especially as global uncertainties grow and as the war in Ukraine continues to heighten tensions between Russia and the West. In a region historically marked by unresolved disputes, NATO's presence offers a sense of deterrence and reassurance.[24]

While the European Union is often criticised for its slow and bureaucratic engagement, it remains an essential player in regional diplomacy and cross-border cooperation. The EU serves as a mediator in Serbia's negotiations with Kosovo and remains a key funder of economic development and institutional reform across the Western Balkans. As a security actor, the EU's role is still evolving, but it is gaining traction: 20% of citizens indicated that they view EU-led mechanisms as their preferred form of regional security cooperation.[25]

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[24] Regional Cooperation Council, *Western Balkans SecuriMeter 2024: Public Opinion Survey on "Attitudes towards security: Perceptions of security and threats in the Western Balkans"*, 2024, https://www.rcc.int/securimeter/publications.

[25] Ibid.

In essence, while Serbia has often operated as a source of instability, it also holds the potential to lead, or at least participate in, a new era of regional collaboration. Making use of that potential will depend on whether its leaders choose engagement over isolation, cooperation over confrontation, and whether international partners remain committed to guiding that transition through sustained support.

Conclusion

Serbia's security perceptions of its neighbours reveal a dual approach. On one hand, it promotes regional cooperation when aligned with its strategic interests, as seen in its bilateral ties with Hungary or its economic initiatives like Open Balkan. On the other hand, it reinforces division by supporting nationalist actors in Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, amplifying cultural and political claims that challenge the sovereignty and cohesion of these states. Serbia tends to instrumentalise nationalist narratives and great power alliances for domestic and geopolitical leverage. Its stance toward Kosovo, strong influence in Republika Srpska, and tolerance of pro-Russian narratives contribute to regional fragmentation rather than integration.

Despite these contradictions, Serbia's regional centrality cannot be ignored. It is essential to the region's long-term stability. The challenge lies in closing the gap between Serbia's formal commitments and its political behaviour – between its stated goals of EU integration and the realities of its domestic and foreign policy. Serbia's alignment with the EU's CFSP and diminished relations with Russia are crucial for strengthening regional security cooperation.

This is where international actors have an essential role to play. Institutions such as the EU and NATO should remain actively engaged and principled in their approach. Greater attention should be paid to domestic political developments in Serbia, particularly around the erosion of democratic standards and the stagnation of key reforms. Upholding a consistent and merit-based EU accession process, prioritising results over formal compliance, and clearly linking foreign policy alignment to accession progress are all steps that can help foster credibility and reform incentives.

Moreover, the sustainability of regional cooperation depends on depoliticising existing and potential bilateral disputes, many of which could be more effectively addressed through existing international legal mechanisms, rather than through the EU accession process. The EU should also shift away from its transactional approach in relations with the EU candidate countries and move toward principled conditionality. This would help restore the credibility of the accession process and support long-term regional stability.

Serbia's trajectory remains uncertain, shaped by both internal dynamics and external pressures. Whether it evolves into a pillar of regional stability or a source of continued fragmentation depends not only on its leadership but also on the willingness of the region and its international partners to engage Serbia with clarity and consistency.

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Cooperative Security vs. Dividing Lines in South East Europe: Kosovo's Case

Lulzim Peci

Introduction

The security landscape of South East Europe (SEE) is a complex interplay between post-conflict cooperation efforts and emerging fractures. Cooperative security refers to a framework in which states jointly address security challenges through dialogue, confidence-building, and integration into broader institutions. This approach has characterized many initiatives in the Western Balkans – from NATO's Partnership for Peace programs to EU-led regional projects – all designed to encourage collaboration over competition. In contrast, dividing lines denote fractures or blocs where mistrust and zero-sum thinking prevail, reminiscent of Cold War-era spheres of influence or the ethnic cleavages of the 1990s. The post-Cold War mantra across the West was a Europe "whole and free", without new security divides, yet recent developments in the Balkans risk re-creating precisely those divisions.

Nowhere are these dynamics more apparent than by the Kosovo–Serbia dispute. Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008 – and Serbia's refusal to recognize it – has become a central dividing line in SEE. This unresolved issue tests the region's commitment to cooperative security: Will neighbors accept new realities and work together, or will old hostilities persist? The Kosovo case also draws in global powers. Western institutions (the EU and NATO) and the U.S. have invested heavily in Kosovo's stability and international integration, while Russia (and to some extent China) leverage the Serbia–Kosovo dispute to project influence and challenge the Western order in the region. Thus, Kosovo serves as a litmus test for the broader region's trajectory – either toward integration and cooperation or toward renewed confrontation.

This paper explores these themes with Kosovo as a focal point. First, it outlines the core security challenges in South East Europe, illustrating how Kosovo's situation exemplifies these issues. It then examines how regional

actors perceive each other in their official security strategies – highlighting, for instance, how Kosovo and Serbia mutually view each other as security concerns. Next, it assesses the role of international security mechanisms and missions in Kosovo and the region (such as KFOR in Kosovo and EU-led dialogues), and the impact of global geopolitical shifts (like the Ukraine war and changing transatlantic priorities) on the Balkans. Opportunities for strengthening cooperative security are discussed, with emphasis on inclusive frameworks that do not leave Kosovo behind. Finally, the report offers conclusions and policy recommendations for reinforcing cooperation over division. An additional analysis is provided at the end to discuss the recent Albania–Croatia–Kosovo Defense Cooperation Declaration (2025) and its implications for regional security cooperation.

Security Challenges in South East Europe: Kosovo in Focus

The legacy of the 1990s Balkan wars leaves several conflicts unresolved or only partially resolved. Foremost among these is the dispute between Kosovo and Serbia, which together with Bosnia and Herzegovina remain as major sources of regional instability. Serbia's refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence is leading to periodic political and security crises that reverberate beyond their bilateral relations. Every so often, disputes over seemingly technical issues – such as license-plate regulations[1] and border controls[2] – or over more political matters, like the situation in the Serb-majority municipalities in northern Kosovo,[3] can trigger flare-ups of tension. These incidents, if mishandled, risk escalating into broader conflict that could draw in neighboring countries and international actors.

Beneath the high-level dispute is the delicate relationship between ethnic Albanian and ethnic Serb communities within Kosovo. Years of interna-

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[1] Jack Butcher and Daniel Boffey, T*ensions rise at Kosovo border as number plate row escalates*, The Guardian, October 2, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/oct/02/tensions-rise-at-kosovo-serbia-border-as-number-plate-row-escalates.

[2] France 24, *Serbia detains three Kosovo police officers, Kosovo says they were 'kidnapped'*, June 15, 2023, https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20230614-serbia-detains-three-kosovo-police-officers-kosovo-says-they-were-kidnapped.

[3] Xhorxhina Bami and Milica Stojanovic, *Serbs Stage Mass Resignation from Kosovo State Institutions*, Balkan Insight. November 5, 2022, https://balkaninsight.com/2022/11/05/serbs-stage-mass-resignation-from-kosovo-state-institutions/.

tional supervision and local institution-building have produced a *fragile accommodation* in which the two communities coexist under Kosovo's constitutional framework. Tensions tend to spike whenever political disputes between Belgrade and Pristina escalate into actions that directly affect the Serb-majority areas in northern Kosovo or challenge the existing security arrangements. For example, in mid-2023 protests erupted in northern Kosovo after Kosovo-Albanian mayors – elected in largely Serb-populated municipalities following a local Serb boycott – were installed in their municipal offices. This led to violence in which dozens of KFOR soldiers were seriously injured.[4] Another serious incident like Banjska terrorist attack of September 2023 further deteriorated security situation.[5] These incidents underscore how quickly disputes can inflame the security situation. Such episodes highlight that, until all communities in Kosovo feel secure and represented – and until Serbia and Kosovo achieve a sustainable, comprehensive normalization of their relations – these tensions will continue to pose a security challenge.

Divergent Threat Perceptions

How regional states *perceive* security threats often reflects these unresolved issues. Serbia's national security doctrine is a case in point. In Serbia's most recent National Security Strategy (2021)[6] and Defense Strategy (2021),[7] Kosovo's independence is framed as the foremost security threat, described in terms of "separatist aspirations" undermining Serbia's sovereignty. Belgrade's strategic documents effectively securitize Kosovo's existence, equating the loss of Kosovo with an ongoing threat to national security. This has concrete effects: Serbia has significantly increased its defense spending and military procurement over the past decade,[8] justified largely by the need to be ready

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4   Fatos Bytyci, *NATO soldiers injured in Kosovo clashes with Serb protesters*, Reuters. May 30, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/nato-soldiers-deploy-around-kosovo-town-halls-standoff-with-serb-protesters-2023-05-29/.

5   Hanne Cokelaere and Seb Starcevic, *Gunmen storm village in northern Kosovo in attack blamed on Serbia*, Politiko, September 24, 2023, https://www.politico.eu/article/kosovo-serbia-police-attack-albin-kurti-banjska-vjosa-osmani/.

6   Ministry of Defense of Serbia, *National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia*, Belgrade 2021, p.18.

7   Ministry of Defense of Serbia, *Defense Strategy of the Republic of Serbia*, Belgrade, 2021, p.15.

8   Serbia's military expenditure rose from about $919 million in 2014 to rough-

for potential conflict over Kosovo or to deter Kosovo from solidifying its statehood. Serbian officials also regularly emphasize their role in protecting the Serbian community in Kosovo, portraying them as communities at risk of persecution. This narrative further justifies Serbia's refusal to disengage – any Kosovo-Albanian move to assert full control in Serb majority areas is cast by Belgrade as a security emergency requiring its intervention. Such threat perceptions in Serbia not only impede sustainable normalization, but also influence neighboring countries' threat assessments, as they worry about Serbia's military build-up and intentions.

From Kosovo's perspective, the primary security concerns are reversed. Pristina views Belgrade's continued denial of Kosovo's sovereignty – and Serbia's ability to leverage the Serb community and even use force – as the main threat to Kosovo's security.[9] Having experienced Serbian state repression, war crimes and ethnic cleansing in the 1990s, Kosovo Albanians remain deeply suspicious of Serbia's motives. This is one reason Kosovo has been investing in developing its own armed forces (transitioning the Kosovo Security Force into a professional army by 2028).[10] In sum, Serbia and Kosovo effectively view each other as their primary security threats, creating a classic security dilemma that complicates regional cooperative security efforts.

Increasing Defense Expenditures (2024)

To understand the security posture of Kosovo in its regional context, it is useful to compare the defense expenditures of Kosovo and its neighboring countries.

Kosovo's defense spending for 2024 is around $165 million, which marks a significant increase in recent years.[11] This level of military expenditure has brought Kosovo's spending in line with NATO's recommended 2% of

ly $2.32 billion in 2024 – an increase of ≈ $1.4 billion, or about 153 % over the decade, Eulerpool, Serbia Military Expenditure, https://eulerpool.com/en/macro /s%C4%B1rbistan/military-expenditures.

9   Government of Kosovo, *Kosovo Security Strategy 2022–2027*, Pristina, 2022, pp. 6–8.

10   Between 2020 and 2024, Kosovo therefore raised its defence budget by about $86 million – an increase of roughly 110 %, from about $79 million in 2020 to $165 million in 2024. https://tradingeconomics.com/kosovo/military-expenditure.

11   Ibid.

GDP benchmark. Still, in absolute terms Kosovo's military budget remains modest, reflecting its small economy and the early stage of its force development. Montenegro, the smallest NATO member in the region, has also ramped up to roughly 2% of GDP, from $114.30 million in 2023 to $150 million in 2024.[12] Bosnia and Herzegovina lags significantly in defense investment amounting $216 million in 2024, or less than 1% of GDP.[13]

By comparison, Albania and North Macedonia – both NATO members – have risen to about 2% of GDP on defense in 2024. Albania's $535 million budget in 2024 is double what it was just a few years earlier, as Tirana fulfills its pledge to meet the NATO spending target.[14] North Macedonia, too, has substantially increased spending to $353.70 million in 2024 (2.22% of GDP) from $266.60 million in 2023,[15] partly due to security needs after joining NATO and to contribute to alliance readiness.

Croatia and Serbia have the largest military expenditures in the former Yugoslavia. Croatia, a NATO and EU member, spends about $1.629 billion (1.8% of GDP) on defense.[16] Serbia, which is not in NATO, has had the largest increase of military expenditure in absolute terms (2.85% of GDP), $2.322 billion in 2024 from $1.7967 billion in 2023.[17] Serbia's spending is closely watched by its neighbors and contributes to concerns of a local arms race if not paired with transparency and confidence-building.

On the other hand, the 2025 Global Firepower (GFP) index places the Western Balkan militaries on a steep descending curve of capability that mirrors their geography: strengths are concentrated in the north-east (Serbia, Croatia) and taper toward the south-west (Kosovo). In this framework,

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[12] Trading Economics, Montenegro Military Expenditure, https://tradingeconomics.com/montenegro/military-expenditure.

[13] Trading Economics, Bosnia and Herzegovina Military Expenditure, https://tradingeconomics.com/bosnia-and-herzegovina/military-expenditure.

[14] Trading Economics, Albania's Military Expenditure, https://tradingeconomics.com/albania/military-expenditure.

[15] Trading Economics, North Macedonia's Military Expenditure, https://tradingeconomics.com/macedonia/military-expenditure.

[16] Trading Economics, Croatia's Military Expenditure, https://tradingeconomics.com/croatia/military-expenditure.

[17] Trading Economics, Serbia's Military Expenditure, https://tradingeconomics.com/serbia/military-expenditure.

Serbia tops the regional table, ranking 63rd worldwide with a PwrIndx of 1.2576.[18] Its 28,000-strong active force is backed by the region's heaviest armor fleet (over 270 tanks) and an air arm refreshed with MiG-29 upgrades, Pantsir-S1s, Chinese FK-3 SAMs and (pending) Rafale fighters. While formally "militarily neutral", Belgrade's budget – now above $2.3 billion – allows it to field a balanced tri-service order of battle. Croatia follows at 74th (PwrIndx 1.5074)[19] and offsets its smaller manpower (15,000 active) with superior integration, Western kit and a rapidly modernizing air force (12 Rafales to replace legacy MiG-21s). Its land component retains 75 M-84 tanks but is pivoting toward wheeled armor and digitized artillery, aligning with Alliance expeditionary doctrine. Albania (78th, 1.6815)[20] has almost doubled its defense budget to hit NATO's 2 %-of-GDP goal, yet remains niche-focused – special-operations units, naval littoral forces and a growing cyber corps – of around 8,900 active manpower, reflecting its modest industrial base.

Below the NATO tier sit the micro-armies. North Macedonia (112th, 2.4042)[21] fields barely 8,000 troops but compensates with interoperability: it deploys light infantry to Alliance missions and is investing in French CAESAR howitzers and C-27J transports. Montenegro (127th, 2.9216)[22] is even smaller (2,350 active personnel) and largely constabulary; its value lies in hosting NATO maritime exercises. Bosnia & Herzegovina languishes at 132nd (PwrIndx 3.0799)[23] political gridlock caps defense at under $220 m and restricts the 10,000-strong Armed Forces to light infantry with minimal heavy assets, leaving EUFOR as the ultimate security guarantor.

Finally, Kosovo sits near the bottom of the global list – 141st with a PwrIndx of 4.9141. Its planned 5000 active manpower Kosovo Security Force is transitioning from civil-protection roots to a lightly armed territorial defense.

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18 2025 Military Strength, Global Fire Power, https://www.globalfirepower.com /countries-listing.php.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

Recent purchases of Bayraktar TB-2 drones and Javelin ATGMs boost tactical punch, but the force still lacks heavy armor, combat aviation and strategic enablers. Defense credibility of Kosovo therefore hinges on KFOR's 4,000-strong NATO presence, and its power projection capabilities.

The gradient from Serbia's combined-arms posture to Kosovo's embryonic force underscores divergent security philosophies: Serbia pursues autonomous deterrence; NATO members privilege integration; and Bosnia and Herzegovina/Kosovo rely on external guarantors. This asymmetry fuels concerns about an incipient regional arms race – especially if Serbia's rapid procurement continues without matching transparency.

The general rise in defense budgets across the Western Balkans in 2024 reflects both a response to heightened geopolitical tensions (each country seeking to bolster its defense) and a commitment to collective security standards (NATO's 2% target). For cooperative security, the challenge is ensuring that this militarization does not devolve into rivalry and security dilemma. Greater transparency, regional defense dialogues, and joint exercises can help ensure that increased spending contributes to shared security rather than fueling suspicion.

External Influences and Great-Power Rivalry

The Western Balkans have long been an arena for great-power influence, and the Kosovo is a focal point of these external rivalries. Russia has been the most overt external actor using the Kosovo issue to its advantage. Moscow staunchly backs Serbia's refusal to recognize Kosovo, blocking Kosovo's membership in the United Nations via its Security Council veto. The Kremlin frames itself as a defender of Serbia and Slavic Orthodoxy, boosting its clout in Belgrade. In practical terms, Russia's backing emboldens Serbia to resist Western pressure over Kosovo, stalling the Serbia–Kosovo normalization dialogue and opposing any settlement drafted by the West. Within this context, Moscow has supported only the idea of a territorial swap between Serbia and Kosovo.[24] Additionally, Russia has leveraged Kosovo as a propaganda tool – for instance,

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[24] For further details see: Lulzim Peci and Bekim Sejdiu, *Russia's Influence on EU facilitated Kosovo – Serbia Dialogue*, KIPRED, January 2024.

drawing parallels between NATO's intervention in Kosovo and Russia's own actions in places like Crimea or Donbas, in an attempt to justify its aggression (the so-called "Kosovo precedent").[25] All of this undermines cooperative security by injecting geopolitical competition into a regional dispute. The war in Ukraine (2022) only amplified these dynamics, as East-West tensions spiked, which led to fears that Russia might encourage destabilization in the Balkans (via its Serbian proxies) to distract or pressure the West during the Ukraine conflict. The violence and security incidents in northern Kosovo – especially in 2023 – show that these fears were not unfounded.

Other external players include China, which, while less emotionally invested than Russia, has aligned with Serbia on non-recognition of Kosovo (partly to reinforce its stance against recognition of Taiwan or other separatist movements). China has sold arms to Serbia[26] and invested economically,[27] subtly increasing its influence. Türkiye is another key actor – it has historically close ties to the region and was among the first to recognize Kosovo. In Kosovo, Ankara's role is generally viewed as complementary to Western efforts and supportive of the country's goal of NATO membership, although its growing influence is sometimes regarded with wariness by EU member states.[28]

Overall, non-Western external engagements can serve as vectors for influence and geopolitical competition: if Russia or China use Serbia to further their own rivalries with the West, and if NATO and European Union does not respond with a fast-tracking integration of the Western Balkans, the region can become split into competing spheres of influence – precisely the outcome cooperative security aims to avoid.

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[25] For further details see: Bekim Sejdiu and Lulzim Peci, *Comparing the Incomparable: Kosovo's Independence and Russian Aggression in Ukraine*, KIPRED, August 2022.

[26] Guo Yuandan and Liu Xuanzun, *Serbia deploys FK-3 air defense system, 'flagship export product from China'*, Global Times, January 3, 2025, https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202501/1326240.shtml.

[27] Helsinki Committee of Serbia, *Serbia: China's Footprint in the Balkans*, Helsinki Bulletin 177, April, 2025, pp. 11–12.

[28] Alsi Aydintasbas, *From Myth to Reality: How to Understand Turkey's Role in the Western Balkans*, ECFR, March 2019, https://ecfr.eu/publication/from_myth_to_reality_how_to_understand_turkeys_role_in_the_western_balkans/.

For Kosovo, Western support remains indispensable. The United States and EU are the primary sponsors of Kosovo's state-building and security. American and European backing has helped build the Kosovo Security Force, supported Kosovo's participation in regional initiatives, and driven the ongoing EU-facilitated Brussels Dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade. However, the mixed success of these efforts (progress is slow and often halting) provides openings for malign influence. Strengthening cooperative security hence involves insulating the region from great-power games – principally by anchoring countries like Kosovo firmly in Euro-Atlantic structures so that external spoilers lose their leverage.

International Security Mechanisms and Regional Cooperation

The NATO/KFOR Security Umbrella

In the absence of a Serbia–Kosovo peace settlement, an impartial external security presence has been crucial to preserve stability. Since 1999, the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR) has played that role. Over 4,000 troops from various NATO countries (and partners) continue to be deployed in Kosovo, with the mission of maintaining a safe environment and freedom of movement. KFOR's presence is widely seen as a deterrent against renewed conflict. For Kosovo Albanians, NATO troops guarantee that Serbia cannot use military force to reassert control. For Kosovo Serbs (especially in the North), KFOR is a buffer that restrains any potential hardline moves by Pristina's security forces. This delicate balance was demonstrated during the 2023 northern Kosovo unrest: Serb protesters attacked international troops, and Pristina criticized KFOR for not acting more forcefully against "Serb illegal structures", yet ultimately KFOR's stance prevented a direct Serb–Kosovar conflict escalation.

Beyond peace-enforcement, KFOR also facilitates capacity-building by coordinating with the Kosovo Security Force on training and exercises. However, NATO's non-recognition of Kosovo (due to four Alliance members not recognizing it) imposes limitations on full cooperation. Kosovo is not yet part of the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program, meaning it cannot fully participate in NATO trainings or procure equipment via NATO frameworks.

Despite this, individual NATO countries (the United States, Türkiye, UK, Germany, Croatia, Albania etc.) have bilateral programs to train and equip Kosovo's forces. As a result of these efforts, Kosovo is regular participant to the Defender Europe exercises. Going forward, a key aspect of strengthening cooperative security will be to gradually integrate Kosovo into Euro-Atlantic structures – something Albania and Croatia, as a number of NATO members, have pledged to advocate for (see the Defense Cooperation Declaration analysis at the end). In summary, NATO's role in Kosovo illustrates both the possibilities and constraints of cooperative security: it has successfully kept the peace and built local capacity, but its potential remains limited due to the non-recognition by the four members of the Alliance.

EU-Facilitated Dialogue and Regional Initiatives

The European Union has taken the lead in mediating between Belgrade and Pristina, recognizing that a stable Balkans is impossible without resolving the Kosovo dispute. The Brussels Dialogue, initiated in 2011 and ongoing with fits and starts, has achieved some important interim deals – for example, agreements on freedom of movement, integrated border management, recognition of each other's diplomas and car plates, and the association of Serb-majority municipalities – ASMM (though this last is still contested).

These agreements represent a form of *cooperative security* wherein both sides make practical compromises to reduce tension. However, implementation often lags, and political will fluctuates. A new push in 2023, backed by a Franco-German proposal, produced the Brussels/Ohrid Agreement(s)[29] in which Serbia and Kosovo agreed in principle to mutual de facto recognition and various measures for normalization. While hailed as a breakthrough on paper, the true test is in carrying out obligations (such as Serbia not blocking Kosovo's international memberships, and Kosovo formalizing the ASMM). The EU has leveraged its strongest incentive – the

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[29] EEAS, *Agreement on the Path to Normalization between Kosovo and Serbia*, February 27, 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-agreement-path-normalisation-between-kosovo-and-serbia_en, EEAS; Implementation Annex to the Agreement on the Path to Normalisation of Relations between Kosovo and Serbia, March 18, 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-implementation-annex-agreement-path-normalisation-relations-between_en.

promise of eventual EU membership – to press for these outcomes. Yet with EU enlargement slow and not guaranteed, the dialogue's progress remains fragile. Still, the EU's role is indispensable: it provides a structured format for negotiation and channels the efforts of all international stakeholders into a single process, avoiding duplication or conflict among mediators.

In parallel, regional cooperation forums have sought to include Kosovo as an equal participant, thereby eroding dividing lines. The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), which is a successor to the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe, has, since 2013, included Kosovo in regional meetings (under a neutral formula agreed in the Brussels Dialogue).[30] Similarly, the annual Berlin Process summits (launched by Germany in 2014 to foster Western Balkans cooperation) always involve Kosovo alongside its neighbors.[31] These forums work on connectivity projects, economic integration (the Common Regional Market), and youth and education exchanges – all of which build networks of cooperation that transcend old conflicts. Kosovo's full inclusion is symbolically and practically important: it forces Serbia (and the few other non-recognizers in the region) to work with Kosovo officials in the same room on common interests, thus normalizing interaction. Such steps, while technical, chip away at barriers and prove that regional ownership of solutions is possible.

In summary, international mechanisms – NATO/KFOR, the EU dialogue, and regional cooperation bodies – form a multi-layered security architecture in the Western Balkans. Kosovo's case demonstrates both the strengths of this architecture (preventing conflict, encouraging cooperation) and its dependency on wider political breakthroughs. These mechanisms have prevented new conflicts and contributed to peace and stability in the Balkans by creating frameworks for states to interact constructively. Yet, the full promise of cooperative security remains contingent on resolving political disputes like that between Kosovo and Serbia, without which a permanent security community in SEE cannot be achieved.

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30 RCC, https://www.rcc.int/pages/96/participants.
31 Berlin Process, https://www.berlinprocess.de/#about-berlin-process.

Global Geopolitical Shifts and Regional Security

Global events and trends also influence the trajectory of security in South East Europe. The most significant in recent memory is Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which sent shockwaves through European security institutions. For the Balkans, the Ukraine war was a stark reminder that "frozen" conflicts can suddenly ignite, and that unresolved disputes can be exploited by revisionist powers. The Western Balkans quickly moved up the transatlantic security agenda as policymakers in Brussels, Washington, and NATO headquarters grew concerned that Russia might foment instability in this vulnerable region as a form of asymmetrical response against the West.

In Kosovo, there were immediate worries that Serbia – emboldened by its friendship with Moscow and sensing Western distraction – might take provocative actions in the North or at least refuse engagement in the EU dialogue. Meanwhile, Kosovo seized the moment to emphasize its Western alignment: it vocally supported Ukraine, sanctioned Russia, and applied for EU membership candidacy in Dec 2022.[32]

The transatlantic allies responded by reinvigorating their commitment to the Western Balkans. The EU finally granted Bosnia and Herzegovina candidate status (December 2022) and visa-free travel to Kosovo citizens (2023), signaling to the region that it has not been forgotten. NATO increased its attention as well – for instance, deploying additional reserve troops to KFOR in late 2023 when tensions in northern Kosovo spiked, to ensure deterrence held. All these moves stem from the understanding that instability in the Balkans would weaken the united front needed to address challenges like the Ukraine war. In essence, the Ukraine conflict underscored that the security of the Western Balkans is integral to the security of Europe.

Finally, shifting trans-Atlantic relations in the second Trump administration would likely recalibrate the transatlantic security architecture in the Western

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[32] Jeta Loshaj, *Between Continuity and Change: Russian Influence and Security Challenges in the Western Balkans Since Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine*, FES, Pristina/Sarajevo, Jan 2024. pp. 8–10.

Balkans by substituting alliance-centric engagement with a more transactional, cost-benefit logic. Experience from 2017–21 suggests that, unless the Kosovo–Serbia dispute can be framed as a "quick win", Washington's diplomatic bandwidth may shrink, relegating painstaking normalization to Europe and thereby weakening the multilateral support that reinforces dialogue. Perceiving a lighter American footprint, Belgrade could test red lines in northern Kosovo, betting that any U.S. response will be slow or conditioned on unrelated concessions, whereas hard-liner Serb actors might interpret ambivalence as tacit permission to stall Brussels-brokered agreements.

In this environment, the burden of sustaining cooperative security initiatives – ranging from KFOR's credibility to the conditionality of EU accession – would shift decisively to European capitals, whose unity and resources have historically proven uneven. Yet Trump's emphasis on burden-sharing also presents an opportunity: a coherent, well-resourced EU strategy, paired with visible defense spending by NATO's European members, could satisfy Washington's cost concerns and keep U.S. forces engaged.

