The Western Balkans 2024: Assessment of the Current Security Posture and Geopolitical Challenges

Edited by Tanya L. Domi

AUSTRIA

HUNGARY

MOL.

SLOVENIA

ROMANIA

CROATIA

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

SERBIA

Adriatic Sea

ITALY

MONTENEGRO

KOSOVO

BULGARIA

NORTH MACEDONIA

Tyrrhenian Sea

ALBANIA

TURKEY

GREECE

Aegean Sea

Mediterranean Sea

NEW LINES INSTITUTE
FOR STRATEGY AND POLICY

The Western Balkans 2024:
Assessment of the Current Security Posture and Geopolitical Challenges

Contents

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not an official policy or position of the New Lines Institute.

Our mission is to provoke principled and transformative leadership based on peace and security, global communities, character, stewardship, and development.

Our purpose is to shape U.S. foreign policy based on a deep understanding of regional geopolitics and the value systems of those regions.

Foreword

Amid rising Russian aggression in Eurasia, the Western Balkans have disproportionately felt the effects of regional destabilization, along with a heightened urgency for Euro-Atlantic integration. With Kosovo and Serbia embroiled in border skirmishes, and interethnic tensions rising throughout the region, forces of political polarization, ethnonationalism, and secessionist movements are posing a growing threat to stability and peace in the Western Balkans.

Both the region's geopolitical relations with Russia and China and its domestic challenges pose barriers to peace and stability. In Montenegro, ongoing illicit activities, institutional corruption, and criminal networks pose a threat to the rule of law and governance – a threat exacerbated by the resurgence of authoritarianism throughout the region. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, EUFOR's mission of maintaining a "safe and secure environment" lacks sufficient deterrent capabilities, manpower, and artillery to fully execute its mission. North Macedonia's identity insecurity is often subject to exploitation by domestic and foreign actors, spreading apathy and disillusionment among the population. Although economies of care are primary factors of sustainable peace in post-conflict contexts, women across the Western Balkans remain disadvantaged by gender discrimination in health care, education, and economic mobility. Meanwhile, Serbia and Kosovo's deficits in the rule of law and challenges in normalization talks have hindered the countries' pursuit of EU membership, resulting in a continued state of EU enlargement fatigue.

The New Lines Institute's Western Balkans Observatory draws on an expert roster of academics, journalists, and former policymakers to identify emerging crises in the Balkans and offer policy solutions for sustainable peace and security. In this monograph, we examine the contemporary security posture in the Western Balkans through lenses of EU integration, rule of law, ethnic and religious tensions, and feminist security studies. We hope that this report, in providing insights on geopolitical challenges and security issues in the Western Balkans, will spur policies to promote peace and stability in the region and avert further threats to its security posture in the near future.

Dr. Azeem Ibrahim, OBE
Senior Director of the Mass Atrocities and International Law Portfolio
The New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy
Washington, D.C.

Acknowledgment

About the Editor

Tanya L. Domi is a senior nonresident fellow at the New Lines Institute, and a professor at Columbia University's Harriman Institute, where she teaches "Human Rights in the Western Balkans" and "The Great Powers & the Balkans after the Fall of Yugoslavia." She is also the president of the advisory board at the Post-Conflict Research Center in Sarajevo.

Bosnia and Herzegovina at a Euro-Atlantic Crossroads: Introducing a 'New Security' Pact

Ismet Fatih Čančar

Introduction

A four-day tour in November 2023 to the Western Balkans by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg started in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). The visit was marked by clear messages of support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Bosnian state and concern over rising Russian influence in the country. Stoltenberg's statements are a result of a continuous effort by NATO to curb foreign malign influence after its recognition of BiH as a possible frontier for Russian activities following the invasion of Ukraine.

Besides statements, the visit reaffirmed NATO's commitment to the newly established Defence and Related Security Capacity Building Initiative (DCB) package, which together with the renewal of the European Union Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina (EUFOR) mandate by the U.N. Security Council, should serve ready to guarantee stability in BiH. However, this stability has been continuously threatened by rising divisive rhetoric supplemented by secessionist politics of the leadership of the Moscow-backed Republika Srpska (RS), one of the two entities established under the Dayton Agreement. These activities, best illustrated by the constant political calls for the dissolution of

the Bosnian state, threaten to undermine stability and weaken reforms, which will lead to a [new crisis](#) for NATO in Europe. They also represent a challenge for EUFOR in responding to any possible conflict. Threats to peace and security in BiH underline the importance of Euro-Atlantic integration and require clear, cohesive cooperation between NATO and EUFOR in the country.