Given these circumstances, Europe needs to act swiftly: secure Washington's backing, present a concise set of guiding principles for a comprehensive Kosovo–Serbia accord, insulate the talks from great-power competition, and lay out compelling incentives that draw both countries toward a durable settlement.

Albania–Croatia–Kosovo Defense Cooperation Declaration (2025)

In March 2025, the Defense Ministers of Albania, Croatia, and Kosovo signed a landmark Joint Declaration on Defense Cooperation in Tirana.[33] This trilateral declaration marks a new step in regional security collaboration. It is important to understand what the declaration entails and what its implications are for Kosovo's security and the broader cooperative security landscape in South East Europe.

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[33] Joint Declaration following the Meeting between the Minister of Defense of Albania, the Deputy Prime-Minister and Minister of Defense of Croatia, and the Minister of Defense of Kosovo, Tirana March 18, 2025, www.morh.hr/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/2025-03-19-deklaracija.pdf.

The declaration commits Albania, Croatia, and Kosovo to pool resources for defense modernization: they will jointly identify, develop, and acquire capabilities – potentially co-producing equipment – while investing in new technologies to build a resilient regional defense industry. Parallelly, the three forces will share best practices in recruitment, training, and reserve-force management, expand access to each other's military academies, and run regular bilateral or trilateral exercises to meet NATO/EU standards – crucial for raising the Kosovo Security Force's professionalism even though Kosovo is not yet a NATO member.

To tackle non-kinetic threats, the partners will coordinate against cyber-attacks, disinformation, and other hybrid tactics by exchanging intelligence and preparing joint responses to attacks on critical infrastructure. Finally, they pledge full mutual backing in Euro-Atlantic fora: policies will be aligned in NATO, the EU, and other institutions, with Albania and Croatia actively lobbying for Kosovo's admission to the Partnership for Peace and broader regional initiatives. Having two NATO allies publicly champion its integration both strengthens Kosovo's diplomatic position and counters the influence of non-recognizing states.

The declaration is careful to note that it is not a legally binding treaty and does not create new international legal obligations. Instead, it is a political commitment "in the spirit of friendship, solidarity, and mutual trust" reflecting the three countries' common strategic vision. In essence, it formalizes a trilateral security partnership without establishing an alliance or mutual defense pact.

The declaration marks Kosovo's first equal-footing defense pact with two NATO allies, legitimizing its security institutions and accelerating capability development through shared training, education, and potential co-production of military equipment. Direct access to Albanian and Croatian academies, exercises, and industrial supply chains will raise the Kosovo Security Force's professionalism, while Tirana and Zagreb's lobbying for Kosovo's entry into NATO's Partnership for Peace could unlock wider Euro-Atlantic programs and ease the eventual path to full membership.

Serbian leaders have portrayed the 18 March 2025 Tirana Declaration – signed by Albania, Croatia and Kosovo – as a pact that seeks to encircle Serbia and open an arms race. President Aleksandar Vučić told domestic media that the pact violates the 1996 Sub-Regional Arms Control Agreement and signals that "powerful aggressors" are lining up against Serbia, vowing that Belgrade will "preserve our country and deter any potential aggressor, even one as powerful as that".[34] On the other hand, on 1 April, Serbia and Hungary signed a strategic defense-cooperation agreement, with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić announcing that the two countries are now moving toward a comprehensive military alliance.

The Tirana Declaration demonstrates that small and mid-sized states can craft complementary security arrangements firmly anchored in NATO. By pooling capability development, training pipelines, and hybrid-threat responses within a single political framework, Albania, Croatia, and Kosovo have established a practical burden-sharing model that strengthens NATO's south-eastern flank and accelerates Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic path.

By pooling capability development, training pipelines, and hybrid-threat response under a single political framework, Albania, Croatia, and Kosovo have sketched a practical model of burden-sharing that fortifies NATO's south-eastern flank while speeding Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic trajectory. The three governments should launch a targeted diplomatic campaign that shuts down attempts to frame this cooperation as a zero-sum scheme. If managed with such transparency and outreach, the Tirana Declaration can become the core of a broader, rules-based security community in South-East Europe – one in which interoperability, resilience, and shared democratic standards steadily replace outdated rivalries.

Conclusions

Kosovo's trajectory stands at the nexus of two competing paradigms – co-operative security and renewed dividing lines – in the post-war Western

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[34] *Vucic: The Memorandum of Croatia, Albania, and Kosovo is a violation of the 1996 Arms Control Agreement*, Kosovo Online, March 19, 2025, https://www.kosovo-online.com/en/news/politics/vucic-memorandum-croatia-albania-and-kosovo-violation-1996-arms-control-agreement-19.

Balkans. This paper has shown that while robust international frameworks, notably KFOR, EULEX and the EU-facilitated dialogue, have prevented a relapse into large-scale violence, they have not yet dismantled the security dilemma that locks Pristina and Belgrade in mutual distrust. Rising defense budgets, nationalist rhetoric and external interference from Moscow and Beijing amplify that dilemma, yet the same environment has also generated unprecedented opportunities: accelerated EU enlargement, NATO's renewed focus on the region and innovative regional initiatives such as the Albania–Croatia–Kosovo defense accord.

Empirical evidence throughout the study confirms that cooperative mechanisms work when three conditions converge: inclusive participation, credible incentives and sustained implementation. The Berlin Process, regional economic agreements and joint hybrid-threat platforms satisfy the first two, but their impact is blunted whenever domestic politics or enlargement fatigue stalls delivery. Conversely, crises in northern Kosovo, secessionist rhetoric in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia's arms build-up illustrate how easily unfinished statehood questions reopen conflicts. The region therefore inhabits a liminal space where progress and regression coexist, each capable of tipping the balance.

Policy Recommendations

1. NATO

- **Keep a credible KFOR footprint and rapid-reinforcement posture.** NATO should maintain the current force strength ($\approx$ 4,000 troops) and pre-position an over-the-horizon reserve able to surge quickly during crises such as the May 2023 Zvecan riots, or September 2023 Banjska terrorist attack.
- **Fast-track Kosovo's entry into Partnership for Peace (PfP).** NATO should negotiate a formula that would let Kosovo join PfP, similarly with the one that enabled Kosovo to sign Stabilization and Association Agreement with the European Union.
- **Institutionalize a Western-Balkans Hybrid Resilience Task-Force.** Building on the 2025 Albania–Croatia–Kosovo declaration's pledge to counter cyber and disinformation threats, NATO

could host an annual table-top exercise focusing on joint cyber-incident response and strategic-communications coordination among KFOR, Allied cyber teams and Balkan countries similar teams

- **Expand joint training and interoperability programs.** Formalize Kosovo's participation in large-scale drills and encourage embedded KSF observers in specific Allied exercises; this reinforces deterrence and familiarizes all forces with NATO procedures.

2. European Union

- **Tie tangible enlargement incentives to concrete dialogue benchmarks.** The Brussels/Ohrid Agreement (2023) created de facto recognition obligations, yet implementation lags. The EU should disburse Growth-Plan funds, grant to Kosovo candidate status and open accession clusters in parallel with the verified fulfilment of key steps such as, operationalizing the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities and Serbia ceasing to block Kosovo in international fora.
- **Adopt a concise set of EU "Guiding Principles" for a comprehensive Kosovo–Serbia settlement.** Define red lines and end-state parameters (e.g., no return to pre 2008 arrangements, mutual recognition of sovereignty, no partition or territorial exchange, and non-majority community protections), including EU Verification and Dispute Resolution Mechanisms.
- **Forge a single narrative on Kosovo's EU future.** Five non-recognizing members dilute the Union's mediation leverage and provide Belgrade with diplomatic work-arounds. Brussels should find a solution with those states to remove objections for Kosovo's candidate status, aiming for a coordinated stance by the 2027 enlargement review.

3. Government of Kosovo

- **Deliver commitments and operationalize the ASMM.** Kosovo Government should send immediately the EU Draft Statute of the ASMM to the Constitutional Court for review.

- **Institutionalize crisis-communication channels with KFOR and Serbia.** Establish 24/7 liaison teams, joint patrols and joint incident-prevention protocols along the border with Serbia.
- **Expand outreach to non-recognizers.** Launch targeted diplomatic campaigns stressing Kosovo's contributions to regional security (e.g., peacekeeping deployments) and its commitment to non-majority protections, before the next enlargement summit.

Montenegro's Security in the Western Balkans: Perceptions by Neighbouring Countries and Strategic Impacts in the Context of Regional Cooperation

Blagoje Gledović

Montenegro, a NATO member since 2017 and a candidate country for European Union, is a small but in certain aspects a pivotal nation in the region of the Western Balkans. Yet some of its internal challenges shape varied perceptions among its neighbours: Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, and Albania. This paper analyses these perceptions, their influence on neighbours' national security and defence strategies, and the resulting risks and opportunities for regional stability.

Introduction

Montenegro, a small European nation of approximately 620,000 people,[1] occupies a strategic position in the Western Balkans, bordered by Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, and Albania. Since regaining independence in 2006 and joining NATO in 2017, Montenegro has pursued European Union integration as a candidate for membership while navigating complex regional dynamics rooted in the former Yugoslavia legacy.

Montenegro's security landscape shapes not only its own future but also the stability of the Western Balkans, as it is the case with other countries in the region due to its interconnections and shared history as well. In order to get the context of the role of Montenegro in regard to regional security, it is important to understand what is the perspective of its neighbours, namely bordering Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, and Albania. Furthermore, it is needed to examine how these perceptions create implications for regional strategic frameworks.

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[1] National Census 2023: Statistical Office of Montenegro – MONSTAT. (2024, October 15). *Popis stanovništva, domaćinstava i stanova u 2023. godini: Stanovništvo Crne Gore prema polu i starosti (Saopštenje 133/2024)*. Podgorica. Retrieved from:https://www.monstat.org/uploads/files/popis%202021/saopstenja/SAOPSTENJE_Popis%20stanovnistva%202023%20I_cg.pdf.

After regaining independence in 2006, the pillars that defined Montenegro's foreign policy such as Euro-Atlantic integration and developing good neighbourhood relations have predominantly shaped the perception of Montenegro in the region and beyond. That is one crucial factor, the other one is absence of serious open issues or disputes with any of the countries from the region. Not less significant, the 1990s conflicts, despite posing serious security challenges, did not take place on the territory of Montenegro neither the country has been involved in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These facts played a significant role in perception among the nations from the region. This is because ethnic conflicts and war crimes took its toll and left deep scars, and the level of reconciliation is still very low.

Regional Perceptions of Montenegro's Security

Montenegro's security is perceived through the lens of historical ties with its neighbours, foreign policy orientation, relevant geopolitical alignments, but also shared challenges that the region with the complex security dynamics faces today. The perspectives are therefore varied in relation to different starting points and strongly influenced by nature of bilateral relations, as well as historical and political dimensions. However, one of the conclusions that can be drawn is that Montenegro is generally seen as a stable partner by Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Albania. The same case is with North Macedonia, although without border-sharing, but as a long standing neighbour from former Yugoslavian federation. Relations with Serbia in this regard are variable due to different foreign policy orientations and official political relations, which often tend to be complicated.

Croatia, a fellow NATO and future fellow EU member, values Montenegro's foreign policy alignment, which is important in the context of Croatia's own security and regional dynamics. Croatia's endorsement of Montenegro's NATO bid was rooted in shared regional interests of both countries, the commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration, and the pursuit of long-term stability in Southeast Europe. Joint membership to NATO per se opens a range of options for security and defence cooperation among the two countries. In the area of military education, for instance, there has been in place an agreement between the two ministries of defence on education

of Montenegrin soldiers in Croatia.[2] At the same time, the strong cooperation was exercised also in the ISAF peace support mission in Afghanistan. Also, there are various possibilities in terms of collaborating on maritime security and tourism along the shared Adriatic coast. Croatia has been supporting EU membership of Montenegro for years now and played a constructive role in that regard. Even the open bilateral border issue related to the Prevlaka peninsula in Adriatic Sea did not create any major problems for years, without challenges, due to an interim regime established by a protocol signed in 2002 at the time of last Yugoslavia.[3]

Recent political developments, however, such as the adoption of the so-called Jasenovac Resolution by the Parliament of Montenegro[4] sparked tensions at bilateral level and incited official Croatia to temporary change a narrative and a course of action in the political and diplomatic sphere. At the same time, a political change in Montenegro in 2020 that came after long ruling by one party/coalition also induced caution in Croatia in terms of whether Montenegro will keep its strategic orientation given the ideological shifts at the levels of power. These developments affected the previously very good bilateral relations and influenced the overall perception of Montenegro by Croatia. However, at least currently, there are no reasons to believe that, on a long run, the support of Croatia and good relations are significantly endangered given shared interest of both countries and their geographical and geopolitical positions.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, sharing a 225-km border, described security relations with Montenegro as "excellent",[5] focusing on a cooperation on a

2   Tabak, I. (2014, October 17). *Crna Gora regulira slanje kadeta u RH*. Obrana i sigurnost. Retrieved from: https://obris.org/regija/crna-gora-regulira-slanje-kadeta-u-rh/.

3   Morski HR. (2023, September 29). *Ekskluzivno: Donosimo Protokol o Prevlaci – sve o sporazumu između Hrvatske i bivše SR Jugoslavije*. Morski HR. Retrieved from: https://www.morski.hr/ekskluzivno-donosimo-protokol-o-prevlaci-sve-o-sporazumu-izmedu-hrvatske-i-bivse-sr-jugoslavije/#google_vignette.

4   Index.hr. (2024, May 9). *Crna Gora izglasala rezoluciju o Jasenovcu. Stigla prva reakcija Hrvatske*. Retrieved from: https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/crna-gora-izglasala-rezoluciju-o-jasenovcu-stigla-prva-reakcija-hrvatske/2577967.aspx.

5   Mirjana Dragaš. (2017, June 6). *Nuhodžić-Mektić: Odlična saradnja CG i BiH u oblasti bezbjednosti*. Retrieved from: https://www.antenam.net/politika/39335-nuhodzic-mektic-odlicna-saradnja-cg-i-bih-u-oblasti-bezbjednosti#:~:text=Bosna%20i%20 20Hercegovina%20i%20Crna%20Gora%20imaju%20izuzetno,sa%20ministrom%20si

range of issues including cross-border crime and migration control.[6] Collaboration on security matters is spread across multiple dimensions. There is engagement noted through international organisations such as the OSCE, NATO, and the European Union as well through its programs for candidate and partner countries. Further, bilateral cooperation encompasses joint efforts in law enforcement, rule of law, defence, emergency and disaster management and rescue operations. At the same time, there are numerous bilateral agreements and memoranda in the broader security related field.[7]

In 2015 border dispute briefly strained ties which had its peak after the Montenegrin President refused to send a new ambassador to Sarajevo amid Bosnia and Herzegovina's territorial claims over the Sutorina region. Some of the international media reported about "Bosnia losing its closest neighbour".[8]

There were strong beliefs that this issue has been publicly sparked by some political centres, however, eventually, the cooperation resumed later reflecting Montenegro's role as a pragmatic partner. Due to its internal characteristics, Bosnia and Herzegovina in a certain way remains cautious about the "issue" of Serbs in Montenegro and the influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church, given its own ethnic fragility. Montenegro's official long-standing position on various issues related to Bosnia and Herzegovina such as the Srebrenica genocide and the question of territorial integrity, had with no doubts a positive impetus on perception by the Bosniak majority in Bosnia and Herzegovina and its political representatives.

On the other hand, however, **Serbia**'s perception of Montenegro in terms of security and political developments is more critical, viewing Montenegro's NATO membership and pro-Western stance as a challenge to mutual relations but regional dynamics as well. The fact that Serbia is not a member of NATO and furthermore, since there is a continuing negative percep-

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gurnosti%20Bosne%20i%20Hercegovine%20Draganom%20Mekti%C4%87em.

6   Ibid.

7   Bajramović, Z., & Latić, I. (2023). *Security cooperation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro*. Security Dialogues, 14(1), 55–64. https://doi.org/10.47054/SD23141057B.

8   Büyük, H. F. (2015, March 24). *Sutorina crisis: Bosnia losing its closest neighbour, Montenegro*. Foreign Policy News. Retrieved from: https://foreignpolicynews.org/2015/03/24/sutorina-crisis-bosnia-losing-its-closest-neighbour-montenegro/.

tion of NATO in Serbia after 1999 military intervention in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, undoubtedly affects Serbia's general perception of Montenegro in terms of its membership to NATO and decision to be a part of this collective security organisation. Speaking of NATO, it is also a well-known fact that there is special cooperation among countries which are "members of the club" in terms of security, defence, intelligence sharing etc. In contrast, this circumstance in general makes it difficult for NATO members then to deepen ties with non-members, especially if their policies are not fully aligned with the Alliance and its values. Despite the fact that for instance defence cooperation is noted at least on paper with a defence cooperation agreement dating from 2007[9] the above circumstances lead to certain limitations in terms of security and defence cooperation between Montenegro and Serbia, due to the mentioned incompatibility between members and non-members of NATO. In addition, the recognition of Kosovo has impacted perceptions and in some aspects affected the relationship between two historically close nations in the Balkans, which after the breakup of communist Yugoslavia remained in a state union until 2006.

Official Serbia is more often seen as under significant Russia influences and this not only limit cooperation but automatically changes the notion of any cooperation in the areas related to security or defence. It is not a secret that Serbia from the beginning was opposing NATO membership of Montenegro, which was often perceived as a break up of traditional and historic ties. Complicated historical ties, a significant share of Serb population in Montenegro (around 33% in accordance to the National Census 2023),[10] and the influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro have made the perception and relations difficult and burdened during significant time periods, including the period after 2006 when Montenegro regained independence. Furthermore, Montenegro's pro-Western orientation and Serbia's ambivalent stance toward NATO and Russia create strategic misalignment. For instance, Montenegro's support for EU sanctions against Russia contrasts with Serbia's refusal to align with such measures.[11]

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[9]   Montenegrin Ministry of Foreign Affairs, https://www.gov.me/en/mvp.

[10]   Radio Slobodna Evropa. (2024, October 15). *U Crnoj Gori 41,1 odsto Crnogoraca i 32,9 odsto Srba, pokazao popis.* Retrieved from: https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/crna-gora-popis-stanovnistva/33158128.html.

[11]   More at: Zweers, W., Drost, N., & Henry, B. (2023, August). *Little substance, considerable impact: Russian influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro.* Clingendael Re-

When it comes to **Kosovo**, which was recognized by Montenegro in October 2008 shortly after it declared independence, it sees Montenegro as a constructive and cooperative neighbour. Bolstered by a fact that the Albanian minority is a part of Montenegro's population, it could be said that Kosovo values Montenegro as a friend and partner in the region. It also values the NATO stance of Montenegro on one hand, but on the other hand, it is wary of pro-Serb political groups in Montenegro aligning with Serbia's anti-Kosovo agenda. Different security and law enforcement challenges such as organized crime, smuggling etc. drives certain joint efforts of institutions of both countries with Montenegro. At the same time, Montenegro contributes troops to KFOR, NATO's peacekeeping mission in Kosovo, which supports a stable and secure environment under UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).[12] This contribution underscores Montenegro's role in regional security and indirectly supports Kosovo's security framework. In 2025, both countries participated in the Immediate Response 25 phase of the United States led Defender Europe exercise, which included cyber defence drills. Kosovo hosted the U.S. military command in Djakovica, serving as a strategic hub, while Montenegro participated alongside allies like the United States (Maine and Vermont National Guards) and North Macedonia. The exercise focused on countering cyberattacks and enhancing interoperability, highlighting shared security priorities.[13]

Taking into account these facts, and despite some bilateral political challenges that occurred related to ratification of the earlier signed agreement on demarcation of the border in the Parliament of Kosovo,[14] there is no doubt that Kosovo's perception is generally positive, though tempered in some way by concerns about Montenegro's internal ethnic dynamics.

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port. The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael'. Retrieved from: https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/little-sub stance-considerable-impact.pdf.

[12] KoSSev. (2018, October 23). *Montenegro is officially a member of KFOR.* https://kossev.info/en/crna-gora-postala-clanica-kfor-a/.

[13] Kosovo Online. (2025, May 25). *Defender Europe 25: Why is the Western Balkans one of the military training grounds for the U.S. and NATO?* Kosovo Online. Retrieved from: https://www.kosovo-online.com/en/news/analysis/defender-europe-25-why-western-balkans-one-military-training-grounds-us-and-nato-25-5.

[14] AP News. (2018, February 14). *Montenegro PM offers 'goodwill' to seal Kosovo border deal*, Retrieved from: https://apnews.com/article/3cdbf767941a4191b96fd1972c9a9a28.

Albania, is also a NATO ally of Montenegro and perceives Montenegro positively, leveraging their shared Albanian community (around 5% of population of Montenegro) is investing efforts in good political relations but pursuing also cultural and security cooperation and partnerships. Joint collaboration is facilitated through different bilateral agreements, NATO frameworks, and regional initiatives aimed at contributing to stability in the Western Balkans and good neighbourhood relations. As allies, both countries regularly align their defence policies with the alliance's framework. This includes joint participation in NATO missions and exercises, enhancing interoperability, but direct bilateral cooperation as well. Participation on regional initiatives is recorded as well as partnering under Unites States led A5 Adriatic Charter were both countries are cooperating with Croatia, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina to promote NATO integration and regional security. This platform facilitates joint military planning and counterterrorism efforts, and includes regular meeting on high political and operational levels.[15]

Apart from the given overview of relations and cooperation mechanisms in security and defence, it is important to notice that, along with specific political, geopolitical and historical context in the Western Balkans and relations between individual countries respectively, all these perceptions significantly shape security and defence strategies of the countries that are neighbours of Montenegro in the region. And that could serve as a pattern for the whole region. The logic thing is that when you tailor your strategic framework in the field of security, first of all you "look around" what is going on out of the backyard and what could be of strategic importance for national security and then start from the global threat landscape.

For instance, if we analyse defence and security strategic frameworks of the countries in the region which are Montenegrin neighbours, regardless of the fact whether these frameworks and official documents mention in particular directly Montenegro, or indirectly address regional issues related to specific countries, for sure there are some takeaways. Croatia's national security framework emphasizes regional cooperation, NATO and EU integration, where Montenegro can be considered as a partner in these efforts. Engagement within NATO and the role in Adriatic security in general are

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[15]   United States European Command, https://www.eucom.mil/.

deemed important, though there could be some caution identified about certain challenges such as organized crime and its spill over effect.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's defence frameworks, shaped by its complex post war political structure, prioritize joint regional security, law enforcement and border management and counter terrorism. This includes cooperation with Montenegro, which appears in the context of regional initiatives that put focus on practical cooperation between two countries that have much in common. The 2016 border demarcation dispute is taken into account, while ethnic concerns shape risk assessments to prevent spill over from Montenegro's Serb population dynamics. Bosnia and Herzegovina's stalled NATO and EU integration limits deeper alignment, but pragmatic cooperation with Montenegro remains a priority in its strategies.

Kosovo's emerging strategies are focused on efforts to strengthen statehood and achieve broader international recognition. Similar to Albania, they do not specifically mention Montenegro but integrate the bilateral relations into the regional practical cooperation context under US and NATO led initiatives such as A5 Adriatic Charter and NATO's Science for Peace and Security Programme, Resolute Support Mission, cooperation in border security and under regional organisations frameworks.

What is interesting in the regional context is, however, that Serbia's National Security Strategy is also prioritizing Serb community protection abroad, and in particular in neighbouring countries including Montenegro. This has been seen as an introduction to the so-called "Serbian World" concept, which has been continuously articulated by Serbian political actors. It is often discussed in the broader context of Serbia's foreign policy and nationalistic narratives and is considered by other countries in the region as a constant malicious activity aimed and interfering in domestic issues of countries with Serb population. These actions often resemble as hybrid threats or hybrid activities aimed to promote influence over Serbs by controlling their political representatives from Belgrade. The result is a situation of complicating bilateral relations, and hindering political dynamics in the countries where Serbian political representatives and parties are parts of the ruling majorities. At the same time there are voices from the region that speak of threats coming from this concept, and at the same

time those explaining it as backed by Russia to further destabilise Western Balkans.[16]

Conclusions vis-a-vis Montenegro and the Regional Dynamics

In summary, it is evident that Montenegro is seen by the majority of its neighbours as a partner and a generally stable and reliable country. Montenegro has a long standing policy of pursuing good relations with all the countries in the region, and over the decades has built an overall positive image as a neighbour, which provides an example of being a non-dispute case in the Western Balkans when it comes to individual relations with others. On the other hand, despite Montenegro's positive image, it could be said that neighbours share concerns about its internal challenges. It is the internal political dynamics that sometimes affects overall perception. Though politically induced, potential ethnic like tensions involving Montenegro's Serb parties and their supporters, the influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church and its role in the social dynamics could be worrisome for some countries in the region. Some of the neighbours (Croatia and Bosna and Herzegovina) tend to apply certain amount of caution and concern when it comes to the issues of preserving Montenegro's pro-Western orientation, heritage and track record of multiculturalism. Also, Montenegro's vulnerability to external interference such as hybrid activities coming even from the region including through proxies from the region or within the country, often latent and not visible to wider public, might lead NATO aligned neighbours to focus on countering hybrid threats.

Yet, opportunities abound. Montenegro's NATO and EU integration positions enhance its role and image as a key partner for Croatia, Albania, and Kosovo, strengthening regional stability through joint exercises and intelligence sharing. Its willingness to collaborate on transnational threats offers a platform for multilateral initiatives, as seen in migration control efforts with Kosovo and Albania. Also, shared ethnic ties, particularly with Albanian communities, enhance Montenegro's role as a cultural bridge with Albania and Kosovo. Its Adriatic position creates prospects for maritime securi-

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[16] Vukićević, J., & Tuhina, G. (2021, October 20). *'Srpski svet' koncept koji region čini nervoznim*. Radio Slobodna Evropa. Retrieved from: https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srpski-svet-srbija-balkan-/31521168.html.

ty cooperation, tourism and economic cooperation, especially with bordering Croatia where there is a huge potential in terms of road infrastructure projects to ensure higher mobility for citizens, tourists and trade sector.

By addressing its internal political weaknesses, Montenegro can lead regional efforts in many fields thus bolstering its strategic credibility. The prospect of joining the EU in close future opens various opportunities and all political actors must jointly support the EU agenda which still has high public support. To mitigate the risks of external influence, ethnic or political tensions that can undermine its EU accession path, Montenegro needs to further strengthen governance and institutional capacities. To seize the opportunities from regional relations, it should further explore NATO, EU and regional opportunities for cooperation, leveraging its geographic and cultural assets. As the Western Balkans navigate a delicate balance, Montenegro's success will depend on its ability to further transform good perceptions into action, that contribute to fostering a secure and united region.

At the same time, joint challenges of the whole region related to the rule of law such as corruption and organised crime including cross-border trafficking and smuggling, are prompting Montenegro and all neighbours to emphasize joint task forces and cooperation mechanisms in their strategies. The EU is also active in this field towards the region which contributes to opportunity of joining forces in fostering rule of law and thus creating better economic development conditions. EU is also important for the region in terms of connectivity plans and infrastructure projects which will also bring Western Balkans physically closer to the European Union.

These dynamics in the region present both risks and opportunities. The risks are significant: rule of law issues such as corruption and organized crime undermine reliability, institutional strength and capacities of Western Balkan countries to address these challenges and secure much needed economic development. These are real challenges for all the countries and joint actions in addressing these problems can be crucial. Moreover, still fresh memories from the 1990s conflicts and inadequate level of reconciliation remain a risk for the region in terms of security and ethnic relations. Individual investments in defence are also occasionally followed by question marks and sometimes a subject to discussions whether it can pose threats

to security of bordering countries. In that sense more transparency and responsibility is needed to be shown.