This scenario raises questions over the status of BiH's accession to NATO, BiH's security situation in light of Russian actions in the Western Balkans, and EUFOR's mandate and limitations in providing a safe and secure environment. In responding to these questions, NATO can take several measures to assist BiH to enhance its own security and defense posture in the Western Balkans. These include a forward-thinking quadrilateral "New Security" pact for BiH, a strategic framework of investment opportunities that would bolster the defense industry in the country, and a strict follow-up on the existing DCB package.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's NATO Status

NATO sees the Western Balkans, and BiH at the center of it, as [strategically important](#) to a free and peaceful Europe. Likewise, BiH has recognized Euro-Atlantic integration as a strategic objective and has a [long-standing relationship](#) with NATO. The country joined the Partnership for Peace program in 2006 and was invited to join the Membership Action Plan in 2010. As part of NATO's response to countries at risk following the invasion of Ukraine, the alliance in 2023 created and adopted a [DCB package](#) aimed at further building BiH's capacities and enhancing its resilience in the face of foreign malign influence. The package, valued at between $48 million and $53 million, focuses on strengthening the country's defense with nine projects and its security apparatus with three projects in cyber defense, crisis management, and counterterrorism. In the next five years, the package implementation will contribute to the strengthening of NATO standards and practices in BiH while further ensuring military interoperability between the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina (AFBiH) and NATO forces in joint exercises, peacekeeping missions, or any other needs.

BiH, in its relations with NATO, is both a security consumer and a security provider, for the region and the alliance alike. In 2022, the AFBiH [underwent](#) NATO Operational Capabilities Concept Evaluation and Feedback, certifying the approximately 1,100-member Light Infantry Battalion group to NATO combat readiness standards. This allows the AFBiH to directly contribute to NATO's deterrence posture across the continent. Furthermore, through regular Partnership for Peace activities, BiH has declared several assets and forces available to the alliance, especially in the field of explosive ordinance disposal, where it has a niche specialty in the NATO pool of forces. The country's NATO-accredited Peace Support Operations Training Centre offers regular training on a wide number of topics to NATO and partner countries, while the AFBiH [participates](#) in a number of high-level military exercises such as [Swift Response '21](#). Additionally, the AFBiH has [regularly contributed](#) to peacekeeping missions across the world, from Afghanistan and Iraq to the Central African Republic and Democratic Republic of Congo.

Despite these efforts, BiH's accession to NATO is incomplete. RS President Milorad Dodik, a staunch ally of Moscow, has used the Dayton Agreement's constitutional power-sharing arrangement, which allows veto power over state-level decisions, to block any Euro-Atlantic integration. This approach is [coordinated](#) with support from Russia, which has on several occasions [openly](#) [threatened](#) the Bosnian state if it chooses to follow the NATO path. In addition to instilling fear and intimidation in the country with a Ukrainian scenario, Russia's goal is to keep BiH in a constant position of unpreparedness and insecurity in which it cannot fully defend itself in the event of a new conflict. The stagnation of BiH's NATO accession and constant state of uncertainty is a deliberate strategy aimed at excluding BiH from the Euro-Atlantic community.

Regional Threats to BiH

Moscow sees Dodik's efforts to undermine Western support for BiH's NATO and EU path as part of a [larger geopolitical mosaic](#), drawing attention further away from the Russian invasion of Ukraine and challenging the guiding principle of Balkans regional order enshrined in Euro-Atlantic integration. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in November 2023 [warned](#) of Moscow's "long plan" to "invest in making

sure one country in the Balkans is at war with another" to further distract the West, which already is spread thin across the world.

In this capacity, Dodik is [Russia's most loyal Balkan client](). He has [visited]() Vladimir Putin [twice]() during the ongoing invasion of Ukraine and has [awarded]() the Russian president with a medal of honor for "patriotic concern" for RS. The synchronized approach between Dodik and Putin is an attempt to [further disintegrate]() BiH using constant [attacks]() on its political and territorial integrity as well as [unravelling]() the [judicial system]() by establishing a series of parallel institutions to roll back state [authority]().

RS leadership has attempted to justify its actions by building an Islamophobic narrative of rampant fundamentalism. For example, a recent [letter]() from RS representatives in the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH to the U.S. Congress claimed BiH has long been a haven for radical Islamists and that parts of the country are inhabited by al Qaeda and Islamic State group sleeper cells. This tactic has been used previously, including during the 1990s war, to [justify]() aggression toward BiH as a common way of defending Christianity and European culture and [aligning views]() against a mutual enemy. Such rhetoric of intolerance has real, tragic consequences, best reflected in the [rising]() [number]() of [attacks]() on predominantly Bosniak returnees in the RS with the aim of further dehumanizing Bosnian Muslims. It normalizes these events and makes further attacks acceptable for any new escalation.

Part of the axis of threats to BiH is also burdened by Serbian ultranational irredentism. It is supported by the ideology of "Greater Serbia" – today rebranded as Srpski Svet ("Serbian World") – which advocates for the [unification]() of all ethnic Serbs in the Western Balkans in [one land](). Redrawing borders in the region represents an existential threat to BiH, NATO, and European security because it targets the basic pillar of the Washington Treaty: the inviolability and sovereignty of territorial borders.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić maintains good relations with Russia. Serbia remains the only country in Europe other than Belarus not to impose sanctions on Russia, and the state continues with its

[procurement]() of military weapons from both Russia and [China](). Most recently, it was a [batch]() of Mi-35 military helicopters from Cyprus, [together]() with artillery and other equipment. With [strong connections]() to the Kremlin and [unconditional support]() for [RS]() and Dodik, Belgrade has staked its position as a regional [hegemon]() that can foment violence in the region at will. Vučić's latest [statements]() predicting that 2024 will bring more conflicts in RS and Kosovo are not accidental.