In conclusion, security perceptions in the region are shaped by complex but promising regional landscape. Strategic documents of the countries in the region generally reflect both trust to other countries in terms of their policies and positions toward global issues, respective bilateral relations, but also build caution over internal vulnerabilities regarding specific neighbours. An important factor also remains the historical aspect of relations in the region and the conflict history, which even today shape perceptions.

Still there are numerous opportunities in terms of regional cooperation, EU integration and joining forces in addressing common challenges related to the rule of law, law enforcement, security and defence. There is a huge potential in sharing resources and capabilities notably in areas such as emergency management and disaster risk prevention and reduction. Besides, the whole region can further capitalise on security cooperation and within OSCE, NATO and EU frameworks alongside bilateral arrangements. Economic cooperation and coordination in infrastructure development is also a great resource on a long run, to ensure better connectivity and open potential in numerous areas such as trade, tourism and related fields.

and goals. By examining North Macedonia's security posture, this analysis aims to provide insights into the broader dynamics of regional cooperation in South East Europe, a region where the interplay of historical legacies, ethnic diversity, and geopolitical ambitions continues to shape the pursuit of stability and integration.

Theoretical and methodological framework

The theoretical framework for studying the security perceptions in North Macedonia and their implications for regional cooperation in South East Europe draws on several interrelated concepts from international relations, security studies and conflict resolution. At its core, the study employs the concept of security perceptions, which refers to how states and societies interpret threats, opportunities, and their own vulnerabilities within their geopolitical environment. This concept is essential for understanding how North Macedonia navigates its complex relationships with neighboring states and strategic partners, as well as how these perceptions influence its foreign and security policies.

A key theoretical foundation is the securitization theory, developed by the Copenhagen School, which emphasizes the social construction of security threats. According to this theory, issues become security concerns not merely because of objective dangers but through the process of "securitization", where political actors frame certain issues as existential threats requiring extraordinary measures. In the context of North Macedonia, this framework helps explain how historical disputes, ethnic tensions, and identity issues are elevated to security concerns, shaping both domestic politics and regional interactions.

The study also incorporates regional security complex theory (RSCT), which posits that security dynamics are often clustered within specific geographic regions, where the security of one state is closely linked to the security of its neighbors. South East Europe, with its history of interethnic conflict, shifting alliances, and external inter-

and developments hindering cooperative security frameworks in South-East Europe.

Perception of Neighbours in the Area of Security Policy

The perception of neighboring countries significantly influences North Macedonia's security posture. Relations with Albania and Kosovo are generally positive on an official level, driven by strong ethnic Albanian ties within North Macedonia itself. Cooperation with Albania is viewed as essential for internal stability and regional projects, particularly in the context of NATO and EU integration (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of North Macedonia, 2020). Political leaders from the Albanian community in North Macedonia maintain close connections with Albanian and Kosovo's officials, with mutual visits and public endorsements being common. This relationship, while enhancing regional connectivity, also at times sends mixed political messages that are perceived domestically as undermining inter-ethnic cohabitation.

Several instances illustrate this dynamic. For example, statements by former **Albania**'s Prime Minister Sali Berisha and former President Ilir Meta emphasizing the concept of "natural Albania" were interpreted as provocative within Macedonian society (Meta, 2018; Berisha, 2015). In 2020, Kosovo's former President Hashim Thaçi openly supported greater rights for Albanians in North Macedonia, which was criticized for interfering in internal affairs. Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama's frequent visits to Tetovo and other majority-Albanian community's areas, such as his 2021 visit ahead of North Macedonia's local elections, were seen as overt political endorsements of ethnic Albanian parties, raising concerns about external influence on internal political dynamics (Balkan Insight, 2021). Similarly, Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti has on several occasions expressed public support for ethnic Albanian political initiatives in North Macedonia, including statements in 2021 encouraging Albanians to assert their "full rights", which were perceived as undermining the delicate balance of interethnic relations (Telegrafi, 2021). From other aspect, his visit to the municipalities of Tetovo and Chair in August 2023, is also perceived from the perspective of his message to the international public that his influence does not end at the borders of Kosovo, in order for this to be seriously taken into account by the 'big ones' in their treatment of Pristina in the context of relations

and dialogue with Belgrade (DW, 2023). The possible accuracy of the indicated perception would represent additional confirmation about the complexity of certain political and security dynamics, as well as about their serious spillover effect at the regional level. Additionally, some Albanian ambassadors in Skopje, such as Ambassador Fatos Reka (2019), have issued statements emphasizing ethnic solidarity over civic unity, further complicating interethnic trust.

The government of North Macedonia, aware of the sensitivity of these issues, has generally reacted with diplomatic caution. Official responses have often downplayed the political significance of these statements and visits, emphasizing bilateral friendship and regional cooperation instead of confrontation. This cautious approach aims to prevent escalation of tensions internally while maintaining the country's commitment to a multiethnic democratic model and preserving its Euro-Atlantic integration path.

Kosovo is perceived with a mix of solidarity and caution. While ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia strongly support Kosovo's statehood and normalization, significant concerns persist regarding border security and the potential spillover of political tensions. A critical issue affecting perceptions was Kosovo's refusal to extradite individuals involved in the 2012 Easter massacre near Skopje, despite convictions by North Macedonian courts (International Crisis Group, 2021), but also regarding the 2015 cases investigating the involvement of people from Kosovo in the attack on the police border station in Goshince and the murder of police officers in the operation to arrest the group in Kumanovo. This refusal deepened mistrust among ethnic Macedonians, reinforcing fears that Kosovo might remain a source of destabilization. Moreover, the memory of the 2001-armed conflict between Macedonian forces and Albanian insurgents, many of whom reportedly had connections with Kosovo, continues to influence public perception of Kosovo as a potential security threat.

Relations with **Serbia** are more complex. Although diplomatic relations are stable and trade ties are strong, historical sensitivities regarding Kosovo's status and competing national narratives occasionally cause friction (Bieber, 2020). However, a positive impulse to bilateral relations with Serbia has been provided by the resolution of the decades-long church dispute between the Macedonian and Serbian Orthodox Churches in June 2022. In

addition, as a basis for deepening cooperation and for strengthening and improving relations, stand out: mutual friendly feelings of citizens of both countries, approaching membership of European Union, and the future development of democratic processes in both countries.

Cooperation frameworks such as the "Open Balkan" Initiative, established in 2021, offer avenues for improving trust, regional economic integration, and labor mobility. However, the implementation of "Open Balkan" remains under construction, and there is an ongoing lack of clarity regarding its full implications. While political leaders emphasize the benefits of open borders, mutual recognition of documents, and a shared labor market, the operationalization of these commitments reveals significant challenges. Still, during the election campaign for the 2024 parliamentary elections in North Macedonia, the issue of reconsidering the role, as well as, about the country's further membership in this Initiative, was raised by the former ruling Albanian party – DUI. According to the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bujar Osmani, the "Open Balkans" initiative is not complete, since it does not include all six countries in the Western Balkans, and furthermore, its initial goal of reconciliation and trust-building, according to him, has been seriously undermined by the events in the village of Banjska in Kosovo on 24 September, 2023 (DW, 2024).

One major concern relates to the costs of harmonizing IT infrastructure across participant states, necessary for enabling free movement and data sharing in real-time. North Macedonia's administrative capacities and cybersecurity standards may require substantial upgrades, raising concerns about financial sustainability and data protection (Regional Cooperation Council, 2022). Similarly, the opening of the labor market without fully harmonized regulations could lead to labor imbalances, brain drain from smaller economies like North Macedonia, and social tensions, particularly if local workers perceive competition from cheaper or more mobile labor forces (World Bank, 2023).

Moreover, while "Open Balkan" is presented as an inclusive regional project, some sectors of Macedonian society perceive it skeptically, fearing that deeper economic integration without clear political safeguards could favor the larger economies (especially Serbia) and potentially reinforce regional asymmetries rather than overcome them. These apprehensions further in-

fluence public perceptions of neighbors and impact political debates regarding the country's strategic orientation. However, it can be expected that future Macedonian-Serbian relations will increasingly be viewed through the prism of general regional cooperation, parallel to the bilateral relations of the two countries, which as such will mean more to these countries themselves, than they will be significant for the EU and for other regional countries and partners.

An official bilateral cooperation with **Bulgaria** is based on a broad framework of concluded agreements in various spheres. Namely, starting from 20 August 1992, when the first agreement between the governments of the two countries for the opening of consulates generally was signed, until 23 November 2017, when the agreement on mutual cooperation in case of disasters was signed, the indicated framework consisting of a total of 34 agreements were subject to ratification. However, despite the broad framework for initiating bilateral cooperation and improving bilateral relations, the perception is that the effects of it are not at a satisfactory level. Such a perception has been particularly present in the last 5 years. On the Macedonian side, there is a perception that Bulgaria is using its EU membership to exert unjustified pressure on North Macedonia in relation to identity issues (history, language, culture, etc.) and hence to block its European integration process, while the Bulgarian position is that North Macedonia is not respecting the Friendship Treaty signed in 2017, as well that the continuation of its European integration is determined by the constitutional amendments and the inclusion of Bulgarians in the Macedonian Constitution.

In October 2019, Bulgaria warned that it would block North Macedonia's path to the EU unless certain historical and educational issues were resolved, while in 2020 it vetoed North Macedonia's EU membership. To resolve the issue, the "French Proposal" emerged, which was hotly debated by both sides. However, in the end, the North Macedonian parliament approved the French proposal and as a result, North Macedonia conditionally (given that there is a protocol on bilateral issues, which serves as a detailed roadmap for future talks) began accession negotiations with the EU. But of course, the process is not over and there is still much to be done and many new challenges that could have a serious impact on the socio-economic well-being of both countries (Trenovski, 2022).

Despite the current burdened bilateral relations, cooperation between the two countries is taking place at a satisfactory level within the framework of regional and international initiatives and alliances, especially within NATO. The perception of Bulgaria's obstruction of North Macedonia's EU integration aligns with a broader pattern of using the enlargement process as leverage to address unresolved historical and identity-related grievances. Bulgaria's insistence on constitutional amendments in North Macedonia, particularly the inclusion of Bulgarians as a constituent people, appears to extend beyond standard EU conditionality and reflects a more profound historical and political agenda.

This approach is rooted in long-standing national narratives tied to Bulgaria's diminished role before, during, and after World War II, as well as its contested historical interpretation of the Macedonian identity. A significant turning point in this context was the Bled Agreement of 1947, under which Yugoslavia and Bulgaria – then both under communist regimes – attempted to institutionalize cooperation and mutual recognition, including tacit acknowledgment of Macedonian identity in the Pirin region. However, following the Tito-Stalin split and shifting geopolitical alliances, Bulgaria reversed course, denying the existence of a Macedonian minority within its borders.

To this day, Bulgaria does not officially recognize the Macedonian minority, despite numerous judgments by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR, 2024). At least 14 ECtHR rulings have found Bulgaria in violation of the rights of individuals and organizations advocating for the recognition of a Macedonian identity. These rulings pertain to freedom of association, expression, and minority rights, yet Bulgaria has failed to implement them, raising serious concerns about its own compliance with European legal standards.

In contrast, North Macedonia has demonstrated commitment to good neighborly relations through the Friendship Treaty signed in 2017, its willingness to engage in joint historical commissions, and its strategic compromises under the Prespa Agreement with Greece, including the constitutional name change – one of the most significant concessions made by any EU candidate country in recent memory.

The imbalance in expectations and obligations – where North Macedonia is expected to make repeated concessions while Bulgaria disregards international legal rulings and fails to reciprocate in good faith – undermines the credibility of the EU as an honest broker. It also threatens to turn the enlargement process into a platform for bilateral score-settling, rather than a structured path based on the Copenhagen criteria and shared European values.

Unless the EU establishes firm mechanisms to prevent unilateral and identity-driven blockages, it risks eroding trust not only in North Macedonia but across the Western Balkans. Guaranteeing the rule of law, minority rights, and mutual respect must be enforced equally among all member and candidate states, to preserve the legitimacy and effectiveness of the enlargement process.

A characteristic of bilateral relations with **Greece** is that starting from 1999 (when the first bilateral agreement for the construction and management of an oil pipeline was signed), until 2 April 2019, when the last Agreement for the opening of a new border crossing between the two countries was signed, the framework for official bilateral cooperation, which is subject to ratification, consists of a total of 5 agreements. Such a situation is in some ways expected, considering the decades-long dispute that the two countries had over the name Macedonia, which was politically resolved with the signing of the Prespa Agreement in 2018. It is precisely the aforementioned dispute that represents a major obstacle and challenge to the development of both bilateral cooperation, as well as the development of negative perceptions between both countries. Has the situation significantly changed after the signing of the Prespa Agreement? Even though North Macedonia became a member of NATO, the perceptions in Macedonian society are that the Macedonian side in the period after the signing of the Agreement took its implementation too seriously, in contrast to the more reserved approach of Greece in this regard. The general perception is that the Agreement calmed tensions between the two countries, mainly on the political level, while its effects are limited in reducing cultural tensions between the people of both countries. As result, there is recent progress in opening the border crossing in Prespa region and starting the construction works on new gas interconnector.

Bosnia and Herzegovina and **Montenegro** are perceived positively, as partners in regional initiatives and Euro-Atlantic integration efforts. Shared challenges in state-building, ethnic reconciliation, and economic reform foster a sense of solidarity and mutual understanding (Regional Cooperation Council, 2022).

Impact of Perceptions on Strategic Documents and National Security Policy

North Macedonia's key strategic documents reflect an emphasis on cooperative security while recognizing latent risks from regional instability. The National Security Strategy (2019) identifies the Western Balkans' stability as a vital interest and explicitly names regional cooperation as a strategic priority (Government of North Macedonia, 2019).

However, these documents also highlight potential threats stemming from unresolved bilateral issues and ethno-nationalistic tensions in neighboring countries. The Defense Strategy (2020), drafted after NATO accession, underlines the need for interoperability and joint operations with allies, suggesting a move toward collective security frameworks rather than bilateral threat assessments (Ministry of Defense of North Macedonia, 2020).

The perception of Serbia and Kosovo features more subtly in North Macedonia's strategic documents. Rather than openly addressing these bilateral tensions and challenges, strategic language focuses on "fragile democratic processes" and "governance challenges" in the region (Government of North Macedonia, 2019). This indirect approach reflects a pragmatic effort to navigate the sensitivities involved in relationships with both countries. By emphasizing regional instability without naming specific threats, North Macedonia seeks to avoid exacerbating tensions and remains diplomatically neutral, positioning itself as a facilitator of regional cooperation.

However, this language in the strategic documents also reveals the underlying tensions and concerns that inform the country's security posture. The avoidance of direct references to Serbia and Kosovo may indicate the delicate balancing act the government faces: addressing the risks of instability without overtly alienating either neighbor. While North Macedonia's NATO accession is framed as a pivotal achievement for regional security,

there is an implicit acknowledgment that the unresolved issues between Serbia and Kosovo continue to present a security risk – albeit in a more abstract and indirect form. This indirect framing allows the country to present a strong commitment to peace and cooperation, while quietly recognizing the long-term destabilizing effects of these unresolved issues on broader regional security.

In practice, this subtle approach is reflected in the country's defense and foreign policy actions. For example, North Macedonia's participation in NATO-led missions often positions it as a peacekeeping contributor and conflict-prevention actor, rather than directly confronting or taking sides in the Serbia-Kosovo dispute. Additionally, North Macedonia has actively promoted dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo within the framework of the EU-facilitated Belgrade-Pristina talks, positioning itself as a neutral party focused on the overall stability of the region rather than engaging in the bilateral disputes of its neighbors.

This calculated diplomatic ambiguity in North Macedonia's strategic documents – balancing cooperative security principles with the realities of regional tensions – highlights the nation's desire to maintain its role as a bridge between East and West, while ensuring its security policy is flexible enough to respond to shifting regional dynamics. The challenge remains, however, in managing perceptions domestically, especially given the ethnic composition of the country and the lingering effects of the 2001 conflict, where domestic ethnic Albanians fought alongside ethnic Albanians from Kosovo.

This nuanced security policy further underscores the complex interplay between domestic political realities, regional security concerns, and the broader international context in which North Macedonia is embedded. It remains to be seen whether this strategy will be able to withstand the pressures of a more assertive regional security environment or whether the latent risks posed by ethno-nationalism and unresolved conflicts will eventually require a more direct confrontation in North Macedonia's security discourse.

Impact on Regional and International Security Initiatives and Peace Support Missions

North Macedonia actively participates in a broad range of regional and international security initiatives, reinforcing its commitment to cooperative security and regional stability. Engagement through platforms such as the U.S.-Adriatic Charter Initiative (A3 established in 2003, lately A5 [in 2008], in which besides North Macedonia, Albania and Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro were involved) and South-East Europe Defense Ministerial (SEDM) helped in fostering interoperability, mutual trust, and strategic dialogue among neighboring countries (Adriatic Charter, 2021).

Participation in NATO-led missions has been central to North Macedonia's security policy. Contributions to the Kosovo Force (KFOR) operation serve multiple purposes: strengthening military professionalism, affirming North Macedonia's status as a responsible NATO ally, and building trust among regional actors (NATO, 2023). However, the involvement in KFOR also carries symbolic weight, particularly in managing domestic perceptions related to Kosovo. While ethnic Albanians within North Macedonia view this engagement positively, ethnic Macedonians sometimes perceive it with caution, given historical memories of the 2001 conflict and lingering concerns over potential cross-border security threats.

North Macedonia's sustained support for EUFOR's Althea mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina reflects a consistent policy of preventive diplomacy and peace support operations (Ministry of Defense of North Macedonia, 2025). The country's participation underscores a broader strategic vision: maintaining stability in fragile neighboring states reduces potential spillover risks and strengthens its Euro-Atlantic credentials.

At the same time, evolving regional cooperation frameworks have played a crucial role in strengthening disaster risk management efforts across South-Eastern Europe. The Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative for South-Eastern Europe (DPPI SEE), established nearly two decades ago, continues to serve as a cornerstone for fostering collaboration among national civil protection authorities (DPPI SEE, 2024). Additionally, the "Open Balkan" Initiative, although broader in scope, includes disaster protection and emergency management as one of its key pillars of cooperation

(Open Balkan Declaration, 2021). Equally significant is the contribution of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), whose Strategy 2030 explicitly prioritizes disaster risk reduction as a critical area of regional engagement (RCC, 2023). Together, these initiatives form the backbone of coordinated efforts to enhance resilience, promote mutual assistance, and address emerging disaster risks and threats across the region. Their combined impact reflects a growing recognition that transboundary challenges require joint, strategic, and sustained action to safeguard communities and support sustainable development.

While North Macedonia officially supports Open Balkan as a means of fostering economic growth and regional integration, societal skepticism remains. Although Open Balkan and the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) provide frameworks for economic cooperation, historical sensitivities and competing national narratives persist below the surface. North Macedonia carefully calibrates its diplomatic messaging, seeking to maintain cooperative relations with Serbia without alienating domestic constituencies sensitive to issues surrounding Kosovo and broader regional dynamics.

Security perceptions, therefore, shape not only North Macedonia's participation in regional security and economic initiatives but also the country's broader strategic calculations. By engaging constructively while remaining vigilant regarding potential risks, North Macedonia attempts to position itself as both a contributor to regional security and a guardian of its national interests.

In this context, North Macedonia's dual-track strategy – strengthening ties with Western-led institutions like NATO and the EU while cautiously engaging in regional initiatives like Open Balkan – illustrates its pragmatic approach. It reflects an understanding that while cooperative security offers important opportunities, it also demands careful management of unresolved regional tensions and internal vulnerabilities.

Opportunities and Risks for North Macedonia in the Evolving Security Environment

The evolving security environment in South-East Europe presents both significant opportunities and critical risks for North Macedonia. The coun-

try's strategic positioning – both geographically and politically – offers avenues for strengthening its regional and international standing, while simultaneously exposing it to vulnerabilities rooted in historical, ethnic, and political complexities.

Opportunities

North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration has significantly enhanced its security guarantees. NATO membership (achieved in 2020) has reduced fear-based perceptions regarding threats to national sovereignty stemming from interethnic tensions and neighboring ambitions, while simultaneously promoting a cooperative approach to regional security (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of North Macedonia, 2020).

Additionally, North Macedonia's participation in regional crisis management initiatives, including joint disaster response exercises and pandemic coordination efforts, reflects a maturing security culture in South-East Europe (Regional Cooperation Council, 2022). These engagements have improved mutual trust among neighbors and demonstrated the potential for practical cooperation beyond political rhetoric.

Economic initiatives, particularly the Open Balkan Initiative, provide platforms for de-securitizing interstate relations through growing economic interdependence. Furthermore, active involvement in regional security platforms – such as the Adriatic Charter (A5) and the South-East Europe Defense Ministerial (SEDM) – enables North Macedonia to engage in strategic dialogue with its neighbors and foster interoperability, particularly in military and security sectors. Such participation amplifies the country's voice in shaping the regional security agenda and building its diplomatic resilience.

Risks

However, these opportunities are closely shadowed by significant risks that require careful management.

Bilateral disputes continue to present major challenges. Historical grievances and identity-related disputes, particularly with Bulgaria, risk reigniting

nationalist narratives both domestically and regionally. The experience of name change's negotiations and the sensitive bilateral agreements with Bulgaria have already demonstrated how historical issues can deeply affect North Macedonia's external relations and internal stability.

The fragility of neighboring states, especially the potential of instability coming from Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, adds another layer of uncertainty. Political instability in these countries could destabilize the broader perception of regional security and have direct consequences for North Macedonia, particularly in its ethnically mixed areas (International Crisis Group, 2021).

Moreover, external influence operations, notably Russia's disinformation campaigns, aim to undermine trust in Western institutions and fuel division within the region (European External Action Service, 2022). North Macedonia remains particularly vulnerable to these narratives given its internal political polarization and unresolved societal cleavages.

Even within economic cooperation projects like the Open Balkan Initiative, risks persist regarding its implementation and commitments of the countries involved. While the initiative holds economic promise, it also entails technical and institutional challenges that remain insufficiently addressed.

The latest regional initiatives for cooperation in the military-security sphere may pose a serious challenge to the proclaimed neutral approach of North Macedonia towards managing and resolving open bilateral issues in the Western Balkans. Namely, in March 2025, Croatia, Albania and Kosovo signed a declaration on deepening cooperation in the field of security and defense. Without giving specific details, the defense ministers of the three countries said that they would increase the interoperability of their armies through education, training and joint exercises, as well as that they would engage in the fight against hybrid threats but also coordinate policies for Euro-Atlantic integration. Serbia considered it as a step that "undermines regional stability" and as a threat to its "territorial integrity", while Kosovo's position is that such initiative should not be seen as a threat to anyone but rather should be accepted as a message that the three states will be united in the face of any challenge or threat. However, the response from

Serbia came in a short period of time, through the Treaty of Military Cooperation with Hungary, signed in April 2025. Despite its geopolitical significance, the most sensitive scenario of the aforementioned process would be if such agreements initiate a further regional arms race, which, combined with the previously mentioned security risks, both at the national (internal instability) and regional level (open bilateral disputes), would represent a new serious test of security and stability for both, the countries themselves and the entire Western Balkan region.

Finally, internal ethnic dynamics pose an enduring risk. Political messages from Albania and Kosovo sometimes unintentionally fuel ethnic tensions within North Macedonia. If left unmanaged, these tensions could weaken the country's internal cohesion and complicate its regional engagement efforts.

Balancing Act

Navigating this complex environment demands a careful balancing act. North Macedonia must continue to deepen its Euro-Atlantic ties while actively engaging in regional platforms, carefully managing bilateral disputes through diplomacy, and strengthening societal resilience against disinformation and ethnic polarization. Investments in cybersecurity, strategic communication, and inclusive governance will be crucial in mitigating risks and fully exploiting the opportunities presented by the evolving regional security landscape.

Conclusion and Recommendations

North Macedonia's security perceptions are increasingly framed by its Euro-Atlantic orientation and strategic commitment to a stable, cooperative Western Balkans. NATO membership and the pursuit of EU accession have elevated cooperative security frameworks over traditional, threat-centric views. Nonetheless, historical legacies, unresolved bilateral disputes, and evolving regional dynamics – particularly concerning regional hotspots continue to shape the country's strategic environment.

To fully exploit the opportunities and mitigate the risks identified, North Macedonia should pursue the following priorities:

- **Strengthen Multilateral and Regional Platforms:** Sustain and deepen participation in multilateral frameworks such as NATO, the Adriatic Charter (A5), SEDM, and EUFOR missions. Proactively asses' national interests through shaping the future development of initiatives like Open Balkan. It can ensure they contribute to genuine regional integration without exacerbating asymmetries or governance gaps.

- **Enhance Strategic Communication and Societal Resilience:** Invest in comprehensive strategic communication strategies to counter disinformation campaigns, particularly those targeting ethnic relations and Western alliances. Strengthening media literacy, building institutional transparency, and promoting inclusive national narratives will be crucial in maintaining societal cohesion.

- **Promote Confidence-Building with Neighbors:** Expand bilateral and regional confidence-building measures with neighboring countries and other partners where historical grievances persist. Initiatives could include joint cultural projects, youth exchanges, and security sector cooperation, aimed at closing perception gaps between political elites and wider societies.

- **Anticipate and Address Emerging Risks:** Develop early warning mechanisms to monitor political instability in neighboring fragile states and prepare contingency strategies to mitigate spillover effects. Attention should also be given to cybersecurity risks associated with deeper regional connectivity and open data flows.

- **Leverage Economic Cooperation for Stability:** Align regional economic projects with strategic political goals, ensuring that economic interdependence complements and strengthens political trust rather than creating new dependencies or inequalities.

The evolving security architecture in Southeast Europe presents both significant opportunities and considerable challenges. North Macedonia's constructive, proactive, and resilient engagement will remain vital not only for its national interests but also for fostering a more cooperative, stable, and secure regional environment.

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Security Perceptions and their Impact on Regional Cooperation in South East Europe: The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Benjamin Plevljak

Perception of Neighbors in the Area of Security Policy

Bosnia and Herzegovina's (BiH) perception of regional security is deeply shaped by its complex post-war legacy, institutional fragmentation, and unresolved political and historical disputes. Although official strategic documents such as the *Security Policy of BiH* from 2006 do not identify neighbouring countries as security threats, the real picture is far more nuanced and affected by widespread public mistrust, political narratives, and security dilemmas. This paper will focus on perceptions related to the Republic of Serbia (Serbia) and the Republic of Croatia (Croatia), given that the policies of their governments are perceived as the most intrusive compared to those of other neighboring states.

Croatia and Serbia are BiH's important economic partners. For example, in the first nine months of 2024, Croatia ranked as the largest foreign investor in BiH, with more than €129 million in registered capital.[1] However, the majority of citizens in BiH continue to hold a problematic view of these two states in the context of politics and security policy.

Serbian governing structures are widely seen as the main external actors undermining BiH's sovereignty. This perception stems from Belgrade's continuous political and rhetorical support for Milorad Dodik, the previous President of the BiH entity Republika Srpska, whose secessionist agenda directly challenges BiH's constitutional order. Political statements given by the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, such as the one asserting that "every decision to arrest Milorad Dodik would be cata-

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[1] Dario Pušić, *Foreign investments in BiH: Croatia invested the most – majority of existing investors plan expansion or new projects*, Večernji list, January 10, 2025. Available at: https://www.vecernji.ba/vijesti/strane-investicije-u-bih-najvise-ulozila-hrvatska-vecina-koji-vec-posluju-planira-prosirenje-ili-nove-projekte-1829542 [accessed: May 3, 2025].

strophic for the region",[2] reinforce the perception of interference in BiH's internal affairs. The special parallel relations between Serbia and Republika Srpska, along with strategic documents such as Serbia's *National Security Strategy*, in which the preservation of Republika Srpska is listed as a priority, exacerbate concerns. Furthermore, the *Declaration on the Protection of the National and Political Rights of the Serbian People,*[3] jointly adopted by officials from Serbia and Republika Srpska, openly challenges the sovereignty of BiH by treating the entity as a "state". Amid the ongoing political crisis, which intensified following the February 2025 non-final conviction of Milorad Dodik to one year in prison and a six-year ban from holding public office for his refusal to comply with decisions of the High Representative in BiH, High Representative Christian Schmidt has also drawn attention to this trajectory of political conduct. In his latest report, he underscores that the Republika Srpska entity under Dodik's rule is acting as if it were a sovereign state and is attempting to establish parallel institutions that undermine the constitutional order and authority of the state of BiH.[4]

Perceptions of Croatia's stances are less acute but still problematic. Despite its membership in the EU and NATO, Croatia is often perceived as attempting to exert (malign) influence over BiH's electoral legislation. The dominant view in BiH is that the proposed changes to the Election Law would aim to institutionalize ethnic division and pave the way for the creation of a third entity, which would be under the political control of Croats. Statements such as the recent one by Dragan Čović, the leader of the HDZ BiH (Croatian Democratic Union of BiH, a sister political party of HDZ in

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[2]   *Vučić commented on the situation in BiH: Every decision to arrest Milorad Dodik would be catastrophic*, Radio Sarajevo, April 6, 2025. Available at: https://radiosarajevo.ba/vijesti/ regija/vucic-komentirao-situaciju-u-bih-svaka-odluka-o-hapsenju-milorada-dodika-bila-bi-katastrofalna/584718 [accessed: May 3, 2025].

[3]   *This is the text of the Declaration adopted at the All-Serbian Assembly – it consists of 49 conclusions*, Klix.ba, June 8, 2024. Available at: https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/ovo-je-tekst-deklaracije-usvojene-na-svesrpskom-saboru-sastoji-se-od-49-zakljucaka/240608055 [accessed: May 4, 2025].

[4]   Politički.ba, *Schmidt: RS is systematically undermining BiH's constitutional order – a path to secession prepared over years*, Politički.ba, June 3, 2025. Available at: https://politicki.ba/ vijesti/schmidt-rs-sistematski-rusi-ustavni-poredak-bih---put-ka-secesiji-pripreman-godinama/77768 [accessed: June 3, 2025].

Croatia) suggesting that the future of BiH lies in "three federal units",[5] further fuel these concerns. This perception is further reinforced by recent statements made by Croatian Foreign Minister, Gordan Grlić Radman, at the NATO Foreign Ministers' Summit held in Brussels on April 3–4, 2025. While some states used the occasion to publicly condemn Milorad Dodik, such as Germany and Austria announcing travel bans due to his attacks on BiH's constitutional order, Grlić Radman downplayed Dodik's role in the political crisis. Instead, he emphasized that "electoral reform is the key priority and the only path toward a democratic, stable, and prosperous Bosnia and Herzegovina".[6] Such framing, presented amidst what many analysts regard as the most serious political crisis since the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement, could be interpreted as an attempt to legitimize reform efforts that align with the political objectives of the HDZ BiH and the long-standing push for the establishment of a third, Croat-majority federal unit.

On a broader scale, military spending by neighboring states contributes to a heightened sense of insecurity within BiH, despite being conducted within the framework of the Agreement on Sub-Regional Arms Control, as established under Article IV of Annex 1-B to the Dayton Peace Agreement. Serbia's ongoing modernization of its military capabilities, without more transparent strategic communication, raises questions about its intentions – whether these efforts are solely defensive or potentially offensive.

In summary, regional security, military and political cooperation remains burdened by unresolved political tensions and mistrust, particularly with Serbia. Cooperation with other neighbors is somewhat more productive and is primarily conducted through NATO frameworks or bilateral agreements.

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[5] *The solution is a third federal unit*, Bljesak.info, April 30, 2025. Available at: https://bljesak.info/vijesti/bih/covic-rjesenje-je-treca-federalna-jedinca/514908 [accessed: May 4, 2025].

[6] Senad Avdić, *By some twist of fate, Bosnia and Herzegovina has become the concern of professional scavenger Gordan Grlić Radman, a man who serves as the very embodiment of the politics he represents*, Istraga.ba, June 2, 2025. Available at: https://istraga.ba/neko-je-providjenje-htjelo-da-se-bosnom-i-hercegovinom-bavi-profesionalni-lesinar-goran-grlic-radman-on-je-metafora-politike-koju-predstavlja/ [accessed: June 3, 2025].

Impact of Perceptions on Strategic Documents and the Security Policy

The internal political fragmentation of BiH directly influences the effectiveness and coherence of its strategic security frameworks. The *Security Policy of BiH*, last adopted in 2006, is outdated and fails to reflect the evolving regional and global security dynamics. Although the Presidency of BiH mandated the Council of Ministers of BiH to update the document, this initiative was never implemented, largely due to a lack of political consensus and interest.

The situation is even more critical in the defense sector. The inability of political elites to agree on fundamental issues such as military modernization or increased defense spending reflects a deep institutional paralysis. Around 0.8% of the country's GDP is allocated to defense (the lowest amount in the region), with 84% of that amount consumed by personnel costs.[7] This leaves minimal space for capacity development and interoperability with NATO standards.

While the NATO *Defense Capacity Building (DCB)* initiative offers some support – particularly in the realm of soft power and training – the lack of concrete equipment and infrastructure support through bilateral channels leaves BiH lagging behind its regional peers. Serbia, Croatia, and others are investing substantial resources in military modernization, further widening the capability gap.

In practical terms, security and stability in BiH heavily rely on the continued presence of EUFOR/Althea, the EU's peacekeeping mission operating under a UN Chapter VII mandate. The absence of a coherent internal security policy makes the country increasingly dependent on international actors for basic security guarantees.

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[7]   Centre for Security Studies, *PRESS RELEASE: Neglecting Bosnia and Herzegovina's Defense – A Flock of Sheep Awaiting a Predator*, Centre for Security Studies, May 27, 2025. Available at: https://css.ba/saopstenje-za-javnost-zanemirivanje-odbrane-bih-stado-ovaca-koje-ceka-predatora/ [accessed: May 27, 2025].

Impact on Regional and International Security Initiatives and Peace Support Missions

BiH participates in various regional and international security initiatives, including the *Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)* and the *Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative (MARRI)*. These frameworks provide valuable platforms for dialogue and cooperation. However, BiH often fails to harmonize its positions within its own government structures, weakening the credibility and effectiveness of its participation.

This institutional dysfunction also negatively affects trust-building within the region. In a context where regional security initiatives require coordinated actions and joint positions, BiH's inability to speak with one voice sends mixed signals to its partners and hinders the broader agenda of regional integration and cooperation.

Moreover, perceptions of interference by neighboring countries, combined with internal political disputes, diminish the country's contributions to peace support missions and regional initiatives. BiH's international engagement remains reactive and often disconnected from a clear strategic vision.

Opportunities and Risks

Despite the complex and often discouraging security landscape, several opportunities can be identified.

Opportunities:

- **EU integration** offers a pathway for systemic transformation. Alignment with EU standards could drive improvements in rule of law, defense/security reforms, and political accountability. However, this requires genuine political will and broad-based societal consensus.
- **International support** remains essential. Targeted assistance – particularly in the field of security sector reform and institution-building – can help stabilize the country and mitigate external (malign) influences.

- **Youth and civil society engagement** represent a significant source of resilience. Increased involvement of young people and grassroots organizations in public dialogue and peace building efforts contributes to social cohesion and interethnic trust. Supporting these actors is crucial for sustainable peace.

Risks:

- **Further escalation of internal political conflicts** remains a serious concern. The continued actions of secessionist actors, particularly within Republika Srpska, test the limits of BiH's institutional endurance. The case of Milorad Dodik, who regularly challenges state institutions, exemplifies the risk of internal destabilization.
- **Foreign influence**, particularly from Russia, is increasingly visible through its support for nationalist actors in Serbia and Republika Srpska. This opens the possibility for the Western Balkans to become a new arena of geopolitical confrontation.
- **Security dilemmas driven by arms build-up** in the region could inadvertently trigger an arms race or provoke unnecessary tensions. Without transparency and confidence-building measures, military modernization efforts may be perceived as potential threats, especially in a fragile state like BiH.

Conclusion

Perceptions matter. In the Western Balkans – and particularly in BiH – they shape ordinary, everyday politics, influence regional cooperation, and determine the success or failure of strategic initiatives. While official documents may portray a neutral or cooperative regional stance, the lived reality tells a different story – one defined by mistrust, unresolved legacies of war, and political manipulation of security narratives.

Navigating this complex environment requires political maturity, regional dialogue, and sustained international engagement. Only by addressing perceptions – both real and perceived – can the region hope to build a more stable and cooperative security architecture.

Albania's Foreign Policy in Transition – The Risks of the Status Quo

Albert Rakipi

Abstract

More than three decades after the end of the Cold War and the fall of communism, Albania's foreign policy finds itself in a phase of transition. A member of NATO since 2009 and an official candidate for membership in the European Union since 2014 – with accession negotiations having formally begun in December 2024 – Albania has recently started to implement the so-called "360-degree foreign policy"[1] model, marking a clear sign of change.[2]

For a relatively long period, both at the policy level and within the community of experts and think tanks, the adoption of this new approach to foreign policy has been consistently argued for – not only as a strategic necessity but, above all, as a response to the pressing need for substantive change in order to overcome a status quo that has dominated for nearly a decade.[3]

This status quo is particularly evident in Albania's foreign policy toward the Balkans – the region that has been, and will remain, the most critical and strategic area of focus, even after NATO membership and the country's eventual accession to the European Union.

Albania, a small Balkan state emerging from decades of communist isolation, addressed its security challenges through an active foreign policy and strong strategic ties with the United States and the West more broadly. Albania has played a constructive and positive role in the Balkans, investing

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[1] See: Albert Rakipi, "The Perils of Change, Albanian Foreign Policy in Transition", AIIS, Tirana 2022.

[2] Over the past two to three years, the compass of Albania's foreign policy has expanded with a rapid development of relations with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, other Gulf countries, Azerbaijan, India, and others.

[3] See: Albert Rakipi, "From staunch enemy to strategic partner: Albanian-American relations in transition" at "The United States and the Future of Europe", TEPSA, Editors Michael Kaeding, Johannes Pollak, Paul Schmidt. May 2025.

in and contributing to the desecuritization of inter-state relations in a region marred by conflict and instability. Its foreign policy, particularly with regard to Kosovo, but also in relation to Serbia, has been fundamental to this process of desecuritization over a significant period – bringing us to the current moment of transition.

If this status quo is maintained, it may carry serious implications, including the potential to trigger a new wave of re-securitization in the region. This essay analyzes Albania's current relations with Kosovo and Serbia and argues that preserving the status quo – including Albania's gradual withdrawal from an active regional role – may have direct consequences for regional stability and security. Albania, alongside Serbia, remains a key state for the stability and security of the Western Balkans. Surrounded by EU member states, the region directly affects the European and Euro-Atlantic security environment.

The essay that follows analyzes Albania's foreign policy in the Balkans, with a particular focus on its relations with Serbia and Kosovo, and argues that this policy is in a transitional phase. Maintaining the current status quo may further weaken Albania and risk re-securitizing inter-state relations in the Balkans.

How and Why Albania's Star in Balkan Foreign Policy is Fading

For more than two decades following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of communism, Albania remained a privileged ally of the West in the Balkans. Without hesitation, Tirana supported Western policies during a critical period marked by the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the bloody conflicts that accompanied it. In close partnership with the United States and NATO – even before becoming a formal member of the alliance – Tirana provided not only political but also logistical support to NATO interventions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and later in Kosovo.

However, the fundamental reason behind Albania's privileged relationship with the West lies in its potential and willingness to play a constructive role in a region sliding into armed conflicts, with possible implications for Euro-Atlantic security – just as the previous East-West confrontation was ending and a new security architecture was being shaped.

Albania's potential was not rooted in its military capacity – despite its high level of militarization during communism – nor in its bankrupt economy during the regime's final decade, nor even in its human resources, as hundreds of thousands of Albanians, newly freed from extreme isolation, were emigrating. Rather, Albania's potential stemmed from the historical developments and circumstances that led to the creation of the Albanian state. When the Great Powers supported the establishment of an Albanian state in 1913, nearly half of the Albanian nation was left outside its borders, with entire territories historically inhabited by Albanians excluded. The creation of the state entailed the division of the nation's natural geography, along with its economic, cultural, and religious communities. It was akin to severing a single, unified civilization.[4]

After the fall of communism and the end of the Cold War – both of which had served as shields against the resurgence of *national questions* in the Balkans – the dilemma became apparent: how would the Albanian national question, undoubtedly the most complex one, be addressed? Would Albanians seek reunification with the so-called "motherland" of the territories that had remained outside the 1913 borders? Such a move would have led to inevitable military confrontations with Serbia, Montenegro, and the then-Republic of Macedonia, all of which were themselves involved in movements to break away from the Yugoslav federation. The alternative was to address the *national question* in cooperation with the international community, which, in a time of dangerous conflicts in the Balkans, demanded from Tirana a moderate policy and a constructive role.

Albania, a fervent supporter of U.S. and broadly Western policies, opted for precisely this constructive approach in the Balkans. This was undoubtedly also a realistic choice, considering how weak Albania was emerging from communism. During a critical time for the region – marked by violent dissolution and bloody conflicts – Albania played an active but moderate role, contributing to peace and stability in the Balkans. Albania established political communication with political leaders in Kosovo and Macedonia, earning deep trust from both leaderships and building a relationship based on mutual trust, cooperation, and close consultation. During the first post-

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[4]   See: D. Heaton Armstrong, "Prince Wied, The Sixth Months Kingdom, Albania – 1914", AIIS, Tirana 2020.

communist decade, until the crisis of 1997, Albania's foreign policy – particularly with Kosovo – demonstrated no trace of paternalism. The future of Kosovo, or the issues facing Albanians in Macedonia or the Albanian minority in Montenegro, were not exploited by the ruling party in Tirana for domestic political gains.

Most importantly, Albania simultaneously supported the aspirations of Kosovo and political groups in Macedonia, as well as the policies of the U.S. and the broader West toward these regions. Thus, Albania stood with Kosovo, but also with the West. In close consultation and cooperation with political establishments in Kosovo and Macedonia, Albania at times discouraged uncoordinated efforts by Albanians in Kosovo or in the diaspora – particularly in Western countries – that were not supported by the international community, such as premature declarations of independence or similar moves in the Balkans, like in Macedonia. This moderate policy increased Albania's influence and role in the region.

The West, for its part, highly valued Albania's foreign policy and consistently emphasized its constructive role in the region. For a relatively long period, thanks to specific circumstances, Albania secured a leadership role in the Balkans, becoming the West's most reliable ally while advancing its Euro-Atlantic integration through NATO membership in 2009 and its EU membership application in the same year.

However, Albania's status as an ally – particularly as a privileged ally of the U.S. and the West – is fading, if it has not already faded completely. At a time when Kosovo is an independent state and Albanians in North Macedonia have made significant progress in building a common state with ethnic Macedonians, Albania's "constructive role" in the region is no longer needed – nor, naturally, requested – by the West.

Even if the processes of state-building in Kosovo and North Macedonia occasionally experience setbacks and have the potential to negatively affect security – in other words, to trigger a degree of re-securitization of internal and inter-state relations in the Balkans – Albania's role is no longer sought, partly because over the past decade, Albania's influence and capacity to impact developments – especially in Pristina – have gradually diminished. At best, this may be described as a mere decline in influence; at worst,

Albania's foreign policy is contributing unpredictably to the "securitization" of inter-state relations between the *two Albanian states* in the Balkans.

Another factor that has weakened Albania's role in the region is the fact that Albania is no longer the only NATO member in the Balkans: North Macedonia and Montenegro are now part of the alliance, while Kosovo remains an ardent supporter of it. Serbia, on the other hand – NATO's primary target in 1999 – has restored, or is in the process of restoring, its relations with the U.S. and the West.

Moreover, another factor weakening Albania's role is the deep domestic political crises, ongoing political conflict, pervasive corruption, and the lack of a viable political, economic, or democratic model for others – Kosovo, for example – to follow. But what has most severely undermined Albania's ability to play a role and exert positive influence in the Balkans – starting with Kosovo – is its own misguided foreign policy. Over the last decade, Albania has returned to a paternalistic approach toward Kosovo, using it to advance deeply personal power interests, internal political battles, and efforts to instrumentalize Kosovo to secure support in decision-making centers in Washington, Brussels, and beyond. Such a policy has been clearly opposed by Kosovo's leadership[5] and has ultimately deprived Albania of the ability to play a regional role or maintain influence in the Balkans.

Finally, but no less importantly, one must note the increasingly transactional nature of international relations, which suggests the need for substantial changes in Albania's foreign policy – especially in the Balkan region – beyond merely preserving the status quo, which carries inherent risks.

The fact that Albania consistently aligns with EU foreign policy toward Russia, while Serbia openly supports Moscow – even after its aggression against Ukraine – has neither helped Albania nor harmed Serbia. This, precisely due to the increasingly transactional nature of international politics and diplomacy, underscores the limitations of Albania's current foreign policy approach.

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[5]   See: Ilir Kalemaj, Marrdheniet Shqiperi Kosove, Quo Vadis, Friedrrich Ebert Foundation, Tirana 2024.

Albania–Kosovo: Sliding toward a Proxy Policy

On February 18, 2018, during the jubilee celebrations marking the tenth anniversary of Kosovo's independence, the Prime Minister of Albania, Edi Rama, while speaking in the plenary session of the Parliament of Kosovo, proposed the election of a joint president for Albania and Kosovo.[6] This entirely unexpected proposal – made without prior consultation either with Rama's own government or with the government of Kosovo – marked the beginning of a significant shift in Albania's foreign policy approach toward Kosovo: the adoption of a paternalistic approach that, in the years to follow, would lead to repeated clashes, the emergence of political tensions, and the first visible disagreements between Tirana and Pristina.

Since 2014, Albania and Kosovo have held joint meetings of their respective governments – a bilateral initiative proposed by official Tirana.[7] None of the numerous agreements signed during these joint governmental meetings, including the agreement on strategic partnership, explicitly refer to the issue of unification between the two states. Nevertheless, the scenography of these meetings – rich in national symbols and imagery, where it is often difficult to distinguish between the official state symbols – and especially the political speeches delivered by leaders, filled with ambiguities regarding the nation, a shared future, and unification, as well as public reports referring to customs union, the removal of borders between Albania and Kosovo, are increasingly reinforcing the idea that the future of Albania and Kosovo lies in their unification.[8]

This paternalistic tone and proxy-style policy toward Kosovo were further reinforced by the nationalist and patriotic rhetoric of the Albanian government concerning the "national issue", national unification, and similar

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[6] Bota Sot. 2018. "Edi Rama: Kosova dhe Shqipëria do ta kenë një president të përbashkët të Unitetit Kombëtar". Accessed on 18/02/2018, https://www.botasot.info/lajme/837341/edi-rama-kosova-dhe-shqiperia-do-ta-kene-nje-president-te-perbashket-te-unitetit-kombetar/.

[7] Zeri. 2019. "Edi Rama paralajmëron bashkimin e Kosovës me Shqipërinë!" Accessed on 20/05/2020, https://zeri.info/aktuale/235135/edi-rama-paralajmeron-bashkimin-e-kosoves-me-shqiperine/.

[8] For a deep analysis on the issue of the so-called Greater Albania, see Albert Rakipi, "Albania and Kosovo. Is Unification the Common Future", AIIS, Tirana 2022.

themes. Only a few months after proposing a joint president, on November 26, 2018, during the joint meeting of the governments of Albania and Kosovo in Peja, Prime Minister Rama called upon his Kosovar counterpart to begin work – through their respective foreign ministries – on drafting a strategic document for the unification of Albania and Kosovo by the year 2025. Taken by surprise, Kosovo's Prime Minister at the time, Ramush Haradinaj, who was also the host of the joint government session, admitted to reporters that they had discussed "the drafting of an analytical, strategic document on how to proceed until 2025 and what the perspective of Albanians in the Balkans might be",[9] but made no mention of the unification proposed by his Albanian counterpart.

We have now arrived at the year 2025. But we have not arrived at the proclaimed national unification declared and demanded by the Albanian government seven years ago. Instead, relations between Albania and Kosovo are, for the first time since Kosovo's declaration of independence, almost frozen – approaching zero – with tensions that, although not declared publicly, are deep and concern fundamental issues. This situation is the product of an entire decade of politicization and instrumentalization of the Kosovo issue by official Tirana, particularly during the tenure of Prime Minister Edi Rama. Instead of building a functional and equal partnership between two sovereign states, the relationship has been marked by unilateral interventions, uncoordinated initiatives with Kosovo's institutions, the use of Kosovo as a political instrument for Albania's internal and international purposes, and a paternalistic policy that has repeatedly generated tensions and undermined the foundations of inter-state cooperation.

Tensions between Kosovo and Albania intensified notably following the Albanian Prime Minister's visit to Belgrade in October 2016. Initially, independent voices in Pristina drew comparisons between Albania's approach to Kosovo and Serbia's stance toward Republika Srpska, deeming Tirana's conduct entirely unacceptable. These highly critical assessments were soon echoed by the Government of Kosovo. The Minister of Foreign Affairs

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[9]   Time.al. 2018. "Serbia me tre fytyra, Shqipëria e Kosova me një fytyrë, kuq e zi", Accessed on 20/05/2020, http://time.ikub.al/18-11-26-Fjalimi-kuq-e-zi-i-kryeministrit-te-Shqiperise-ne-mbledhjen-e-dy-Qeverive703980/Serbia-me-tre-fytyra-Shqiperia-e-Kosova-me-nje-fytyre-kuq-e-zi-.aspx.

publicly warned Tirana that, "with regard to the normalization of Kosovo–Serbia relations, Kosovo is a political actor in its own right, and Albania must acknowledge this reality, both now and going forward".[10] Kosovo and its relations with Serbia have increasingly featured on the agenda of bilateral discussions between Albania and Serbia – an area that, by all diplomatic standards, should fall within the sovereign jurisdiction of the third state involved, namely Kosovo. Albania and Serbia have proposed infrastructure projects – such as the Durrës-Niš highway – that necessarily traverse Kosovo's territory.

The signing of bilateral protocols between Tirana and Belgrade for such projects provoked discontent in Pristina, which viewed them as implicitly acknowledging Serbian sovereignty over Kosovo. It was not merely the "elephant in the room", but the elephant's exit in 2008 – that is, Kosovo's declaration of independence – that rendered the proxy competition between Albania and Serbia over Kosovo both dangerous and unnecessary. In the context of the new rapprochement between Albania and Serbia, Tirana made no secret of its ambition to co-lead, alongside Belgrade, a regional process of reconciliation between Albanians and Serbs. Albania was among the first countries to recognize Kosovo's independence on February 17, 2008, thereby granting the new state international legitimacy and active support in international forums. Initially, this support was seen as part of a joint national and diplomatic project aimed at securing Kosovo's international affirmation. However, the decade that followed did not reinforce a stable bilateral relationship based on institutional and strategic partnership. On the contrary, Albania became increasingly involved in unilateral actions, often without consultation with Kosovo's legitimate institutions, advancing a posture more akin to institutionalized paternalism than to a relationship between two sovereign states.

After Prime Minister Edi Rama came to power in 2013, Albania's foreign policy toward Kosovo evolved in a new direction: from direct support for Kosovo's statehood toward using Kosovo as a tool to strengthen the Albanian government's international standing. This was reflected in efforts to present Albania as a key actor in the Kosovo–Serbia dialogue by drafting

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[10] Comments of Hoxha, Minister of Foreign Afaires of Kosovo, Tirana Times, at www.tiranatimes.com.

and promoting plans that were not coordinated with authorities in Pristina.[11] Albania attempted to mediate in the dialogue, even though Kosovo had made it clear that the only acceptable mediators were the European Union and the United States. Tirana's unilateral positioning as a spokesperson for Kosovo's interests – without mandate and contrary to the will of its legitimate institutions – was one of the main causes of the deterioration in bilateral relations. The instrumentalization of Kosovo also served as a platform for promoting Prime Minister Rama's personal profile as a regional leader and a stabilizing figure in the Western Balkans. This strategy was pursued at a time when Albania was grappling with major internal challenges and weakening democratic institutions. Though this approach was designed to boost Tirana's international profile, it failed to respect Kosovo's political autonomy and strategic interests.

One of the most tense moments in bilateral relations was Albania's promotion of the "Open Balkan"[12] initiative, in cooperation with Serbia and North Macedonia. Designed as a platform for economic integration and regional cooperation, the initiative was strongly opposed by Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro. For official Pristina, the Open Balkan was perceived as an attempt to bypass the Berlin Process and to normalize Serbia's position in the region without recognizing Kosovo's statehood. The lack of consultation with Pristina and Tirana's leadership role in the initiative deepened institutional mistrust and further divided the political agendas of the two countries. At the same time, the joint meetings of the Albanian and Kosovar governments – conducted in a largely ceremonial format – have failed to produce tangible results in the areas of economic, diplomatic, or infrastructural cooperation.

These events have been perceived more as media spectacles than as forums of substantive content or clear vision for deepening integration between the two states.

Bilateral relations are currently in a frozen state. At first glance, a façade of formal stability is maintained, but the substance of the relationship is fragile.

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[11] See: Albert Rakipi, "Why Albania sees Kosovo as an Autonomus Province of Hers" Tirana Times. 2024, at www.tiranatimes.com.

[12] For an in-depth analysis of the Open Balkans initiative, see: the Tirana Observatory special issue Winter 2023, Vol 5 Nr.1.

Divergences in political positions, parallel diplomatic channels, and differing approaches to the Serbia dialogue have created an atmosphere burdened by mistrust. After failed attempts to mediate the Kosovo–Serbia dialogue, Albanian diplomacy has retreated from initiatives with clear regional content, leaving a dangerous vacuum in its relationship with Kosovo. This vacuum risks transforming into a process of "securitization" of inter-state relations, in which internal political tensions are projected onto bilateral ties, generating a cycle of institutionalized conflict. In a region like the Western Balkans – where inter-state relations are delicate and deeply interdependent – such a scenario poses a long-term threat to regional stability.

In this context, it is essential that Albania fundamentally revise its approach toward Kosovo. A new relationship must be built, one founded on sovereign equality, institutional respect, and shared strategic interest. This requires abandoning all forms of paternalism, affirming Kosovo's full sovereignty, and establishing permanent mechanisms for coordinating foreign and regional policy between the two governments. It is also imperative that economic, cultural, and educational cooperation move beyond rhetoric and become institutionalized through clear legal, financial, and institutional instruments. The symbolic spectacle of political events must give way to concrete projects with measurable impact on the citizens of both countries.

Relations between Albania and Kosovo are at a critical juncture. The current status quo is the result of a unilateral policy that has produced tensions, weakened mutual trust, and diminished the potential for building a strategic partnership. Instead of deepening cooperation between two states with natural national and cultural ties, we have witnessed a period marked by immature initiatives, political paternalism, and mutual instrumentalization. The time is ripe for a new approach and a return to the path of genuine partnership – one based on sovereign equality, mutual respect, and a shared vision for European integration and democratic development of both societies

Albania and Serbia: From a Strategic Agenda to the Status Quo

"Albania and Serbia, the Albanian and Serbian peoples, must do for the Balkans today what Germany and France, the French and German peoples,

did for Europe after the Second World War",[13] declared the Prime Minister of Albania on May 26, 2015, one day before the visit of the Serbian Prime Minister to Tirana. With enthusiasm and pomp, the Albanian Prime Minister announced not only a new era in bilateral relations but also a highly ambitious strategic agenda aimed at reconciliation between Albanians and Serbs in the Balkans.

A year earlier, in 2014, direct flights between Belgrade and Tirana had been reinstated – considered a symbolic step signaling a new phase in Albania–Serbia relations. At the inaugural ceremony of the new air route, the Albanian ambassador in Belgrade declared that the Albanian Prime Minister would personally use the Air Serbia flight to travel to Belgrade within a month.

Ten years ago, everything seemed to promise a new beginning: nearly seventy years had passed since the first and only visit of an Albanian prime minister to Belgrade. The JAT aircraft that had taken Enver Hoxha to Belgrade in 1946 no longer existed. Nor did Yugoslavia – it had disintegrated following Serbia's violent attempt to dominate the other republics. The political map of the Balkans had changed several times, most recently with the creation of Kosovo as an independent state. Enthusiasm and expectations were high. The international press labeled the visit historic, while European diplomacy harbored great – though, as it would later prove, misguided – hopes that improved Albania–Serbia relations would lead automatically to reconciliation between Albanians and Serbs in the region.

Economic relations received a boost in 2014 due to the positive and enthusiastic atmosphere that had emerged. In 2013, trade exchanges between the two countries were modest, around 100 million euros, but just one year later they nearly doubled. Although at a slower pace over the next five years, economic relations continued to grow and gain momentum. Some Serbian companies competing in European markets expressed interest in investing in Albania. During the same period, there was dialogue and communication at the highest levels. The Albanian Prime Minister visited Belgrade twice, while Aleksandar Vučić visited Albania both as Prime Minister and later as President of Serbia.

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[13]   The newspaper "Panorama", issue of May 26, 2015.

However, since 2015, bilateral cooperation issues have been replaced on the agenda of high-level political meetings and dialogue between Albania and Serbia by a broader, more ambitious, and often "grandiose" strategic approach. This approach was linked to the future of the Western Balkans, peacebuilding, regional integration, and reconciliation between Albanians and Serbs in the spirit of the Franco-German model after World War II – a slogan frequently used by Prime Minister Rama after every meeting or regional summit, especially in Brussels. But can the Franco-German model be meaningfully applied to the case of Albania and Serbia? The long-standing hostility between Serbs and Albanians is not a myth – but it is also not a direct parallel to Franco-German rivalry. Crucially, in the contemporary dynamic between Albanians and Serbs, the issue of Kosovo remains central. Despite a hostile political atmosphere – and putting aside the role of Serbia, Montenegro, Greece, and the European powers in attempting to partition Albanian lands at the moment of state formation – Albania and Serbia have never engaged in war with each other as independent states, as Germany and France did up to 1945. Instead, war, genocide, mass killings, and forced displacement occurred in Kosovo, not in Albania. Within this context, the prospect of Albania leading a reconciliation process between Albanians and Serbs in the Balkans raises serious questions. The former President of Kosovo, Hashim Thaçi, provided a direct and unequivocal answer: "The full normalization of Albanian–Serb relations does not pass through Belgrade via Tirana – it passes through Pristina."[14]

In the second half of 2019, the two countries focused their attention on the "Balkan Schengen" initiative, inspired by the EU's Schengen Agreement. The initiative aimed to facilitate the free movement of people, services, goods, and capital among the six Western Balkan countries, despite the fact that two of them – Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina – do not recognize Kosovo as an independent state. President Vučić and Prime Minister Rama promoted the initiative through three summits: in Novi Sad, Ohrid, and on December 21, 2019, in Tirana. North Macedonia joined; Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina expressed hesitation; and Kosovo categorically rejected it.

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[14] See: Albanian Serbian Relations: from Enthusiasm to Status Quo, from Status Quo to the false promise of a strategic Agenda. January 31, 2023, at: https://tirana observatory.com/2020/01/31/albania-serbia-relations-from-enthusiasm-to-status-quo-from-status-quo-to-the-false-promise-of-a-strategic-agenda/.

This commitment to reconciliation, peacebuilding, cooperation, and regional integration represented a kind of "love letter" from the region to Brussels or Washington – a message that was undoubtedly well received, if only because it was hard to reject. In this way, the bilateral Albania–Serbia agenda left less and less space for concrete cooperation in areas such as politics, economy, trade, investment, tourism, energy, security, education, and culture.

In their domestic rhetoric, the leaders of Albania and Serbia carefully craft the message that the strategic agenda they are pursuing enjoys full support from Brussels and Washington in the case of Albania, and, in the case of Serbia, that the time has come for Balkan countries to take their fate into their own hands. In both instances, the political elites in Tirana and Belgrade aim to bolster their own authority – Albania through "purchasing legitimacy from abroad" (the EU and the U.S.), and Serbia through nationalist and populist rhetoric that blames foreign – especially Western – intervention for both old and new problems.

Yet, despite bilateral contacts and communications within the framework of regional meetings, political relations between Albania and Serbia have not advanced in a meaningful way. The images and optics of these meetings are usually highly positive, and it is evident that both leaders take exceptional care to ensure that the visuals – intended for domestic audiences and decision-making centers in Brussels and Washington – convey the message that Tirana and Belgrade are building a new, cooperative, and close relationship. But behind the polished façades and meticulous staging lies very little substance. This underscores the fact that high-level meetings and dialogues where only principles and willingness to cooperate are discussed rarely – if ever – translate into operational cooperation.

From the very first official discussions in November 2014, when the Albanian Prime Minister made a public appeal in Belgrade for the recognition of Kosovo, this issue has been included – and indeed has dominated – every meeting and public statement between Rama and Vučić, with both sides "forgetting", for their own reasons, that the bilateral agenda includes the question of a third state – Kosovo – which neither Albania nor Serbia has the authority to represent. This forced inclusion on one side rendered the Albania–Serbia bilateral agenda highly political and strategic – a hot topic

for local and international media – while on the other side, it was categorically rejected by the Government of Kosovo.[15]

Ten years after that enthusiastic beginning, Albania–Serbia relations have returned to a status quo. Only one-third of Albanian citizens believe that the relationship is good or very good. The majority – 44% – perceive it as "neither good nor bad",[16] indicating a situation of stagnation with no clear progress.

The strategic agenda under the motto "Albania and Serbia as Germany and France" has faded, and no one mentions it anymore. The "Open Balkan" initiative, loudly promoted by Rama and Vučić, has now quietly shut down – like a shop that suddenly closes without explanation. What is evident after a decade is that not only have Albania–Serbia relations stalled, but Albania–Kosovo relations have also entered a new status quo. Today, tensions and disagreements exist between the two Albanian governments, with Kosovo clearly rejecting Albania's paternalistic policy and its role as spokesperson in foreign affairs.

Albania increasingly appears to be withdrawing from the Balkans. The region now occupies a peripheral place in Albania's international relations. The Albanian Prime Minister, who has monopolized foreign policy, seems focused on projecting a greater role – not for Albania, but for his own personal power. He organizes summits on Ukraine, European summits in Tirana, delivers energetic speeches in Rome and Berlin, and has even announced that Albania will host a NATO summit. The Balkans appear small and forgotten.

Vučić's oft-repeated anecdote in front of journalists – that "I am a small leader for Serbia, Edi is a great leader for great things" – today seems like a prophecy come true.

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[15] Albert Rakipi, "Albania and Serbia – The false battle over Kosovo", Panorama, September 27, 2017.
[16] AIIS survey, Albania's Regional Foreign Policy, Tirana 2023.

PART II: The Impact of International Organizations on Security Cooperation in South East Europe

The Role of the OSCE in Advancing Security Cooperation in South East Europe

Stephan Nunner

Introduction

South-Eastern Europe (SEE) remains a region of enduring geopolitical sensitivity and strategic importance. While the legacy of the 1990s conflicts is still visible, the past decades have seen an ongoing transformation toward peace, stability, and democratic reform. This transformation has not occurred in a vacuum; it has been actively pursued by authorities in the region, supported by the co-ordinated efforts of international organizations, including the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Together with other international partners, such as the United Nations, the European Union, NATO, and the Council of Europe, the OSCE has played a pivotal role in reshaping the post-conflict landscape of SEE, each contributing unique added value that together form a comprehensive framework for regional security co-operation.

Complementary Roles of International Organizations in Regional Stability

The OSCE stands out for its comprehensive, field-oriented, and people-centered approach to security. As the largest regional security organization under Chapter VIII of the UN Charter, with its broad-based membership of 57 participating states, the OSCE has supported the region through assistance in priority reform areas to meet OSCE commitments agreed upon by all participating states. Its multidimensional security model addresses both the symptoms and root causes of instability, creating a safer, more stable and more prosperous environment for the region to thrive.

These efforts have been complemented by the European Union, which has offered critical reform incentives via enlargement mechanisms such as the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA). NATO has further con-

tributed through defense sector reform and stability missions like KFOR, reinforcing interoperability and resilience.

On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act, the OSCE as a political community focused on comprehensive security in Europe, and founded on common values, continues to be a platform for dialogue and a stabilizing force with reach from Vancouver to Vladivostok. It continues to deliver both politically and operationally on the ground through tangible fieldwork, local partnerships, and results-driven initiatives across, in and for, the 57 participating States and its 1 billion citizens.

The OSCE does this with an overall annual price tag of less than €150m, and 2,500 staff, over half of them in its field operations. It is not an expensive outfit. It is lean, impact-focused and agile. It has the expertise, experience, tools, and, importantly, relationships, to deliver on the political-military, economic, environmental and human dimensions.

OSCE Field Work: A Multilayered Model for Resilience

The OSCE operates through six field missions in SEE, working deeply at local and national levels. Its work is as diverse as it is impactful – ranging from building multi-ethnic police services, promoting civilian oversight of the military, promoting gender equality, and combating violence against women, to supporting free media, judicial reform and good democratic governance. Together with field offices outside of capitals, the OSCE supports early warning mechanisms, community-level reporting, and mediation/dialogue facilitation tools that help identify and prevent emerging tensions before they break out into violence or conflict.

Notable initiatives include:

- **Justice and Reconciliation:** OSCE-supported war crimes prosecution and transitional justice efforts have brought credibility and capacity to post-conflict legal systems in the region. The OSCE continues to be the only international organization monitoring war crimes trials in Serbia, providing systemic recommendations to the judiciary, and fostering judicial co-operation to overcome the lega-

cies of the past. It also provides regional training seminars for young policy-makers on transitional justice, for a new generation of politicians to promote tolerance and non-discrimination. Through an OSCE regional trial monitoring project implemented in all six jurisdictions, analysing over 360 high-level corruption and organized crime cases, the OSCE has helped to shape recommendations on a systemic level to judicial actors to meet rule of law and fair trial standards – key components of the OSCE's body of commitments. This initiative reflects a partnership between the EU and OSCE, marrying EU's macro-level policy investment with the OSCE's embedded, responsive field presence and expertise.

- **Youth Engagement and Civic Education:** By developing civic education curricula and training educators, the OSCE has strengthened democratic awareness among youth. With a fifth of the population in Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia under 30 years old, and half of Kosovo's population in the same category, the time to invest in a new generation is now. Programmes such as the Dialogue Academy for Young Women from Belgrade and Pristina empower future leaders to act as change-makers, with over 230 alumnae contributing to peace and mutual understanding in the region. They have implemented over 20 impactful cross-community projects that have reduced intra-community conflicts and strengthened regional co-operation. In 2024, alumnae developed their first ever roadmap which guides the network in its consolidation and will strengthen its impact within and between the two societies.

- **Media Freedom and Countering Disinformation:** The OSCE plays a vital role in promoting ethical journalistic standards, media pluralism, and strategies to counter hate speech and misinformation, contributing to resilient societies. It has created mechanisms in Serbia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina to strengthen the efficiency of investigation and prosecuting attacks against journalists. It has strengthened the regulatory framework on media issues by providing concrete recommendations on good practices in the area of media laws, and it continues to work with citizens on strengthening media literacy.

- **Small Arms and Light Weapons**: Part of what sets the OSCE's work apart is our ability to foster regional approaches to shared challenges. The proliferation of illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) is a scourge that affects the whole OSCE region, and our SALW work increasingly assumes a regional approach. For example, this year saw six jurisdictions in South-Eastern Europe build capacities in ensuring physical security and stockpile management, SALW deactivation, and awareness-raising on the dangers of illicit SALW. In BiH for example, the OSCE has aided the authorities in updating the infrastructure of 10 police SALW and ammunition storage sites. In Serbia, the OSCE supported the Ministry of Interior's 2023 voluntary surrender campaign, which led to the collection of a total of 108,883 weapons, including 26,485 mines and explosive devices, and 4,243,139 pieces of ammunition. In North Macedonia, the OSCE has supported the development of standard operating procedures (SOPs) and a training manual for law enforcement personnel to ensure that the enhanced communication tools are used to their full potential to help reduce SALW-related incidents. According to the authorities, there has been a 20% increase in large-scale seizures in 2023 compared to the previous year.

Through these layers of engagement, the OSCE builds social cohesion and institutional trust – key ingredients in preventing future conflict and fostering resilient democracies.

Challenges and the Need for Renewed Investment

Despite undeniable progress, SEE faces persistent vulnerabilities: rising political polarization, the erosion of democratic advances, and institutional fragility. Addressing these requires a nuanced and context-sensitive response. Four areas merit particular attention:

- **Hybrid Threats:** SEE remains susceptible to disinformation, cyberattacks, and foreign malign influence. Investing in media literacy and cybersecurity is crucial to safeguarding democratic institutions.

- **Youth and Community Peacebuilding:** Scaling up grassroots dialogue and empowerment initiatives can help mitigate ethnic tensions and foster inclusive identities. The OSCE's field presence and community engagement outside of capitals, sometimes in remote or highly polarized environments, creates opportunities to be replicated.[1]

- **Cross-Border Crime and Small Arms Proliferation:** Coordinated regional efforts – particularly among the OSCE, EU, RACVIAC and others – are needed to tackle illicit arms trafficking and fighting organized crime.

- **Rule of Law and Institutional Reform:** Legal systems require deeper support, including trial monitoring, civil society involvement, and sustainable capacity-building. The OSCE creates the foundation for the judicial system to be effective, training judges, prosecutors and investigators on good practices to deliver justice based on international standards.

Conclusion

Security and democratic progress in South-Eastern Europe hinge on sustained, co-ordinated international support. International actors each bring indispensable assets, but their true strength lies in their complementarity, finding synergies and messaging the need to reform in a co-ordinated manner.

In particular, the OSCE's model – deeply embedded, inclusive, and multi-dimensional – bridges communities, generations, and institutions. To se-

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[1] For example, in Bitola, the Mission to Skopje pioneered dialogue facilitation between the local authorities and the Roma community by convening Bitola Task Force. The task force sought to improve relations between the police and local Roma community, which had deteriorated over the course of the last several years. By bringing together local police, municipal officials and representatives of the local Roma community, the task force was able to foster improved communication between the two groups and identify critical issues for resolution. In addition to better relations between Roma and police, changes to the catchment zone of the schools addressed educational segregation and ensured the equal access and participation of Roma pupils in schools. This initiative's success is being replicated in other municipalities in 2025 to foster constructive dialogue across the country.

cure a peaceful and democratic future for South-Eastern Europe is to invest in these partnerships and in the people of the region. In doing so, we not only safeguard SEE's future but that of the OSCE region as a whole.

The Role of the EU in the Western Balkans in the Field of Security: The Reluctant Security Provider

Bodo Weber

Since the EU two deacades ago inherited the role of the main Western and internation actor in the Western Balkans from the US, one would expect for it to also play an outsized role in the field of security. However, as the Union's joint defense policy, at least up until the Russian agression in Ukraine in 2022 and US President Trump's serious undermining the future of the post-war transatlantic alliance since his January 2025 return to the Oval Office, has remained limited and its acquis communitaire is thin on policing, the EU through its enlargement, and wider regional policy, so far has played a limited role in police and defense reform as well in fostering regional security cooperation.

At the same time, the EU in seizing the leading Western role in the Western Balkans, established several, executive mandate-stuffed Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) missions, two of which persist until today – EUFOR Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), and EULEX in Kosovo. However, the EU remains a reluctant security provider in the region, despite dramatically accelerating security threats, particularly in recent years.

The Role of the EU in Strengthening Security Cooperation

As the EU's acquis is generally thin on defense, and on police is focused on a few areas (migration, fight against terrorism and organized crime, et al) only, the Union's role in strengthening security cooperation among the Western Balkan candidate countries in general remains limited. Strengthening defense cooperation is most directly realized through the participation of Western Balkan countries in CSDP peace-keeping and conflict prevention missions, albeit with a generally small number of troops. Thus, in 2024 Albania and North Macedonia provided troops to EUFOR Althea (1, respectively 32); BiH (3) and Serbia (7) participated in the Union's training

mission in the Central African Republic, EUTM RCA, and Serbia (6) also participated in the Union's training mission in Somalia, EUTM Somalia.

EU CSDP Missions in the Western Balkans: The Reluctant Security Provider

At the same time, the EU remains a potentially potent security provider itself in the Western Balkans, the heritage of Western military and political interventions in the 1990s and of the shifting of Western leadership from the US to the Union two decades ago, and after the EU in 2004 had opened the path for membership to the countries of the region. The two remaining missions, EUFOR Althea and EULEX are located in parts of the region that have recently seen the most serious political and security crisis in decades, namely the constitutional-institutional crises over the non-arrest of Republika Srpska (RS) President Milorad Dodik in spring this year in BiH, and the series of violent incidents, and tensions in the north of Kosovo since end of 2022. However, instead of making consistent use of the mission's mandate and leverage, the EU acts as a reluctant security provider, with both missions suffering from past weakening, respectively dismantling of their executive mandate.

EUFOR

The legal-constitutional crisis unfolding in BiH this year is emblematic for the EU's status as a reluctant security provider in the Western Balkans: In February, BiH's strongman and RS President Milorad Dodik was convicted by the Court of BiH to one year in prison and a six-year ban to hold public office for not complying with decisions by the international community's High Representative (HR) Christian Schmidt. Schmidt had annulled unconstitutional entity laws, initiated by Dodik, that prescribed the non-implementation of decisions by the High Rep as well as by the country's constitutional court on the territory of the state entity. Since Dodik had not complied with the ruling against him, the Prosecution of BiH in March filed an arrest warrant against him, that was subsequently ignored not only by the RS police, but also by state level police agencies like the border police and SIPA, demonstrating the degree of ethnic division of BiH's state-level security agencies.

With domestic security providers demonstrating their impotence in defending the country's constitutional order by arresting Dodik, attention shifted to the EU's executive mandate-stuffed military mission, EUFOR. However, instead of taking a clear position, confusion spread within the EU about EUFOR's precise authority in the case – whether it was authorized to arrest Dodik or just to assist domestic security agencies to do so, and whether the decision to act rested of the EUFOR Commander (COMEUFOR) or needed to be taken higher up in the chain in Brussels. This confusion, caused by EU institutions themselves, led to most EU member states' capitals being convinced EUFOR had no mandate to arrest Dodik. This conviction runs both counter to EUFOR's legal mandate and past practice of arrests of politicians during the international community's so-called Dayton phase of more pro-active engagement in BiH during 1998–2005: EUFOR's UN Security Council Chapter 7 mandate allows both such arrests and puts the authority to undertake such moves with the COMEUFOR. This EU/EUFOR inaction contributed to Dodik ultimately not being arrested and to the fundamental undermining of state-level security agencies, proving that BiH lacks domestic institutions capable of defending the country's constitutional order, and territorial integrity, a serious security threat not only to the Western Balkans region, but also to the EU.

Such EU passivity running counter to its own security interests can only be understood on the background of the two decades-long history of the Union's unilateral disarmament in BiH, i.e. the dismantling of EUFOR's executive mandate, proceeding in parallel with the emerging, and accelerating political and security crises in the country:

In 2004, EUFOR seized the security arm of international peace implementation from NATO-led SFOR, down from 60,000 troops in the immediate post-war period, to 7,000 troops. EUFOR's executive mandate is based on the Dayton Peace Accord (DPA) Annex 1A's authority to "maintain a safe and secure environment" (SASE) and UN Chapter 7 peace enforcement authorization. It parallels the High Representative's executive mandate aimed at guarding implementation of the civilian part of the DPA, executed through the so-called Bonn powers. As the 2005–6 pouring over of Western leadership to the EU by the US was accompanied by a policy shift aimed at ending the intense post-war engagement in BiH, starting with the announcement of the closure of the Office of the High Representative

(OHR) in 2007, a political battle within the EU, and wider West started over the future of executive mandate-staffed missions, including EUFOR's. The 2007 troop reduction to a 2,500 brigade size, the absolute minimum to provide for SASE, and the closure of the mission's three regional centers marked the start of the haemorrhaging of the force amidst a lasting dispute among European and Western capitals over the future of its executive mandate. The same year the then COMEUFOR ordered EUFOR to stop patrolling across the country, a move founded in the political position of his home country, not that of the entire EU, and an increasing number of member states governments unilaterally withdraw their troops, bringing the strengths down to 1,300 in 2011. That year, Western capital's dispute ended in a "compromise" on the future of EULEX' executive mandate – that came down to formally maintaining it, but making it operationally unusable, while at the same time pretending it is not there: EUFOR troops were further downsized to 600, a size and structure reliant on over the horizon forces in order to even theoretically fulfill its executive mandate. In 2012–13 the then EUFOR commanders in public statements willfully misrepresented the force's mandate, insisting that EUFOR could only militarily intervene upon invitation from BiH authorities. And in the wording of the annual UN Security Council resolutions on the extension of EUFOR's mandate it was tacitly redefined as "supporting BiH authorities to maintain a safe and secure environment."

As the policy of exit by declaring success without creating the preconditions for turning the international community's post-war achievements in BiH in peace, security and democratization (self-)sustainable led the country back into permanent political destabilization, embodied in the rise of Dodik with his secessionist policy as the country's new strongman, the West in 2008 partially adjusted course by abandoning the plan to close OHR. On the EUFOR and security end, a comparable reassessment, however, never happened. Instead, the EU shifted to a policy of looking the other way and of not wanting to know. Security implications of the structural political and institutional crises have been consistently downplayed. And information on serious security threats has been either hidden or ignored – like in the case of the 2014 violent social unrest when RS police received shooting orders, or Putin's failed post Crimea annexation push to have Dodik move on RS secession.

Even worse, since 2014 the EU and wider West have ignored the threat Russia, a staunch ally of the Dodik regime in the RS, poses to the future of the EULEX mission. Instead of a preparing a Plan B in case Russia vetoes the annual extension of EUFOR Altea in the UN Security Council, i.e. preparing for a NATO Sarajevo HQ executive mandate-staffed EUFOR successor mission, the EU, and wider West have remained passive, only starting to discuss plans for such a NATO replacement mission after the 2022 Russian aggression on Ukraine, but without yielding any concrete results.

EULEX

In Kosovo, the EU in 2008 launched its so far largest civilian CSDP mission, and the only one ever with an executive mandate, the EU Rule of Law Mission EULEX, taking a lead role in the newly established country's judiciary, but also disposing of a limited number of police units. Fulfilling its vast mandate, however, from the outset severely suffered from to the lack of EU member states unity on the issue of Kosovo's declaration of independence. The 2012–13 establishment of the EU-led political dialogue on the Kosovo-Serbia dispute over Kosovo's status and the initial historic breakthrough achieved towards Serbia accepting Kosovo's independence under German, British and US leadership bridged that internal EU divide and created the preconditions for fixing EULEX. However, the internal discussion on whether to fix or close EULEX ended in the 2014 "compromise" on gradually phasing out of the mission's executive mandate, part of the EU/Western history of prematurely checking out of its post-war engagement in the Western Balkans. In parallel, KFOR troops were substantially reduced during that period, too.

As in BiH, political and security developments on the ground did not meet the EU's expectations of the premature disarmament. The lack of a long-term EU political strategy on the dialogue allowed the local parties to undermine the process. The failed 2017–19 push for a dangerous land-swap deal by the then EU foreign and security policy chief Federica Mogherini, ignoring the West's lesson from the 1990 Balkan wars on ethnoterritorial "solutions" and running counter to the Union's security interests in the region, did not manage to unblock the dialogue deadlock, but only profoundly discredited the process and damaged the EU's reputation in Kosovo and the wider region.

The half-hearted 2022 attempt by Berlin and Paris to revive the dialogue with their so-called German-French initiative only further added to the collapse of the process, achieving no palpable progress in negotiations, while leading to the continuous escalation in the north of Kosovo and tensions between the Kosovo government and Belgrade and its extended political arm in the majority-Serb inhabited municipalities in Kosovo, the Serbian list party. The November 2022 exit from Kosovo institutions by Serbs in the north undid the major dialogue achievement, the April 2013 Agreement-based integration of Serb police and judiciary into, and establishment of municipalities under the Kosovo state systems. The deployment of majority-Albanian Kosovo police forces necessary to fill the security vacuum further added to the tensions. With the lack of any credible EU policy curbing the escalation and relations between Brussels and Pristina broken, the Kurti government increasingly opted for "unilateral" moves, meaning outside the broken dialogue framework on not coordinated with the EU (and the US), nor the international security missions on the ground, KFOR and EULEX. The contentious issue of incidents of excessive use of force by KP officers, particularly by special police units further raised tensions between Kosovo authorities and the Serb population in the north. The escalatory spiral peaked in the May 2023 violent clashes between Serb protesters and KFOR and the failed September 2023 Serb terrorist attack on the Orthodox Banjska monastery. As is the case with KFOR, EULEX found itself caught in between in this escalation of the security situation in the north of Kosovo, falling victim to the non-strategic dismantling of its executive mandate and the overall lack of a strategic EU policy on the dialogue. Though EULEX's executive mandate had been phased out, a residual executive mandate-stuffed police unit remains in the north, the Formed Police Unit (FPU). However, in the current situation and strategic policy vacuum, it particularly suffers from its complicated mandate: in Kosovo, under the existing arrangement, the Kosovo Police is the first security responder, and EULEX only serves as the second responder, and KFOR as the third responder. What is worse, unlike KFOR EULEX can only act upon the explicit request of the first responder, the KP. In addition, the fact that the bi-annual extension of EULEX' mandate depends on the Kosovo government's consent puts further strains on the consistent and effective performance of EULEX' police units in the current security crisis the north.

The 2nd Trump Administration and Future of the EU as a Security Provider

As the EU's policy of declaring success and dismantling its executive mandate-stuffed military and civilian missions in the Western Balkans has not met hopes in the further political and security consolidation of the region, the Union's reluctance in seriously performing as a security provider in itself has become untenable in recent years. There exists another development that additionally urges for a serious political U-turn: the January 2025 return of Donald Trump to the Oval Office. As has been demonstrated by former presidential envoy Richard Grenell's 2019–20 push for a Kosovo-Serbia deal during his first administration, Trump's unique mixture of transactionalism, right-wing ideology and cosying up to autocrats poses a serious potential threat to the EU's political and security interests in the Western Balkans. Much speculation has accompanied Trump's taking office about his second administration's Balkans policy, ranging between a "best-case" scenario of political disengagement and focusing on economic investment projects like the Jared Kushner-Grenell real estate project related to the former Yugoslav Supreme Command headquarter in Belgrade or the Sazan VIP-tourist island project in Albania, and the pro-active siding with right-wing/ethnonationalist, authoritarian and autocratic political leaders and forces in the Balkans. Potential threats to EU security interests in the region could include a revival of the land swap idea and the use of the US's 600 KFOR troops as a pressure point towards Pristina, and the blockage of a NATO Sarajevo HQ Chapter 7 EUFOR successor mission in the case of a Russian veto against EUFOR in the UN Security Council.

While the 2nd Trump administration during its first few months in office so far seems to have opted for a policy of relative disengagement in the Western Balkans, there is absolutely no guarantee this will remain so for the remainder of its mandate. The EU, on the other end, torn apart in between taking a wait and see position and trying to keep the US on board in Europe through NATO, and deciding for more pro-active, pre-emptive action, seems to have opted for the former. This approach is dangerous, as hope in the continuation of the harmless US Western Balkan policy is not a plan. Instead, the EU, and wider Europe, should seize the moment and act according to its announced taking European security issues into its own hands. First, leading EU member state and other European capitals like

Berlin and London should offer to Washington to replace the 600 US KFOR troops with their own, European troops. Second, the EU and the UK should take the initiative within NATO and towards the Trump administration on an entirely European-staffed and operated NATO military force replacement to EUFOR. This way, the EU, supported by its wider European allies, could finally become a serious security provider in the Western Balkans and start to seriously deal with the existing security threats in BiH and in/on Kosovo, as part of a shift towards a long overdue strategic EU policy towards the region more needed than ever.

PART III: The Role of Regional Initiatives Regarding Security Cooperation in South East Europe

RACVIAC – Centre for Security Cooperation: 25 Years of Regional Security Partnership in South East Europe

Vedrana Djukarić

Introduction

In an increasingly complex and interconnected global security environment, regional organizations have emerged as crucial actors when it comes to maintaining peace and stability. These organizations, formed by geographically and politically aligned states, address regional security issues with strategies tailored to local contexts.

RACVIAC was established in the year 2000 as an initiative of the Stability Pact for South East Europe. Initially, RACVIAC was a bilateral project between the Federal Republic of Germany and the Republic of Croatia and dealt exclusively with arms control. This is where the name of the Centre came from – Regional Arms Control Verification and Implementation Assistance Centre.

In 2003, RACVIAC broadened its mission to include security sector reform topics. In 2005, the mission was further expanded to include defense conversion. By 2007, circumstances changed and new security issues emerged. In this period, countries saw a considerable improvement of mutual trust, having in mind the war period of the 1990s. From predominantly military and arms control issues the focus shifted to the Euro-Atlantic integrations process and contemporary security challenges. RACVIAC adapted to these changes by starting the process of transformation into the "Centre for Security Cooperation" in order to build on its success and deal with security issues in a broader sense. However, the abbreviation RACVIAC was kept, as it was already recognized as a security cooperation brand in the region. Owing to this, RACVIAC became increasingly regional in its nature. To recognize the significant changes that took place, a new agreement on RACVIAC was developed and signed in 2010 and in December 2011 it entered into force. RACVIAC became an international organization with the status of a diplomatic mission under the Vienna convention on diplomatic relations from 1961.

RACVIAC Members are countries of the South East European Cooperation Process. So far, 9 countries have ratified the agreement on RACVIAC, namely Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Greece, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Türkiye. Additionally, there are Associate Members and countries wishing to support and contribute to security dialogue and cooperation in South East Europe – there are 14 of them at the moment in RACVIAC. Finally, Observers are countries, institutions or organizations, which may participate in RACVIAC activities as observers after approval by the MAG (Multinational Advisory Group) – 6 countries in total.

The MAG (Multinational Advisory Group) is a steering committee of RACVIAC, comprised of representatives from Members, Associate Members and Observers. It provides direction to ensure the smooth operation and development of RACVIAC, in accordance with the guidelines and decisions adopted. There are 3 pillars that represent the core units of RACVIAC. They are responsible for organizing all RACVIAC activities and carrying out the annual Programme through a project-oriented approach.

RACVIAC Capacity Building through Focused Thematic Areas

RACVIAC Members understand that effectively addressing contemporary and emerging security challenges requires a concerted, collective effort, particularly when considering the limited national resources in terms of personnel, funding and logistics. The evolving global and regional security landscape demands constant adaptation and innovation. Considering the increasingly complex challenges, RACVIAC Members, together with international partners, are continuously refining and updating the agendas and areas of interest. The goal is to provide relevant, forward-looking training, dialogue, and cooperation platforms that support regional stability, capacity-building, and the development of comprehensive, collaborative security solutions.

Regional mechanisms hold distinct advantages in conflict resolution, primarily due to their geographic, cultural, and historical closeness to the issues they address. As a regionally owned intergovernmental organization, RACVIAC leverages its deep understanding of local dynamics to develop

solutions that reflect the region's specific challenges. Its structure promotes regional ownership and consensus-based decision-making, allowing the Members to play an active role in shaping outcomes, which strengthens mutual trust and cooperation.

RACVIAC conducts its activities through three core Pillars that form the foundation of its mission: Cooperative Security Environment Pillar, Security Sector Governance Pillar, and the Countering Transnational Security Threats Pillar. These pillars are responsible for organizing all RACVIAC activities and implementing the annual Programme through a project-oriented approach that fosters regional cooperation, transparency, and capacity building. The Cooperative Security Environment (CSE) Pillar is a unique structure in the region, dedicated exclusively to arms control. Its primary objective is to reduce insecurity among Members by enhancing mutual trust and improving perceptions of each other's intentions through the promotion of transparency and predictability. This is achieved by supporting arms limitation and reduction measures, as well as implementing confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs). Frameworks relevant to this Pillar include the Vienna Document 2011, the Sub-Regional Arms Control Agreement under Article IV of the Dayton Peace Agreement, and the Treaty on Open Skies. RACVIAC plays a vital role in this context as the only organization in the region offering practical training for future arms control inspectors. Over the past 25 years, RACVIAC has conducted 29 Dayton Article IV Orientation Courses, training more than 600 military officers. This sustained effort reflects the strong cooperation and transparency among the signatories and directly contributes to regional stability and trust.

A key component of CSE Pillar is the Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction (C-WMD) Network. Established in 2015 by Croatia and the United States, this initiative aims to help countries in South East Europe develop national strategies and enhance their capacities to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. With ongoing support from Croatia, the USA, and RACVIAC, nine regional countries have adopted national C-WMD strategies. The Network Programme evolved alongside the new training initiative to further strengthen the capabilities and operational readiness of RACVIAC Members in combating the illegal proliferation of WMDs, dual-use items, and related precursors, while also enhancing regional cooperation.

Security Sector Governance (SSG) Pillar continuously adapts its activities to the evolving landscape of the security sector in order to build capacity and promote good governance among its members. The main focus of this pillar is to promote a security sector that is accountable, efficient, democratically governed, and under civilian control. Its core activities include the annual "Meeting of Representatives from Defence and Security Committees of South East European Parliaments", which focuses on democratic oversight, and the "Conference on Security Challenges for Europe", which addresses political and military aspects of security. In addition, RACVIAC has demonstrated a strong commitment to integrating human rights and gender perspectives into security policy. Since 2014 it has been organizing a two-week, NATO-approved "Gender Training of Trainers Course" in cooperation with the Croatian Armed Forces and the Nordic Centre for Gender in Military Operations. This course has become a key regional event, creating a network of over 200 certified gender instructors across South East Europe and beyond. It is supported by a deployable Mobile Team, enabling the delivery of training across Europe and in neighboring regions.

The third Pillar, Countering Transnational Security Threats, addresses a wide range of contemporary security challenges that cross national boundaries. This pillar focuses on enhancing cooperation in areas such as cyber security, violent extremism, radicalism, terrorism, organized crime, corruption, climate change, natural disasters, and broader transnational threats. It also supports activities related to NATO's European security agenda and the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy. In addition, it facilitates joint efforts in fields such as search and rescue operations, energy security, and crisis management in response to natural disasters. Through its dynamic programming, the Pillar provides a platform for dialogue, collaboration, and practical training to prepare Members for the complex challenges of today's interconnected security environment.

In conclusion, RACVIAC three-pillar structure represents a comprehensive and strategic approach to enhancing peace and security in South East Europe. By combining efforts in arms control, democratic security sector governance, and the response to transnational threats, RACVIAC continues to serve as a vital platform for dialogue, cooperation, and capacity development.

Overall, regional organizations such as RACVIAC boast numerous advantages due to their proximity and contextual understanding. Being geographically and culturally close to its Members allows for quicker crisis responses and more relevant interventions. Shared security challenges, such as energy and environmental security, border security and countering weapons of mass destruction, foster common interests and enhance cooperation. Additional advantages of RACVIAC and other regional organizations are better flexibility and adaptability as opposed to global institutions, which enables faster, context-specific decision-making.

The comparative strengths of regional cooperation, as demonstrated by RACVIAC, lie in the capacity to grasp and respond to local realities. Through workshops, training programs, and research initiatives, the Organization encourages collaboration among military, diplomatic, and civil society actors – creating a supportive environment for addressing shared challenges in South East Europe.

It is important to recognize that regional organizations, including RACVIAC, often face considerable challenges such as limited financial and logistical resources that can restrict their operational capacity. RACVIAC also depends on external actors, primarily major donor states, when it comes to financial and strategic support. However, by continuously adapting its programs and maintaining an open, transparent dialogue with its Members and partners, RACVIAC effectively addresses and overcomes these challenges. Furthermore, in regions where multiple organizations operate simultaneously, overlapping mandates may result in confusion, duplication of efforts, and inefficient allocation of resources. By regularly organizing both online and in-person meetings and ensuring the inclusive participation of all Members, international organizations, and partners in the program development process RACVIAC strives to address and reduce overlapping efforts.

As RACVIAC serves primarily as a platform for training, capacity building, and promoting regional cooperation rather than as a political organization, it contributes to strengthening collective resilience while avoiding engagement in possible political instabilities and divisions.

Conclusion

In today's interconnected and rapidly evolving security environment, no single country is capable of addressing the full spectrum of threats on its own. The complexity and transnational nature of modern challenges – ranging from cyberattacks, terrorism, and hybrid warfare to organized crime, irregular migration, and climate-related security risks – demand collective action. Robust international cooperation is not merely beneficial but also essential for mounting an effective and coordinated response to these multifaceted threats.

In light of the recent Russian aggression against Ukraine, ongoing instability in the Middle East, and broader global security challenges, RACVIAC's role has become increasingly valuable and prominent.

Regional organizations are indispensable components of the global security landscape. Their proximity, shared interests, and adaptability allow them to address security threats more effectively than other global institutions. However, their potential is often hindered by limited resources, internal political fragmentation, and dependence on external actors. To maximize their impact, it is essential for regional bodies to enhance coordination, build sustainable funding mechanisms, and clarify their roles within the broader international security framework. By doing so, they can serve as both frontline responders and reliable partners in the pursuit of global peace and stability.

In conclusion, as we collectively reflect on the critical role that regional mechanisms play in addressing the multilayered challenges confronting SEE and the broader international community, it is imperative to acknowledge the invaluable contributions of institutions such as RACVIAC. With a diverse membership of nine nations, fourteen Associate Members, and six Observers from South East Europe and beyond, RACVIAC serves as a platform for transparent dialogue and mutual understanding, while acknowledging the historical complexities and tensions that have shaped the region, as well as the impact of global events on its stability.
Regional ownership of this organization creates a sense of shared responsibility and plays a pivotal role in building trust, securing peace, and enhancing prosperity.

With 25 years of experience, RACVIAC serves as a distinguished model for establishing dialogue and fostering cooperation in post-conflict regions.

Through its steadfast commitment to fostering mutual trust, promoting open and constructive dialogue, and facilitating meaningful regional cooperation, RACVIAC continues to serve as a cornerstone in the pursuit of enhanced regional stability, security, and resilience. As we confront increasingly complex global challenges, it is essential that we harness the unique strengths and capacities of regional mechanisms to complement and reinforce the overarching framework of global governance.

Security Perceptions and their Impact on Regional Cooperation in South East Europe

Agron Sojati

Abstract

This paper explores the critical role that security perceptions play in shaping regional cooperation in South East Europe, with a particular emphasis on the Western Balkans. It examines how historical legacies, ongoing political transitions, and emerging transnational threats influence public sentiment and institutional responses. The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and the Integrative Internal Security Governance (IISG) platform are analyzed as pivotal actors facilitating regional integration and coordination. Through economic connectivity, mobility initiatives, and security cooperation frameworks, these institutions have made significant strides in building trust and resilience within a region still marked by post-conflict fragmentation and political volatility.

Utilizing data from the 2024 SecuriMeter survey, this paper highlights prevailing concerns related to safety, corruption, disinformation, and societal vulnerabilities. It argues that successful regional cooperation depends not only on harmonized policies and frameworks but also on cultivating inclusive, transparent, and people-centered approaches that address public fears and expectations. By exploring flagship achievements such as the Roaming Agreement, Green Lanes, and regional labor mobility frameworks, the paper underscores the tangible benefits of collective action. Ultimately, it posits that fostering durable security requires both effective threat management and a sustained investment in public trust and regional solidarity.

Introduction

The Western Balkans, and South East Europe more broadly, present a unique security environment shaped by a complex convergence of historical legacies, socio-political transitions, and emerging global challenges. The region's history of ethnic conflict, contested statehood, and economic un-

derdevelopment continues to influence public perceptions of safety and the capacity of states to provide security. These perceptions, in turn, directly impact regional cooperation efforts, as states and societies weigh the benefits and risks of collaboration with neighbors and international partners.

In the aftermath of the violent conflicts of the 1990s, the Western Balkans embarked on a gradual but uneven path towards stabilization, reconciliation, and European integration. Institutions such as the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and the Integrative Internal Security Governance (IISG) platform have emerged as central facilitators of this process, providing mechanisms for dialogue, coordination, and joint action on shared challenges. However, the fragile nature of peace and political volatility, compounded by economic disparities and governance deficits, continue to shape how security is perceived and prioritized.

This paper examines the dynamic interplay between security perceptions and regional cooperation by focusing on the contributions of RCC and IISG in fostering integration in the Western Balkans. Using the 2024 SecuriMeter survey, it provides an empirical grounding to understand how public attitudes reflect underlying vulnerabilities and expectations. By linking these perceptions to institutional responses, the paper offers insights into the pathways through which regional cooperation can address both tangible threats and intangible drivers of insecurity.

Part I: The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)

Since its establishment in 2008, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) has played an instrumental role in advancing regional cooperation in South East Europe. RCC, acting as the operational arm of the South East European Cooperation Process (SEECP), continues to advance its core mission of promoting regional cooperation, inclusive dialogue, and sustainable development across South East Europe (SEE). RCC integrates 46 members and partners, including Western Balkan states, EU institutions, and international organizations.

The **Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)** emerged from a defining moment in South East Europe's modern history. In the aftermath of the devastating conflicts of the 1990s – which shattered communities, dis-

placed millions, and destabilized the region – the international community responded with the **Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe**, launched in **1999**. This initiative marked one of the first comprehensive international efforts to rebuild trust, restore peace, and encourage cooperation in a region that had become synonymous with fragmentation and conflict.

While the Stability Pact served as a much-needed framework for crisis management and donor coordination in the immediate post-war period, it gradually became evident that the region required a more regionally owned, sustainable mechanism for cooperation – one driven not by external actors alone but by the countries of South East Europe themselves. In this spirit, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) was established in 2008 as the successor to the Stability Pact, with a mandate to promote regional cooperation, advance European integration, and support development led by the region, for the region. Its mission spans across political, economic, and social domains, acting as a cornerstone of inclusive dialogue and coordinated action. The RCC's mandate follows the overarching goal of promoting stability and European integration.

One of RCC's landmark initiatives is the Common Regional Market (CRM), launched in 2020. Rooted in the principles of the EU's single market, the CRM seeks to eliminate barriers to the free movement of goods, services, people, and capital. This initiative responds directly to the legacy of economic fragmentation that has hindered the region's growth and integration. Through the CRM, the Western Balkans have not only deepened intra-regional ties but also aligned themselves more closely with the European Union's economic structures.

The impact of the CRM is tangible. Intra-regional trade has doubled in five years, with more than 1,200 businesses expanding across borders. Mobility initiatives like the Roam Like at Home agreement and the institutionalization of Green Lanes have fostered practical connectivity and reduced bureaucratic obstacles. While regional GDP per capita has improved relative to the EU average, signaling incremental convergence. These economic gains are not merely statistics but represent improved livelihoods, increased employment opportunities, and broader consumer choice.

Mobility, a key facet of regional integration, has seen tangible enhancements. The "Roam Like at Home" agreement, initiated in 2021, drastically reduced roaming costs and encouraged cross-border communication. The resultant 500% increase in roaming usage evidences how reducing technical and financial barriers can accelerate integration. The Green Lanes mechanism, originally a crisis response during the COVID-19 pandemic, has been institutionalized to streamline customs procedures, reducing delays by more than twenty years cumulatively. This initiative illustrates the potential for agile, regionally coordinated responses to logistical challenges.

Education and labor mobility have benefited from mutual recognition agreements on diplomas and professional qualifications. These measures are particularly significant given the Western Balkans' young population and high unemployment rates. By facilitating easier cross-border employment, they contribute to reducing brain drain and enhancing human capital circulation within the region.

The RCC's support for digital transformation further positions the Western Balkans on a path toward competitiveness in the global economy. Initiatives to establish a Regional Digital Market promote e-commerce, the rollout of 5G networks, and harmonized cybersecurity policies. These efforts are critical not only for economic modernization but also for safeguarding digital infrastructure against emerging cyber threats.

Strategically, the CRM aligns with the EU's Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, thus serving as a bridge between regional economies and the broader European single market. RCC's role transcends mere coordination; it has become a proactive implementer of regional development projects, offering a model of regionally led cooperation with international legitimacy.

Part II: Integrative Internal Security Governance (IISG)

Complementing the Regional Cooperation Council's (RCC) economic and social integration mandate, the **Integrative Internal Security Governance (IISG)** platform addresses internal security challenges that could undermine regional stability and progress in South East Europe. The IISG was formally launched in **2014** under the framework of the **Western Balkan**

Counter-Terrorism Initiative (WBCTi), in response to the increasing recognition that fragmented and uncoordinated approaches to security were limiting the effectiveness of international assistance and regional responses to shared threats.

The initiative emerged as a response to growing concerns over **transnational security threats** – such as terrorism, organized crime, and irregular migration – whose complexity required a coordinated, cross-border, and multi-agency approach. The IISG was designed to fill this gap by streamlining efforts, avoiding duplication of donor support, and fostering genuine regional ownership of security reforms. In 2017, the IISG evolved into a broader, structured platform under the political ownership of the Western Balkans and with the support of the EU and key international actors.

IISG operates through four thematic pillars: counter-terrorism (WBCTi), counter serious crime (WBCSCi), border security (WBBSi) and cybersecurity (WBCS). Through these pillars, it promotes a comprehensive, integrative, and evidence-based approach to security governance across the Western Balkans.

At its core, IISG facilitates structured cooperation among WB governments, law enforcement agencies, and judicial institutions. This is achieved through the strategic mapping of security-related assistance**,** identification and mapping of needs, national-level consultations, and donor coordination forums, ensuring alignment with both national priorities and international standards. This multi-level coordination mechanism allows for the identification of policy overlaps, resolution of operational gaps, and more efficient use of donor resources.

By fostering regional working groups, technical exchanges, and joint operational planning, IISG enhances institutional capacities while promoting the adoption of European best practices. Its work is instrumental in mitigating security risks that could destabilize the broader EU accession process, threaten investor confidence, and hinder the free movement of people, goods, and services.

Ultimately, the IISG contributes to building a secure, rules-based environment essential for sustainable development and regional integration. Its

close cooperation with international partners – including the European Union, NATO, OSCE, and UN agencies – ensures that internal security reforms in the Western Balkans remain consistent with EU acquis and broader Euro-Atlantic standards, strengthening the region's preparedness for future membership.

Part III: Security Perceptions and Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans

Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, while critical to fostering stability and integration, must be understood in the context of how citizens themselves perceive security and governance. The 2024 SecuriMeter survey provides valuable, granular insight into these perceptions, revealing a complex landscape marked by both hope and persistent fears. When combined with complementary data from the Balkan Barometer – a widely respected regional public opinion survey conducted by the Regional Cooperation Council – these findings underscore significant societal challenges that remain central to the success of any regional integration effort.

Perceptions of Safety and Conflict

According to the SecuriMeter 2024 survey, only **39%** of respondents across the Western Balkans feel safe in their daily lives. This figure, while reflecting some progress compared to earlier years, still indicates a high level of insecurity. Almost **half of the population** expressed concern about the potential resurgence of regional conflict, a deeply rooted fear tied to memories of the wars in the 1990s and ongoing political instability in certain areas.

The Balkan Barometer similarly highlights that, although trust in security institutions has improved marginally, many citizens remain skeptical about the effectiveness of police and judicial systems. This skepticism stems from ongoing challenges such as slow judicial processes, perceived political interference, and a lack of transparency. This environment contributes to a persistent feeling of vulnerability among the population, especially in ethnically diverse and politically sensitive regions.

Trust in Institutions

Trust in public institutions is a fundamental pillar underpinning perceptions of security and the legitimacy of regional cooperation. The surveys reveal troubling deficits in this regard. Confidence in the judiciary, law enforcement agencies, and anti-corruption bodies remains low across the region, with less than half of the respondents expressing trust in these institutions. This lack of trust is particularly acute in countries where political influence over judicial and law enforcement processes is perceived as pervasive.

Such institutional distrust undermines efforts to combat corruption, organized crime, and other security threats effectively. Citizens who doubt the impartiality and competence of these bodies are less likely to report crimes, cooperate with authorities, or support reforms. The Balkan Barometer further emphasizes that corruption scandals and weak accountability mechanisms have eroded public confidence, reinforcing a vicious cycle where governance deficits exacerbate insecurity.

Restoring trust requires transparent, accountable governance and visible results in tackling high-profile cases of corruption and organized crime. It also calls for empowering independent institutions, protecting whistleblowers, and promoting civic engagement. Regional cooperation mechanisms like IISG have a role in facilitating capacity building, harmonizing standards, and fostering peer accountability among Western Balkan states to strengthen institutional credibility.

Corruption as a Pervasive Threat

Corruption emerges as one of the most pervasive concerns. Over **80%** of respondents believe corruption is widespread in their countries, a figure consistent across all Western Balkan partners. This perception seriously undermines public trust in government institutions and impedes the effectiveness of law enforcement agencies. Corruption's corrosive effect extends beyond governance to economic development, discouraging foreign investment and perpetuating social inequalities.

The Balkan Barometer further reveals that corruption is often perceived as linked with organized crime networks, suggesting that citizens see these

issues as interconnected rather than isolated problems. This perception creates additional pressure on regional cooperation mechanisms like IISG to coordinate anti-corruption and anti-organized crime efforts more effectively and transparently.

Gender-Based Violence and Social Vulnerabilities

A particularly concerning dimension revealed by the surveys is the perception of gender-based violence. Two-thirds of women surveyed in the Western Balkans identified **domestic violence** as a major security threat. This alarming figure calls attention to the need for stronger protective measures, better victim support services, and cultural shifts to address entrenched gender inequalities.

The Balkan Barometer complements this by reporting low levels of trust in institutions responsible for protecting victims of gender-based violence, which contributes to underreporting and social stigma. Addressing these issues requires coordinated regional policies, supported by public awareness campaigns and enhanced legal frameworks, areas where both RCC and IISG could play facilitating roles.

Youth Concerns: Disinformation and Radicalization

The younger generation, often viewed as a critical demographic for the region's future, expresses distinct security anxieties. The 2024 SecuriMeter identifies **disinformation and online radicalization** as rapidly growing threats among youth populations. Digital platforms have become battlegrounds for misinformation campaigns, which exploit ethnic tensions, political divisions, and social grievances.

The Balkan Barometer reinforces these findings by highlighting that young people exhibit lower levels of institutional trust and higher susceptibility to polarizing narratives. This digital vulnerability not only threatens social cohesion but also risks destabilizing democratic processes.

Ethnic Tensions and Political Instability

Ethnic divisions remain a persistent fault line shaping security perceptions. While overt conflict has largely subsided, political actors in some areas continue to exploit ethnic identities to maintain power, fueling mistrust and hindering effective governance. Regions with unresolved territorial disputes or divided political structures exhibit the lowest levels of security confidence.

Political instability, frequent government reshuffles, and weak rule of law further exacerbate these concerns. The Balkan Barometer indicates that citizens across the region frequently cite political uncertainty as a key factor undermining security and economic progress.

External Influences and Geopolitical Competition

Complicating the internal dynamics are external geopolitical influences. Russia and China's expanding economic and political footprint, often exercised through strategic investments and information campaigns, challenge the Western Balkans' EU integration path. These actors sometimes provide alternative narratives and support to political factions skeptical of Western institutions, intensifying societal polarization and complicating regional cooperation.

Emerging Threats: Cybercrime, Migration, and Environmental Security

Emerging threats such as cybercrime and migration pressures have gained increasing prominence in the public's security concerns. Cyberattacks, online fraud, and data breaches are perceived as growing risks, especially among urban and younger populations. The management of migration flows, with periodic surges related to regional instability or global crises, strains border control and humanitarian capacities.

Environmental insecurity – manifested through floods, wildfires, and climate-induced displacement – is becoming a non-traditional but critical security issue. Citizens recognize that such risks have direct consequences for public safety, infrastructure, and economic livelihoods.

Implications for Regional Cooperation

The combined insights of SecuriMeter and the Balkan Barometer illustrate that security cooperation in the Western Balkans must address a broad spectrum of interrelated challenges – spanning physical safety, governance quality, social inclusion, and emerging digital risks. Public perceptions highlight not only the tangible threats but also deeper deficits of trust, accountability, and inclusion.

Regional institutions like RCC and IISG therefore face the dual task of managing operational security challenges and fostering the social contract that underpins long-term stability. Success depends on transparent governance, responsive policymaking, and meaningful public engagement. Only through such inclusive approaches can cooperation translate into enhanced security confidence and resilient regional integration.

Conclusion

The Western Balkans stands at a historic inflection point, moving from a past characterized by fragmentation towards a future defined by cooperation and shared resilience. In this transitional phase, security perceptions do not merely reflect past experiences but actively shape policy priorities and institutional strategies.

The Regional Cooperation Council and the Integrative Internal Security Governance platform embody the region's efforts to build an architecture of cooperation that is strategic, inclusive, and responsive. RCC's work in economic integration and mobility demonstrates how practical benefits can enhance connectivity and prosperity. IISG's coordination of security reforms ensures that these gains are protected from destabilizing threats.

Nevertheless, the gap between institutional progress and public confidence remains a challenge. The 2024 SecuriMeter survey reveals that fears related to conflict, corruption, violence, and digital insecurity persist, underscoring the need to deepen trust in governance. Building this trust demands a shift from procedural cooperation to a shared ethic of security that prioritizes the lived realities of citizens.

For the Western Balkans to realize its potential as a stable, integrated region within Europe, cooperation must be sustained and inclusive. The investments in institutional capacity, public engagement, and regional dialogue represented by RCC and IISG provide a foundation for this transformation. With continued effort and adaptive leadership, the region can convert security perceptions from obstacles into catalysts for peace, development, and European integration.

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Reimagining UNSC YPS Agenda Localisation: "The Wise Don't Give in – They Organize"[1]

Milena Stošić[2]

This paper unfolds in four parts. First, I situate the evolution of the global UNSC YPS framework and briefly scrutinise its implementation in national and regional contexts, highlighting the downsides of overall official YPS effort. Next, I outline the analytical framework, drawing on theories of invited vs. invented participation spaces to explain how youth claims-making can emerge under unfavourable conditions. The third section presents the Serbian case study in depth, tracing how the 2024–2025 student plenums and protest repertoires correspond to each of the five YPS pillars and embody **everyday peacebuilding** from below. Finally, I draw implications for policy and scholarship: formal, funded YPS architectures remain relevant, but localisation depends on recognising and resourcing grassroots, 'invented' initiatives and institutionalising local deliberation, youth majorities in decision forums, and direct resourcing for youth-led actors. Bridging international relations, feminist critique, and participatory governance, I argue that youth-driven democratic innovations can reimagine peace and security locally in ways that travel beyond a single country.

Great Expectations of UNSC Youth, Peace and Security Resolution 2250: A Decade Later

Under the agenda *Maintenance of international peace and security*, on 09 Dec 2015 UN Security Council[3] (UNSC) adopted the first resolution on Youth, Peace

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[1] *"The wise don't give in – they organize"* – student slogan, Serbia 2024–25. It is a reference to the traditional saying 'the wise one give in'.

[2] This article proceeds from reflexive practice: my analysis is situated in my Serbian citizenship, prior multilateral work on institutionalised youth policy, youth-representation roles, participation in the citizens' assemblies (plenums) discussed here, student status and feminist activism – rather than the 'God trick' of a disembodied view-from-nowhere (Haraway 1988). I triangulate scholarly work, media coverage, movement social-media content, and my own lived experience and fieldnotes from participant observation, acknowledging the limits and advantages of a situated perspective.

[3] Draft resolution co-sponsors were: Angola, Chad, Chile, France, Jordan, Lithuania,

and Security 2250, that will later become known as YPS agenda, with two more resolutions adopted in 2018 (2419) and 2020 (2535). In the words of Jordan's representative to the UNSC, the draft resolution advances a normative shift that calls for the participation of young people in decision-making in peacebuilding, political participation, and conflict resolution – and urges Member States to ensure such participation in a positive, substantive manner. While Jordan UNSC representative connected this outcome with previous debates on countering violent extremism, the statement underlines an intention of the resolution to recast youth as constructive agents in building societies by strengthening their roles in social inclusion, societal progress, and economic development.[4] This marks a historical move beyond securitized portrayals of youth toward proactive inclusion, also because, as often emphasized, youth-led peacebuilders had a prominent role in advocacy toward a UNSC resolution making young people themselves central as creators of a new principle for the norm of youth participation (Berents 2022).

A decade later, 10 countries (5.2%) have adopted a YPS National Action Plan (Finland, Nigeria, DRC, Malawi, South Sudan, Burundi, Gambia, Kyrgyzstan, Jordan and Liberia) out of which only Finland is developing its second, and 20% of NAPs are currently outdated, having expired in 2025 or before.[5] Optimistic forecast recognizes approximately 60 more countries have plans in development (Dallaire 2025). On a different scale, African Union (AU) adopted its Continental Framework for Youth, Peace, and Security in 2020, which calls upon its membership to develop NAPs, with an ambitious target of 50% of AU Member States to have one by 2029. Apart from NAPs as an implementation modality, USA situated YPS agenda within its foreign policy through the Youth, Peace, and Security Act of 2020,[6] and in

Malaysia, New Zealand, Nigeria, Spain, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the United States of America and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. China and Russian Federation took part in the final vote, and resolution was adopted with 15 votes in favour.

4 United Nations Security Council. 2015. "Security Council Meeting Record of the 7573rd Meeting (S/PV.7573): Maintenance of International Peace and Security, 9 December 2015." New York: United Nations: https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_pv.7573_E.pdf.

5 YPS Monitor: https://ypsmonitor.com/naps.

6 U.S. Congress. 2020. *Youth, Peace, and Security Act of 2020*, H.R. 6174, 116th Cong. https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/6174/titles.

Canada, mainstreaming YPS is observed in its 3rd National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (WPS).[7]

Localisation of YPS has so far been slower than youth stakeholders would like, and slower than the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda's trajectory at a similar stage. Two agendas with potential to be mutually reinforcing, share also thematic pillars: Participation, Protection, and Prevention, with YPS focusing also on Partnership, and Disengagement/Reintegration. Existing efforts and processes of YPS work have been praised, but also qualitatively scrutinised against participation practices of institutionalised pathways, funding challenges and accountability of policy owners – quite echoing WPS critics.

I approach this brief examination of participatory localisation of YPS through the concept of *invited* and *invented/claimed* spaces (Cornwall 2002; Gaventa 2006; Miraftab 2004; Kersting 2013). 'Invited', in the interpretation of Miraftab (2004; 2001) refers to the participation arenas legitimized by the state and donors, where activity is non-confrontational and geared toward survival and incremental fixes – often leaving core power relations intact; by contrast, 'invented' is about **self-organized, claimed** by grassroots through collective action, **confronting authorities and the status quo**, with activity aimed at **structural change and resistance** to dominant power relations. While no clear cut among the two would do justice to YPS spaces interpretation, this analytical framework is useful for **tracking how youth participation moves** across settings, where barriers are and where opportunities might be.

In terms of critical analysis of YPS multilateral arena, Berents and Fosu (2024) introduce the term *conditionality,* to describe the structural-discursive constraints that pre-configure 'invited' participation. Concretely, institutional compliance may be reproduced: youth are invited to participate in ways that preserve existing hierarchies and technocratic routines, whereas 'participation' in such form can be itself a way of channelling youth agency into acceptable, non-disruptive forms. While young women and men usual-

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7   Canada Youth, Peace and Security Coalition. 2024. "Statement Welcoming the Launch of the 3rd National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, March 28." *Canada YPS Coalition*. https://www.canadayps.org/post/cnap3-launch-2024.

ly describe such practices as tokenistic, Berents (2025) also points out that *compromise* is two-sided, although asymmetrical.

The violence of exclusion, used to describe relationship toward youth-led peacebuilders (such as in Simpson 2018), in a more sophisticated manner is also creeping into YPS localisation, adding to the risk of instrumentalization of embraced invited spaces. The tension between invitation and ownership is widespread, cutting across regions and contexts rather than belonging to any single setting, Leclerc (2025) rightfully notices. She observes that many youth-serving organizations (YSOs) committed to 'youth empowerment' position themselves as the default indefinite brokers between young people and decision-makers, contributing to venues so conditioned by gatekeeping where staying 'in the room' eclipses participating freely or setting the agenda.

YPS in South East Europe:
'My Love Has Got Money, He's Got His Strong Beliefs'[8]

UNSCR 2250 mandated the Secretary-General 'to carry out a progress study on the youth's positive contribution to peace processes and conflict resolution, in order to recommend effective responses at local, national, regional and international levels', towards providing evidence of young people's contribution to sustaining peace, through a participatory research process. To this end, some SEE youth voices were present in regional consultations in 2017 – Eastern Europe and Central Asia Consultation[9] and the

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[8] The line is from Gala, "Freed from Desire" (1996). Students in Serbia widely repopularised the song at rallies in 2024–25.

[9] Eastern Europe and Central Asia Consultation, held in Istanbul, Türkiye, from 23–25 May 2017, was the third of a series of regional consultations for the Study. It was organized by UNFPA, UNDP with the support of the Peacebuilding Support Office. For the concept note of the event, please click here. 39 young participants between the ages of 19 to 35 from the region were selected out of an open call for application, out of which 12 from the Western Balkans. Participants came from 19 different countries and territories: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, North Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Russia, Serbia, Tajikistan, Türkiye, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. As per report on the consultation: https://www.sparkblue.org/system/files/2024-08/2017.09.06%20-%20Report%20-%20Eastern%20Europe%20and%20Central%20Asia%20Consultation%20and%20Dialogue%20on%20Youth%2C%20Peace%20%26

European Regional Consultation.[10] The former advised on implementation strategies of UNSCR 2250 in terms of: setting up a national implementation architecture for UNSCR 2250 with country-specific, measurable indicators;[11] creating multi-stakeholder working groups where at least half the members are youth-organization representatives; running local consultations and awareness-raising across age groups; and systematically gathering and sharing evidence of youth peacebuilding, using rights-based arguments to sustain inclusion. Interestingly, the participants also recognized aspects of instrumentalized youth participation in formal politics and a need to develop mechanism to ensure youth participation in decision and policy-making processes at municipality level (Altiok 2017). The later consultation was more detailed, providing recommendations for national level implementation, across borders and even targeting EU and OSCE directly:

> The recommendations called for building robust national implementation architectures for UNSCR 2250 – most notably National Action Plans (NAPs) with clear goals, indicators, budgets, and independent monitoring that included youth alongside officials and experts – while institutionalizing youth participation across general policymaking (youth mainstreaming), including quotas for young candidates, participatory budgeting, and legally anchored youth councils. Transnationally, they urged mainstreaming YPS across the conflict cycle and Agenda 2030 (especially SDG 16), expanded public awareness, comparative evidence and data-sharing, university-led research, and peace education/PVE tools, with youth centered in development-cooperation design and evaluation. At the EU level, they proposed em-

%20Security%20%281%29.pdf.

10 The European Regional Consultation, held in Brussels, Belgium, from 25–27 September 2017, was the seventh and last of a series of regional consultations for the Study. It was organized by the European External Action Service, in partnership with the United Nations Population Fund, the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office, the Anna Lindh Foundation, the European Youth Forum and the European Partnership for Children and Youth in Peacebuilding. 44 young participants between the ages of 15 to 30 from the region were selected out of an open call for application, out of which 10 from Western Balkans. Participants came from 19 different countries and territories: Albania, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom and North Macedonia. As per report on the consultation: https://www.sparkblue.org/system/files/2024-08/2017.12.21%20-%20Report%20-%20European%20Regional%20Consultation%20on%20Youth%2C%20Peace%20%26%20Security_0.pdf.

11 Please note that indicators and monitoring system, by the international standards, has not been set even in the case of Finland – a country pioneering the agenda.

bedding 2250 in the EU Youth Strategy and Global Strategy, creating accessible YPS funding (e.g., via the IcSP[12]), formalizing structured youth participation, appointing an independent rapporteur, and establishing an inclusive YPS consultative body empowered to recommend a Special Adviser. For the OSCE, they recommended mainstreaming 2250 across documents and operations, adopting a cross-cutting OSCE Youth Policy, and constituting a representative Youth Consultative Body with authority to propose an OSCE Special Representative for Youth,[13] supported by a Secretariat within the unified (core) budget.

However, regardless of how limited in scope or intersectional participation these consultations were, very concrete proposals remained widely unknown, at least in the region in focus. When it comes to national implementation, no institutionally-led steps were taken through any formal processes. It is arguable that even the YPS agenda per se was mostly broadly unknown, before Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO),[14] through German-backed funding, commendably began raising awareness on it since 2022/23, among youth, intergovernmental actors in the region and national institutions. YPS Monitor (n.d.) documents some progress only in two cases: in Albania, partial exclusion is observed regarding YPS Coalition, with some efforts being led by youth and INGO/CSOs but not supported by Government; and in Kosovo, YPS Coalition is recognized as direct participation 'by being present in the room'. While both cases may be scrutinized for interpretation accuracy, insight is indicative of slow progress.

YPS Monitor provides also priority ranking map of 195 countries, generated by combining scores from existing global indexes, each linked to one or more YPS pillars. The priority ranking for national implementation positions shows the Western Balkan and South East European area closer to the first half (higher priority), with Bosnia and Herzegovina (84), Bulgaria (99) and Montenegro (100) making it into top 100. Among European countries rank-

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12 The Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP) is the EU's main instrument supporting security initiatives and peace-building activities in partner countries.

13 Interestingly, Serbian Chair-in-Office (CiO) to the OSCE in 2015 unsuccessfully advocated among 57 participating States for development and adoption of the OSCE-wide Youth Action Plan, and was the first CiO ever to appoint a Special Representative on the theme of Youth and Security, as an honorary position in late 2014.

14 Independent intergovernmental mechanism mandated to advance youth policy in the region and cooperation, founded by Western Balkans six 'contracting parties'. RYCO is also well recognized for its co-management governance model, in which six line ministers share governing powers with six young people.

ing only, in addition to mentioned, Serbia (107) is indicated to be among ten most prioritised. The Balkan Peace Index,[15] which is the first locally owned and locally created peace index containing seven domains, recognizes in 2024 that Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo have currently contested peace, referring to the state in which violent conflict may occur, i.e. conflicts are manifested through distrust, propaganda, ideological competition, political terror, the radicalisation of society and sporadic violent incidents.

Policy-wise, the Serbian National Youth Strategy 2023–2030[16] recognizes a number of 'international documents of importance for young people', including UNSCR 2250, but its value is rather symbolic as no concrete measures or goal are operationalising it beyond what was done already before YPS resolutions. While youth-led peacebuilding efforts undeniably existed in the region for way longer than YPS agenda lifespan, advocacy for norming the policy are still scarce, modest and donor-dependant.

Finally, knowledge production on YPS norming is dominantly situated in the political West. While this is a common grievance for many disciplines in general, it carries particular weight in the field where participation is valued as constitutive to the policy, if not its *raison d'être*. For demonstration purposes, looking at the current YPS database[17] entries (on categories of academic, paper and research reports, treating them as knowledge production types), out of 237 entries, which are on YPS theme at large and not only on YPS norming, coding of publishing sources reveals only 5% ownership of knowledge products in/by the Global Majority. When filtered for academic entries only, up to five entries may be argued to be (co)owned elsewhere than the Western academia (out of 29).[18]

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15 Balkan Peace Index. https://bpi.mindproject.ac.rs/.
16 Ministry of Tourism and Youth of the Republic of Serbia. 2023. *Youth Strategy in the Republic of Serbia for the Period from 2023 to 2030*. Belgrade: Government of the Republic of Serbia. https://mto.gov.rs/extfile/sr/1829/EN%20Youth%20Strategy%20in%20the%20Republic%20of%20Serbia%20for%20the%20period%20from%202023%20to%202030.pdf.
17 This is to date most comprehensive database of materials produced, of relevance to the YPS agenda.
18 This rough-cut analysis is not attempting to situate authors but publishers. Entries labeled as Multilateral (30%) cover mainly to different UN agencies, and while their representations might be based in different geographies, only a dedicated analysis could offer more insight into power relations construing knowledge products.

One reason for such disbalance, linked with political marginalisation, is underfunding of YPS localisation, but also funding that is not flexible, conditioned and otherwise not based in comprehensive needs assessments. As a prominent example, Thematic Review on Youth, Peace and Security (Gaston et al. 2025) of the UN Secretary-General's Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) finds that only a small trickle of funding towards YPS goes directly to youth organizations. The researchers note that youth organizations interviewed in the review received a small amount of the YPS funding that is allocated to larger international organizations and UN agencies. On a sample of 41 funded projects (with a single one labelled as Eastern Europe, but actually Western Balkans), study counts that UN entities were direct recipients in 32 projects, large international CSOs were direct recipients in 12 projects and in just one of the projects a CSO was a direct recipient, but no national CSOs or youth organizations. A specific funding modality known as the Youth Promotion Initiative (YPI) was introduced in 2016 seeking to increase support to young people's contribution to peacebuilding and to advance the implementation of YPS resolutions, but it was discontinued in 2024, and countries of the Western Balkans/SEE were not eligible for it.

Still, I argue that YPS agenda's relevance is undoubtful in this region, and regardless of absence of institutionalised interest in its national localisation young people and youth-led stakeholders are living up to its values and rationale, including non-intentionally. The Serbian student movement of 2024–2025 exemplifies this notion. Despite little awareness of UNSCR 2250 itself, Serbian students (and later high school students, citizens and others) embodied its spirit through their unprecedented mobilization – as the next section will explore. While doing it without external aid, grants and projects, with *no money but strong beliefs*, the student movement is working its way toward institutionalising deliberation from below. Gala's lyrics, frequently played at student-led rallies, condense the movement's ethos: scarce resources, but abundant conviction.

How Serbia's Students Embody and Challenge UNSC Youth, Peace and Security Agenda

> We believe it is crucial for students to realize how powerful their collective voice is and how much political power they actually hold. For a long time, we have felt that

institutional mechanisms, such as student parliaments and assemblies, do not represent our interests. To a large extent, they have become instruments of party agendas and have lost their connection to the real needs of students. That is why we believe the plenum is currently the only space where students can express themselves freely and in solidarity, and where they can jointly articulate political demands and responses – especially in moments of social crisis, such as the one we are going through now.[19]

The legacy of youth and student movements in South East Europe speaks of a generational continuity in demands for participation that transcends episodic protest. Across contexts students have consistently refused to remain objects of policy and instead positioned themselves as political subjects with the agency that differs the logic of the engagement deficit discourse.

This contrasts sharply with the 'invited spaces' of participation, such as student parliaments or formal consultations, which tend to be tightly managed by institutions and often reproduce existing power hierarchies. The claimed spaces opened through plenums, assemblies, or occupations demonstrate alternative democratic repertoires that foreground autonomy, horizontality, and collective agency. In the context of the YPS agenda, which aspires to deepen youth participation, these lessons remain critical: while policy frameworks emphasize inclusion, in practice they too often replicate consultative approaches where *some* young people are at best heard but not heeded. Integrating participatory formats experimented with during protest cycles into everyday governance and peacebuilding processes might therefore bridge the gap between rhetorical commitments and transformative practice impacting not only youth but societies at large. In 2024–25, Serbian university students started a massive protest movement that not only shacked national politics but also reflected the core themes of the YPS agenda. This section examines how the movement's features correspond to each of the five YPS pillars – Participation, Prevention, Protection, Disengagement/Reintegration, and Partnerships – thereby illustrating an 'invented space' of youth agency in action.

'The protests, led by the 'Students in Blockade' movement, erupted in late 2024 and have since swept across Serbia. What began as a call for accountability following the tragic collapse of the Novi Sad railway canopy – which

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[19] Representatives of the Student Plenum in North Macedonia (Govedarica Antanasijević 2025)

killed 16 people and severely injured others – has grown into a nationwide demand for accountability, transparency, justice, and investment in education. The movement reached a peak in March 2025, when hundreds of thousands of people gathered in Belgrade in a powerful display of civic unity', the OHCHR's press statement of Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council (2025) explains. More precisely, 'Students in Blockade' means that every university centre in the country, including vast majority of state and private faculties, were occupied by students fully for more than half a year – they slept, ate, deliberated there – while the 'blockade' in a wider sense continues for ten months at the time when I write this paper. What initially was labelled by students as non-political and exclusively a demand for functional institutions and justice, after mid-March, became the largest protest in Serbia's history (Maksimović and Popovicć 2025), and took shape of nation-wide political awakening, in an environment systematically trained for depolitisation. Eventually the students extended their unmet demands to snap parliamentary elections and renewed a committed enthusiasm for deeper change.

In his systemic comparative analysis of studies on youth in Serbia in recent years, Vranić (2025) notices that especially before covid-19 they were interpreted as passive, ideologically shaped, and unaccustomed to voting. Despite their participation in various previous protests, drawing on research, he documents that they were not recognized as a distinct political force and were commonly portrayed in the media as alienated, apolitical, apathetic, marked by "brain drain", and at times exhibiting authoritarian dispositions. The Study of the National Youth Council of Serbia,[20] the highest independent representative body of youth, finds also that among youth interested in political topics, interest in security jumped from ~25% in previous years to 71.5% in 2025, and concern about the functioning of democracy rose from ~45% to 74.4 (Stojanović, Ivković and Kaličanin 2025). Such (real or perceived) shift demonstrates the scope of unexpected change that began to rise with a movement which started with mourning, enabling emotional catharsis in society and repolitisation of daily life.

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[20] Civil society organization, gathering under its umbrella 108 youth-led and youth-serving organisations. It is a member of UNOY, that is co-chairing The Global Coalition on Youth, Peace and Security (GCYPS) – the leading platform for shaping global policy and practice on YPS.

From being seen as apathetic, self-centered, and oriented toward emigration, perception about youth in Serbia switched to being the main trusted political actor (55% of citizens would support students list in the case of elections, a study[21] finds), and dubbed as one of the most significant democratic movements in Europe today (Petrović Lotina 2025). 'For their peaceful and non-violent demonstrations demanding accountability from their government and that its state institutions follow the rule of law' they have also been nominated for the Nobel peace prize.

In students' widely embraced slogan – 'the wise don't give in - they organize', the shift from invited compliance to invented deliberation can be traced, crosscuting throughout YPS pillars.

Invented Spaces for Organic YPS

Participation Pillar – Redefined from Bellow
In the last eleven convocations of the Serbian Parliament, representation of young MPs fluctuated between 1 and 11%, with only 2.4 in 2025 (Stojanović, Ivković and Kaličanin 2025), further pointing out to the low political participation of young people. In such context, students created their own deliberative structures – plenums – where every participant has an equal voice. It is a reinvention of political space, built on horizontality and shared agency. It is also a direct bypass of the instrumentalised invited space of student parliaments, which are foreseen by relevant laws in the country, but experienced as captured and non-representational, and at least to say irrelevant.

> We have no individuals who stand above the community. We do not follow a cult of personality. Our actions are collective, thoughtful, and responsible. We are in the streets for an idea, not for personal gain. This is neither the time nor the place to elevate individuals, but a moment for unity and solidarity.[22]

While being a classical protection tactic against repressive targeting on one hand, this approach articulated that ongoing societal polarization could not be healed by more, especially when that representation is embedded in economic and political structures no longer trusted by the public (Stošić 2025).

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[21] I.M. 2025. "Istraživanje o izborima: Za studentsku listu 55 odsto građana, Vučić na 42,1 odsto." *Vreme*, July 17, 2025. https://vreme.com/vesti/istrazivanje-o-izborima-za-studentsku-listu-55-odsto-gradjana-vucic-na-421-odsto/.

[22] Students in Blockade highlighted on their X account (@studentblokade) on 31 Dec.

Students did not use political commitment to UNSC' YPS agenda as an advocacy or strategic tool to demand a place at the table, not only because *invited* spaces were uninviting and policy-making world as such is not easily accessible, but also because they not only do not feel it their own, but most probably never heard about it in average. Instead, in a dramatic turn of events, they organised new venues of influential participation that holds astonishingly high sustainability potential. This also echoes Women, Peace and Security (WPS) scholarship emphasizing the importance of grassroots mobilization over elite consultation. The reimagining of participation observed in this case aligns with YPS's call for youth decision-making, but on the students' own terms.

Prevention Pillar – Challenging Structural Violence

By demanding accountability for corruption, the abuse of public funds, and repression, students address not only immediate threats but the long-term drivers of instability. Their focus on infrastructure, education, and transparency directly confronts the structural conditions that perpetuate exclusion and injustice. One of their demands is a budget increase of 20% for high education.

In addition, the movement embraced non-violent strategic logic, consistently calling all political and institutional actors, as well citizens, not to engage in violence. During the insofar largest protest on 1 March 2025, where presence of 300 to 500 000 people was estimated, students officially called an end of the protest in the first moment critical to escalations. This is the protest for which an interim measure by European Court on Human Rights (ECtHR) was granted concerning Serbia on the allegation of sonic weapon being used against demonstrators.[23]

Performative acts of citizenship in imaginative forms find a place in the collective memory of solidarity – temporally, spatially, and transnationally (Ay and Miraftab 2016). Students in Serbia, and later on other citizens, excelled at non-violent creative acts, in a way that seemed to integrate not only Gezi-like performances, but also more recent symbols of Istanbul

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[23] European Court of Human Rights. 2025. "Interim measure granted concerning Serbia." April 30, 2025. https://www.echr.coe.int/w/interim-measure-granted-concerning-serbia.

protests whereas *Pokémon* figure reappeared in Belgrade. Similarly to Gezi's *Table on Earth*, where hundreds of people shared their food with one another on the first day of Ramadan, by appropriating the space and reproducing their own – citizens cooked hot meals on the streets of Belgrade, Kragujevac, Niš etc., aiding students to persevere in their demands. Along the similar lines, Muslim students were welcomed in the city of Niš with iftar, enabling their inclusion. Ay and Miraftab (2016) also recall the individual action, taken by a German pianist performing a recital on the Taksim square to express solidarity with the ideals of Gezi, interpreting it as illustration of the global frustration with authoritarian neoliberal market-based politics. This 'guerilla pianist' of Gezi reappeared in Serbia, only to be expelled by authorities (Lebrecht 2025), evoking same outcome as in Türkiye, after participating in a protest during the 5-hour student blockade in the city of Niš. Days later Davide Martello joined Serbian students cyclists on the last point of their 'Tour to Strasbourg: Pedalling for the Truth', who took 1,400km bike journey to address the EU on the candidate country anti-corruption movement and draw the wider attention that four months after country-wide blockades was not yet there – in the media or political echelons.

Apart from daily silent stand-offs starting at 11:52am (the tragedy time), as a means of commemorating 15 (later 16) victims of the Novi Sad tragedy, students literally marched hundreds of kilometres through Serbia, reclaiming the national flag, anthem and patriotism – symbols that over the years in the aftermath of dissolution of Yugoslavia became associated rather with the nationalist tendencies. They organised humanitarian bazars, quizzes, lectures and sports tournaments within occupied and repurposed spaces. They hosted movie nights and even a film festival, started their own 'blockade' news video channel and a podcast, offering impressive alternatives to the captured state media.

Protection Pillar – Collective Care in the Face of Repression
Facing physical attacks, surveillance, and police brutality, students remained committed to nonviolence. Their methods challenge the assumption that youth require protection as passive victims – instead, they protect one another through collective care. In the words of a youth worker, describing

on social media the events of a protest in Novi Sad from 05 September 2025:

> We spent almost three hours locked up in the Faculty of Science and Mathematics, where we ran at the call of the students – fleeing from the rampaging cordon of the gendarmerie. Three hours in the complete darkness of the amphitheatre.
> At some point I reach the front door to check the situation. The student guard tells me that it is not yet safe to go out. Tear gas penetrates even past the closed doors and windows. The air is getting thinner.
> I ask her how she is.
> She shrugs and says in a calm voice:
> "We are already used to it."
> I am speechless.
> I am defeated – by the tone, the sentence, her ordinary calmness with which she describes the horror. Because that sentence reflects the reality that young people in Serbia have been living for ten months.

Youth protection is inseparable from gendered security, and the case of Nikolina Sindjelić testifies to that end. The targeting of student-activist whose intimate images were weaponised online after she accused a senior police officer of threat of a sexual assault – illustrates how image-based sexual abuse functioned as a tool of political control against women in movements, chilling participation and attempting to reframe victims as perpetrators (Cvetinčanin Knežević 2025). However, in a matter of days 'We are all Nikolina' protest took place as a response led by organised citizens and students, demonstrating protection-from-below, where movement cultivate mutual care and deterrence alongside nonviolence. As a not isolated incident, this case tells a story of a deeper structural gendered dynamics, which resurfaced during the protests.

Disengagement and Reintegration Pillar – New Dealing with the Past

Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) as strategies used in the aftermath of an armed conflict as a way to achieve sustainable peace are perhaps not as directly applicable to the Serbian case. However, in terms of dealing with the violent past and reconciliation in the region that is still a work in progress, the student movement inspired previously unseen effects. Namely, one of the prominent new groups that joined the cause of the student movement are war veterans. They came under spotlight in April 2025 during students' blockade of the national broadcaster (RTS) building entrance. As this was also time of Easter, in a majority-Christian population, students in Belgrade were joined by their colleagues from Novi Pazar,

a predominantly Bosniak Muslim city, in an act of unity and solidarity during this major religious holiday. In welcoming them and promising them safety, a war veteran held a speech that did more for dealing with the past grievances and reconciliation among ethnic groups, than the years of civil society work on the same. For the first time in public discourse, in an emotionally resonant manner, a war participant, representing many, acknowledged the accountability of his own group:

> Our kitchen for spreading hatred and lies is in this building behind us. At this same RTS that still spreads lies and hatred today. My generation believed that we were doing the right thing and that we were the right ones, and that the others were evil. And the others thought the same about themselves. And then the wheel of evil started that cannot be stopped and that continues to this day for many. (Martinović 2025)

Since then, war veterans are holding first lines for students in protests and blockades, openly supporting the 'new generation that rose to stop the evil': 'They are the ones who spread love and light up the future. That future is what we all want and it is our duty and that of our failed generations to stand up and just follow them' (ibid.). This happens in a context where, according to research (Jovanović 2023), young people in Serbia have very limited knowledge about the past war crimes. YIHR report establishes for example that only 19% ever heard that Sarajevo was under siege of Serbian forces for more than 1000 days; 7% heard that during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina there were war camps for Croats and Muslims; and even though the focus of the culture of remembrance in Serbia is mostly on Serbian victims, only 12% heard about rapes of captured women of Serbian nationality in a war camp "Čelebići".

Partnerships Pillar – Making Horizontal Coalitions

War veterans are not the only prominent group supporting Serbia's student movement. It triggered broad, cross-sector solidarity and activism – teachers, pharmacists, farmers, bikers, and even a month-long Bar Association strike – backed by citizen logistics (food donations, taxi shuttles) and an IT-sector built donation platform, turning sympathy into sustained, material support and real infrastructure of renewed sense of citizenship. The number of towns and villages in which, according to the records of the Ar-

chives of Public Gatherings, some form of protest action was held at least once by July 2025 was at least 516.[24]

Student demands and organizing practices are also increasingly aware of rural-urban divides and digital exclusion, and there is visibility of people with disabilities in many student-led protests. For example, students have a working unit 'Student in every village (SuuS)', formed with the intention to provide alternative ways for informing citizens on their own movement and demands, in the atmosphere of limited media freedom in the country. This unit is predominantly focused on remote and smaller areas and it contributes to revival of citizenship agency beyond major cities. Not to claim that the student movement is committed to intersectionality, but a number of indicators are shown. One other example is the gender balance that student movement strive to showcase in their media appearances. While not all youth are students, study shows (KOMS 2025) that more than 90% of youth (15 to 30 y.o.) support the student cause.

Student movement inspired others to organize under tagline 'the wise don't give in – they organize', across different, age, professions, education levels and ethnicity. It opened space for more autonomous, citizen-led alliances rooted in shared principles.

What makes this Case so special?

Erosion of trust in democratic institutions across geographies is not new, neither is the notion that youth political participation happens in alternative spaces rather than through conventional mechanisms. Questioning of representational democracy as elite-serving, and distancing from partisan politics is also already theorised, lived and mapped within the realm of "well yes, but then what?". Civic uprisings, and relying on non-violent strategies, are not a novelty either. So, what makes the Serbian student movement so distinct?

This wave turned into a more stable new reality due to its length (a continuous 10+ month mobilization), depth (transformation of political attitudes

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[24] Arhiv javnih skupova (AJS Magazin). 2025. "Mesta u kojima su održane akcije posle rušenja nadstrešnice." July 21, 2025. https://javniskupovi.org/index.php/2025/02/01/gradovi-u-kojima-je-odrzana-akcija-zastani-srbijo/.

and engagement across society), and scope (hundreds of sites of protest and involvement of diverse societal groups daily), which mutually reinforced each other and synergised into a unique phenomenon.

Kersting (2013) argues that political systems indeed have embraced some *invited spaces* such as referendums, round tables, and forums. However, many of these experiments have been dominated by political parties and formal institutions, leaving citizens dissatisfied. In response, people developed their own *invented spaces* of participation, using alternative channels to express their interests and to counter hierarchical interventions. These new forms of protest and participation served as a public counterweight to existing structures and challenged the dominance of entrenched elites. The critical issue, Kersting contends, is whether such emergent structures can be transformed into sustainable practices of deliberation and open democracy. Linking this notion to the invented spaces of students' movement in Serbia, we can identify *plenum-based decision-making* as the democratic innovation that seems to capture this need for meaningful citizenship beyond the Serbia-only case. To that end, in analysing other instances of plenums usage in the region, Štiks and Horvat (2014) conclude that without protest, plenums risk routinization and loss of bargaining power, because protest supplies agenda-setting leverage and the credible threat of renewed disruption, and predicting that institutionalisation in some form is the inevitable next step for sustainability.

What is a variable in this case study that provides seed for these invented or claimed spaces to hybridize into functional **invited** spaces, might be the existence of institutionalised local community councils (srb. *mesne zajednice*). Back in the days of Yugoslavia's socialist self-governance, municipalities could not make any important decisions without consulting the local communities and although this opinion was not binding, it was respected, especially when the local communities were headed by influential people (Ostojić 2022). While these formats today, in its legal outline are either tokenised, politically irrelevant, not formed everywhere or inactive, theoretically are a basis for formal mechanism of representative and direct democracy at the neighborhood level. Student mobilizations have sought to reclaim and repoliticize them as genuine spaces of citizen deliberation and decision-making, outside any partisan control. They invited citizens to organize within citizens plenums (srb. *zborovi građana*): 'What is a plenum for

students – it is a *zbor* for the people'. They even distributed guides for citizens, sharing their own practices of hosting deliberations. In this way, they not only inspired venues for diverse groups of citizens to support them in an organised manner in the immediate goals, but venues for challenging power distribution long-term.

Students inspired extension of the horizontal assembly model beyond campuses into neighborhoods and towns, positioning *zbors* as reclaimed, grassroots spaces of deliberation and political agency. While hundreds of these plenums across the country are embodying a deliberate effort to enact direct democracy and challenge representative deficits within crisis contexts, their defining features differ and do not necessarily reflect current legislations' framework. Instead, they reflect citizens' genuine need for decentralizing power and autonomous articulation of bottom-up priorities, grievances and needs, whereas citizens form them not only based on territorial proximity criteria (plenums based on former local community councils' borders), but also based on union-like professional identity (e.g. Zbor of health workers), single issue causes (e.g. Zbor against bailiffs) or identity/constituency based (e.g. Queer Zbor). In that way, plenums grew from being a deliberative method, to becoming organizational activist units that not only deliberate, but also implement their decisions. Within current legislation 'zbor' is a possibility that does not embody deliberation on horizontal framework that mirrors student's plenums. However, without secretarial work of the local community councils and local self-government's resources, new form of 'zbor' is transforming from a method into a hybrid between a grassroot citizen assembly and something reminding of civil society organisation. This is a game changer because it calls upon *acting* and not only deliberating, bringing to life powerful realisation that citizens themselves can and should have impact on their way of living: 'Direct democracy is not just a theory – it requires action. Start a meeting in your local community or municipality, or a plenum at work and in an institution! Every initiative, no matter how small, contributes to change'.[25] This ongoing evolution – from spontaneous plenum to semi-structured civic assembly – might represent a novel hybrid of direct democracy and civic organization, worthy of further exploration.

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[25] From student's guide for forming citizen plenums: https://zborvrsac.rs/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Pamflet-SVI-U-ZBOROVE.pdf.

As students are putting forward the 'students list' for the demanded snap elections, they were developing programmatic outline for it, too. Among other, they have foreseen that 'it is necessary to legally recognize student plenums as legitimate form of student organization, which would further empower students to actively participate in the decision-making concerning student affairs'. Thus, they aim to challenge current invited spaces of student participation, alongside with

> more precise regulation and encouragement of mechanisms of direct democracy such as are civic plenums, local referendums, popular initiatives and other forms of participation that empower communities and contribute to greater transparency and accountability of local government.[26]

Leclerc (2025) beautifully puts it –

> belonging is the difference between being given a seat and being given the keys. It is the point where young people are not just allowed in, but trusted to make decisions, to take risks, and to define the direction of policy and practice.

In the Serbian case, we can recognize a prominent example of this insight, taken a step further, where young people are enabling this sense of belonging to other citizens, too, but not through waiting to be given keys, but by creating openly accessible rooms. Expressed in the logic of Soo Ah Kwon (2019), students in Serbia perhaps do contrast a neoliberal script ("be a good participant to survive") with counter-moves of insisting on collective rights and public responsibility (not just individualized self-help through participation). In doing so, they woke up millions, including across former Yugoslavian borders (e.g. plenum-based organising in North Macedonia,[27] following the Kočani nightclub tragedy when 59 youth lost their life).

Where WPS and YPS formal mechanisms often struggle in authoritarian or shrinking civic space contexts, and with compromise and conditionality of participation, this case exemplifies how civic resistance itself becomes a positive peace and human security practice, especially when formal systems fail to ensure rights, justice, and accountability. While NAPs are not per se

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[26] From Student's 'Social agreement' i.e. programmatic minimum, as provided by the 'Student in every village' working unit to citizen plenums.

[27] Mašina. 2025. "„Сите на plenum!": Početak samoorganizovanja u Severnoj Makedoniji." *Mašina*, March 19, 2025. https://www.masina.rs/%D1%81%D0%B8 %D1%82%D0%B5-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BD %D1%83%D0%BC-pocetak-samoorganizovanja-u-severnoj-makedoniji/.

to be discarded as YPS implementation modality, the need for institutions to bend, adapt, and share power is (hopefully) obvious.

Drawing on Miraftab (2001), neoliberal governance technocratizes participation – stripping it of contestation – while worsening women's material conditions and access to basic services. Paradoxically, it opens some 'invited' decision-making arenas from which women were previously excluded, but this 'inclusion' rarely redistributes power. This resonates with how participation is arranged with the view on youth, too and with what Kwon (2019) describes as *compulsory participation*: when a model youth is always *participating* – joining councils, volunteering, attending forums – not primarily to share power, but as a way to manage their own risk (unemployment, precarity) in an era where the state has pulled back social protections. With all of that in mind, is something called 'meaningful' participation even possible in isolation and without challenging political systems at a larger scale?

Success assumption for NAPs is that institutions are trusted and participation can be operationalized via formal invitations. But is co-created, inclusive and functional invited space possible? Students in Serbia surely see their struggle as part of the bigger picture, and perhaps YPS policy actors may make use of it, too:

> The messages we carry are messages of togetherness – where young people in Serbia have gathered, stood up, and as a collective are fighting for the well-being of their society. This is something I believe all of us would like to invite young people around the world to do as well: for youth to sit down, reflect on what their problems are, what they want for tomorrow, and what they need to fight for. And I hope that one day, through the actions of all of us, things will be better. Because the way we see it, we are all one people under one sky, and we all deserve to live a better tomorrow. […] The world is full of struggles – against totalitarian regimes, against fascism, against absolutism, for human and civil rights. And I see the struggle in Serbia as yet another voice within the wider fight taking place across the globe. Therefore, no matter how geographically distant we may be, all of these struggles are connected into one larger picture. We are part of it, but we are fighting in our own home, and that is what rests upon each of us. My power is small in what I can do somewhere far away across the ocean, but the first step we can take is to clean our own garden, our own yard.[28]

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28 Danilo Erdeljan, student of the Novi Sad Faculty of Law in blockade. Festival Grounded. 2025. *Deveti mesec, vztrajno: Pametniji ne popušta, pametniji se organizuje.* Video, 2:00:11. YouTube. August 25, 2025. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zMtOKi0ZaY0.

Student's words point out that youth movements, even if unaware of global agendas, are forging the peace and security from below that international policies aspire to create. Recognizing and learning from these invented spaces is essential if the YPS agenda is to be truly localized and impactful. His aspirational message resonates beyond Serbia – it captures the standpoint of generations refusing to accept exclusion and injustice, in spite of often being labelled as apathetic. For the YPS agenda, it is a reminder that its ultimate success may depend on following such voices across geographies.

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PART IV: Policy Recommendations

Policy Recommendations

Regional Stability in South East Europe Study Group

Executive Summary of Recommendations

- ***Regional Cooperation Council (RCC):*** Supporting the construction of a multilateral security coordination hub involving all Western Balkan (WB) countries.

- ***OSCE/RACVIAC:*** Facilitating a dialogue in support of a possible adaptation of the Article IV Agreement on Sub-Regional Arms Control.

- ***EU Commission/OSCE:*** Creating forums for regional parliamentarians, civil society and youth to engage in regional peacebuilding.

- ***EU/NATO:*** Integrating the goals of the UN Security Council Resolution 2250 ("Youth, Peace and Security") into the security agenda for SEE.

- ***EU/NATO:*** Exploiting fully the mandates of EUFOR and KFOR when politically and security-wise indispensable.

- ***EU countries/NATO countries:*** Increasing the resilience of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Kosovo by expanding the bilateral security cooperation.

- ***NATO:*** Institutionalizing a WB Hybrid Resilience Task Force.

- ***NATO:*** Negotiating a political formula that would let Kosovo join the "Partnership for Peace" (PfP).

- ***EU Commission:*** Defining red lines and end state parameters for a comprehensive Kosovo-Serbia settlement.

- **_EU Commission:_** Addressing the political crisis in Serbia by support-
  ing the conduct of free and fair parliamentary elections as well as by
  ending the policy of appeasement towards authoritarian practices.

- **_Kosovo government:_** Institutionalizing crisis communication channels
  with KFOR and Serbia.

Situation Analysis

For the region of SEE, in particular the WB, to move toward lasting stabil-
ity and European integration, a robust, cooperative security framework is
essential. There are common interests in many transnational security areas
such as fighting organized crime, irregular migration and demographic chal-
lenges. Nevertheless, by mid-2025, we can only speak of a partially func-
tioning system of cooperative security in SEE. This is due to differing secu-
rity perceptions of neighboring countries, which are exacerbated by increas-
ing geopolitical antagonisms.

It is much easier for Albania, Croatia, North Macedonia and Montenegro
to cooperate with each other on security policy within the framework of
their NATO membership than it is for the non-NATO members BiH,
Kosovo and Serbia. Bilateral tensions among NATO members in the WB
are the exception. Those in the case of Croatia and Montenegro can be
traced back to the growing political influence of Belgrade and Serbian na-
tionalist parties on and within Montenegro. North Macedonia's further EU
path is challenged by unresolved identity issues, which have been raised by
neighboring NATO member Bulgaria.

The central challenges for and to regional security in the WB remain excep-
tional, however. Without consolidation of BiH as a functioning multi-
ethnic state (with constructive relations between Croatia, Serbia and BiH)
and normalization of the conflictprone relations between Belgrade and
Pristina, a state of cooperative security in the region cannot be fully estab-
lished. The internal polarization between authoritarian and democratic cur-
rents in Serbia, an important WB actor, also blocks such a positive process.

In view of the ongoing regional risks, the continued presence of the peace
support missions EUFOR Althea in BiH and Kosovo Force (KFOR) with

a robust mandate remains necessary. Those mandates must not be diluted under any circumstances, as further separatist measures by the current political leadership of the BiH entity Republika Srpska can be assumed. In Kosovo, the security situation is particularly tense in the mainly Serbian inhabited north, where the Kosovar government is trying to assert state sovereignty with little political consideration for the local population. The latter was previously mainly under the political control of Belgrade and had no opportunities for autonomous political decisionmaking.

Regardless of existing conflicts, international organizations and regional initiatives are making substantial contributions to regional security cooperation in SEE. In addition to its responsibility for the KFOR mission, NATO supports security reforms in BiH and military cooperation with neighboring countries through its NATO Headquarters in Sarajevo. The NATO Liaison Office in Belgrade plays an important role in Serbia's participation in the PfP program. The EU, in turn, is in command of the EUFOR mission and continues to assist rule of law reforms in Kosovo through the EULEX mission. In many areas, the goals and measures of international organizations to boost security cooperation in SEE overlap. In particular, there is a high degree of complementarity between the activities of the EU and the OSCE when it comes to supporting law enforcement agencies, democratic grassroots initiatives and the fight against transnational crime.

Regional platforms such as the RCC, based in Sarajevo, or the Center for Security Cooperation RACVIAC near Zagreb make a major contribution to advancing security cooperation through concrete projects. However, their important contributions to confidence-building in security policy are often not visible enough due to political antagonisms. Issues such as regional arms control dealt with by RACVIAC could, however, become more important again in the near future, as modern weapons such as drones are also being acquired in SEE, which were not yet addressed in the subregional arms control agreements resulting from the Dayton Peace Agreement from 1995. However, human security issues must not be neglected in the WB's only semi-consolidated societies either. In this context, regional experts particularly emphasize the role of youth, which is also at the heart of UN Resolution 2250 (Youth, Peace and Security).

Policy Recommendations

With Reference to the Entire Region

- **To SEE governments:** Resolve bilateral matters in a constructive and timely fashion and refrain from inappropriate interference in internal matters of neighboring countries, thus creating a supportive environment for EU-integration processes.

- **To EU Commission:** Bilateral issues between candidate countries and EU member states should be removed from the EU enlargement framework, especially when these disputes fall outside the scope of EU law and accession criteria. Instead, such issues should be addressed through international legal mechanisms. For example, territorial disputes could be resolved through international arbitration or the International Court of Justice. Disputes concerning minority rights should be addressed by the European Court of Human Rights or other appropriate international bodies.

- **To RCC:** Support the construction of a multilateral security coordination hub involving all Western Balkan countries. This center would facilitate real-time intelligence sharing, joint training exercises, and rapid response coordination to regional threats such as organized crime, terrorism, and cyberattacks. It would also help align national security strategies with EU and NATO standards.

- **To SEE governments:** In order to better leverage your membership in regional security initiatives take a more proactive role in shaping the agendas and priorities of these organizations. Additionally, enhance intergovernmental cooperation and coordination to guide the strategic direction of these initiatives and improve national-level participation.

- **To OSCE and RACVIAC:** Against the backdrop of the introduction of modern weapon systems in SEE, facilitate a dialogue of the parties to the Article IV Agreement on Sub-Regional Arms Control, based in Annex 1-B of the General Framework Agreement for Peace in BiH, in support of a possible adaptation of this Agreement.

- **To EU Commission and OSCE:** Enter into a structured co-operation that includes regular consultations and coordination, reinforcing each institution's added value. Such a structured co-operation should encompass a financial portfolio to support OSCE efforts in supporting the authorities in the region to meet OSCE commitments, often complementary to the values and the acquis of the EU.

- **To EU Commission and OSCE:** Promote political dialogue and confidence-building measures by creating forums for regional parliamentarians, civil society, and youth to engage in regional peacebuilding.

- **To EU and NATO:** Integrate the goals of the UN Security Council Resolution 2250 ("Youth, Peace and Security") into your security agenda for SEE by including youth representatives in all aspects of regional peace processes.

- **To NATO:** Institutionalize a Western Balkans Hybrid Resilience Task Force to counter cyber and disinformation threats. Host an annual tabletop exercise focusing on joint cyber incident response and strategic communications coordination among KFOR, allied cyber teams and Balkan countries teams.

With Reference to Peace Support Missions

- **To EU and NATO:** Strengthen your cooperation under the Berlin Plus Agreement, in support of an effective and full implementation of the EUFOR mandate in accordance with Annex 1-A of the Dayton Peace Agreement. Troop contributing nations should abstain from determining caveats, which limit the operational utilization of assets provided to EUFOR and KFOR.

- **To EU and NATO:** EUFOR and KFOR should be encouraged to exploit their mandates fully when politically and security wise indispensable.

- **To NATO:** Maintain the current force strength (> 4,000 troops) and over the horizon reserve able to surge quickly during possible crises such as the May 2023 Zveçan/Zvečan riots, or September 2023 Banjska terrorist attack.

With Reference to Albania

- **To the Albanian government:** For the purpose of a constructive regional approach, a paternalistic policy towards Kosovo should be avoided.

With Reference to BiH

- **To the BiH institutions and the High Representative:** Ensure the functional system of rule of law in BiH, capable of enforcing the verdicts of the courts, regardless of unprincipled threats of political instability.

With Reference to BiH and Kosovo

- **To EU and NATO countries:** In order to increase the resilience of BiH and Kosovo, which are blocked internally and/or externally with regard to their NATO accession aspirations, bilateral security cooperation in the areas of training and the establishment of sophisticated security and defense systems should be expanded.

With Reference to Kosovo

- **To NATO:** Negotiate a formula that would let Kosovo join the "Partnership for Peace", similarly with the one that enabled Kosovo to sign the "Stabilization and Association Agreement" with the EU.

- **To EU:** Agree on a single political narrative on Kosovo's EU future. The position of the five non-recognizing members on Kosovo's status dilute the Union's mediation leverage. Brussels should find a solution with those states to remove objections for Kosovo's candidate status, aiming for a coordinated stance by the 2027 enlargement review.

- **To the Kosovo government:** Expand outreach to non-recognizers through diplomatic campaigns, emphasizing the importance of a consolidated Kosovo for regional security.

- **To the Kosovo government:** Deliver commitments and operationalize the "Association of Serb Majority Municipalities" (ASMM). To this end, send immediately the EU Draft Statute of the ASMM to the Constitutional Court for review.

- **To the Kosovo government:** Institutionalize crisis communication channels with KFOR and Serbia. Establish liaison teams, joint patrols and joint incident prevention protocols along the border with Serbia.

With Reference to Kosovo and Serbia

- **To EU Commission:** Disburse resources from the "EU Growth Plan" funds to Kosovo and Serbia, grant candidate status to Kosovo and open accession clusters in parallel with the verified fulfilment of key steps from the Brussels/Ohrid Agreement (2023) on the normalization of bilateral relations.

- **To EU Commission:** Adopt a concise set of EU "Guiding Principles" for a comprehensive Kosovo–Serbia settlement. Define red lines and end state parameters (e.g., no return to pre-2008 arrangements, mutual recognition of sovereignty, no partition or territorial exchange, and non-majority community protections), including EU Verification and Dispute Resolution Mechanisms.

With Reference to Montenegro

- **To the Montenegrin government:** Encourage the intensification of bilateral talks on pending issues with Croatia to maintain the pace of accession and avoid blockades in the process.

- **To the Croatian government:** Continue supporting Montenegro's EU accession process by sharing experiences and knowledge, as well as engaging in bilateral talks that should help resolving existing bilateral disputes and prevent delays in the process.

With Reference to North Macedonia

- **To the government of North Macedonia:** Stick to the requirements of the European Commission on the introduction of Bulgarians in the country's constitution as a constituent people alongside with Roma, Croats, Serbs, Vlachians and others.

- **To the EU Commission and facilitating countries of the 2022 French Proposal:** Provide firm guarantees that the constitutional inclusion of Bulgarians will be the final resolution of bilateral disputes with Bulgaria.

- **To the government of North Macedonia:** With regard to the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, practice a comprehensive approach that balances internal political unity, regional diplomacy, and ethnic equality. By addressing both internal and external challenges, North Macedonia should create a more inclusive society, overcome the effects of external interference, and ensure the long-term stability of the country.

With Reference to Serbia

- **To EU Commission:** End the appeasement policy towards authoritarian practices of the current political leadership in Serbia – otherwise the loss of credibility of the EU within the region and beyond will irretrievably damage the other WB-5 and the EU as the flagship organization within Europe.

- **To EU Commission:** Constructively address the political crisis in Serbia by supporting the conduct of free and fair parliamentary elections.

- **To EU Commission:** Call upon the government of Serbia to immediately cease all measures that undermine university autonomy and target university employees who have expressed solidarity with Serbian students.

- **To EU Commission:** Adopt a more principled and conditional approach to Serbia's accession path. Non-alignment with the EU's Com-

mon Foreign and Security Policy, particularly on major geopolitical issues, should trigger a formal pause in accession negotiations until progress is made.

- **To EU Commission:** Assess rule of law reforms according to tangible outcomes (judicial independence, the prosecution of high-level corruption etc.) and not only according to the introduction of technical or legislative steps.

List of Abbreviations

A5	Adriatic Charter
ASMM	Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities
ATGM	Anti-Tank Guided Missile
AU	African Union
BiH	Bosna i Hercegovina/Bosnia and Herzegovina
CEFTA	Central European Free Trade Agreement
CiO	Chair-in-Office
COMEUFOR	Commander of the European Union Force
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CRM	Common Regional Market
CSBMs	Confidence- and Security-building Measures
CSDP	Common Security and Defense Policy
CSE	Cooperative Security Environment
CSFP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organisation
C-WMD	Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction
DCB	Defense Capacity Building
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization & Reintegration
DPA	Dayton Peace Accord
DPPI	Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative
DPPI SEE	Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative for South-Eastern Europe
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
DUI	Democratic Union for Integration/Bashkimi Demokratik për Integrim
ECtHR	European Court of Human Rights
e.g.	exempli gratia/for example
EU	European Union
EUFOR	European Union Force
EULEX	European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo
EUTM	European Union Training Mission
EUTM RCA	European Union Training Mission in the Central African Republic
FPU	Formed Police Unit

GCYPS	Global Coalition on Youth, Peace & Security
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GFP	Global Firepower
HDZ	Hrvatska demokratska zajednica/Croatian Democratic Union
HDZ BiH	Hrvatska demokratska zajednica Bosne i Hercegovine/ Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina
HQ	Headquarters
HR	High Representative
IcSP	Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace
i.e.	id est/that is
IISG	Integrative Internal Security Governance
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
IT	Information Technology
JAT	Jugoslovenski Aerotransport/ Yugoslav Airlines
KFOR	Kosovo Force
KP	Kosovo Police
KSF	Kosovo Security Force
MAG	Multinational Advisory Group
MARRI	Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative
MPs	Members of Parliament
NAPs	National Action Plans
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
n.d.	no date
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
OHR	Office of the High Representative
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PBF	Peacebuilding Fund
PfP	Partnership for Peace
PfPC	Partnership for Peace Consortium
PM	Prime Minister

PVE	Preventing Violent Extremism
PwrIndx	Power Index
RACVIAC	Regional Arms Control Verification and Implementation Assistance Centre/ Centre for Security Cooperation
RCA	Central African Republic
RCC	Regional Cooperation Council
RS	Republika Srpska/Serbian Republic
RT	Russia Today
RTS	Radio televizija Srbije/ Radio Television of Serbia
RYCO	Regional Youth Cooperation Office
SALW	Small Arms and Light Weapons
SAM	Surface to Air Missile
SASE	Safe and Secure Environment
SEDM	South-East Europe Defense Ministerial
SEE	South-Eastern Europe
SEECP	South East European Cooperation Process
SFOR	Stabilization Force
SIPA	State Investigation and Protection Agency
SNS	Srpska napredna stranka/ Serbian Progressive Party
SOC	Serbian Orthodox Church
SOPs	Standard Operating Procedures
SSG	Security Sector Governance
SuuS	Student u svakom selu/ Student in Every Village
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNOY	United Network of Young Peacebuilders
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
US/USA/U.S.	United States of America
VIP	Very Important Person
VMRO-DPMNE	Vnatrešna Makedonska Revolucionerna Organizacija-Demokratska Partija za Makedonsko Nacionalno Edinstvo/Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity

WB	Western Balkan
WBBSi	Western Balkans Border Security Initiative
WBCS	Western Balkans Cybersecurity
WBCSCi	Western Balkan Counter Serious Crime Initiative
WBCTi	Western Balkan Counter-Terrorism Initiative
WMDs	Weapons of Mass Destruction
WPS	Women, Peace & Security
YIHR	Youth Initiative for Human Rights
y.o.	years old
YPI	Youth Promotion Initiative
YPS	Youth, Peace and Security
YSOs	Youth-serving Organizations

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Perceptions matter! This statement applies above all to the area of security relations, especially in a region such as South East Europe, which has not yet fully overcome the difficult legacy of conflict from past wars.

The articles in this volume provide an excellent overview of the security perceptions of the six Western Balkan states in geopolitically antagonistic times. They highlight important contributions by international organisations and regional initiatives to improve security cooperation in South East Europe and analyse the obstacles to such cooperation.

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