A September 2023 attack on the [Kosovar village]() of [Banjska]() by a paramilitary force that had trained at a Serbian military base, and which Kosovo officials claim that Serbia was prepared to use as justification to annex northern Kosovo, can offer a blueprint. It remains plausible that a similar attack from a paramilitary group could be perpetrated on BiH by [private contractors](), ex-special forces members, and [volunteers](), with [logistical and tactical support]() from local RS authorities and [training and equipment]() from Russia and Serbia. Such an attack would inflict significant damage to Bosnian security and statehood while providing enough cover for deniability, as was the case in Banjska.

The possibility of such a scenario raises questions over NATO's response and EUFOR's readiness.

Political and Strategic Limitations of EUFOR

Operation Althea, formally known as EUFOR, is the only EU land operation with an executive mandate. Its mission of maintaining a "safe and secure environment" is part of the military implementation of the Dayton Agreement under Annex 1A. Since 2004, it has succeeded the NATO's IFOR and SFOR missions and is annually renewed in the U.N. Security Council under Chapter 7 of the U.N. Charter.

Critics have [long warned]() that the mission lacks credible deterrent capabilities and has insufficient capacity to fully execute its mandate in BiH. Indeed, EUFOR started in 2004 with a contingent of 3,500 personnel that was reduced to roughly 600 troops by 2016, after Brexit and the departure of British troops from the mission. Only in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the potential for instability spillover, has EUFOR [decided to deploy]() an additional 500 personnel.

However, this remains insufficient for BiH's security. As has been widely discussed, the force lacks in both size and means. The current number of approximately 1100 troops cannot effectively cover the necessary ground across BiH in potential conflict areas – for example Zvornik, Brčko, Višegrad, Foča and Sarajevo – simultaneously. Moreover, the force has insufficient armor, no heavy weaponry, and not enough helicopters to quickly move forces and equipment, rendering the mission incapable of containing a serious escalation.

EUFOR uses 19 Liaison and Observation Teams throughout BiH for intelligence-gathering and situational awareness. However, it remains unknown how effective these teams would be in a medium- to large-scale conflict, as gathering intelligence in real time without a significant increase in surveillance and reconnaissance capacities would pose an additional challenge. The mission lacks in aircraft and unmanned aerial vehicles for this purpose and has so far relied on outside support for surveillance and reconnaissance to keep track of any possible movements. Therefore, the light infantry battalion would, as has been pointed out, likely focus on securing the EUFOR base in Butmir and the adjoining Sarajevo Airport for the over-the-horizon reinforcements.

Another challenge for EUFOR is internal information sharing within the EU security apparatus. To request additional troops, the EUFOR commander must assess the situation on the ground for potential danger, considering both intelligence from contributing troops and information obtained through the work of the Liaison and Observation Teams. However, the commander does not have sole authority to activate reserve, over-the-horizon, troops. This decision falls under the operations commander, the vice chief of staff at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE).

Because of internal political disagreements among some member states regarding exchange of classified information, the EU Command Element, located at Allied Joint Force Command in Naples, whose specific aim is to coordinate NATO-EU reserve forces and support the Operation Commander, is excluded from receiving regular updates on the Balkans. In practical terms, this means that the Allied Joint Force Command in Naples can share information with Brussels through the European External Action Service but cannot send updates directly to the EU Command Element or EUFOR in the country. In the case of an immediate escalation in BiH, it is likely that the situation on the ground will have changed by the time intelligence from the European External Action Service transfers through the EU military headquarters before reaching EUFOR. This creates an information-sharing vacuum in which the operations commander has crucial information coming from Naples but cannot share it with the EUFOR commander on the ground.

Besides the question of capacity, recent developments have added additional political weight to EUFOR. Starting Jan. 1, the mission was taken over by Hungary, another ally of Dodik and Vučić and a keen supporter of Putin and Russia. Hungary has been working to increase its footing in the Balkans and BiH, and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has historically harbored anti-European and ultimately anti-Bosnian attitudes, raising suspicion of credibility in its approach to BiH. Indeed, during Orban's rule, Dodik and counterpart Dragan Čović, the leader of the Croat Democratic Union, have received steady support in unraveling Bosnian statehood. The two leaders share an ideology and nationalist agenda: the pursuit of ethnically pure, homogeneous territories. In a June 2022 letter to Dodik, Orban called for "rebuilding Europe based on Christian civilization and sovereign nations," while at a press conference in 2021, in the eyes of Orban, "the challenge with Bosnia is how to integrate [into the EU] a country with 2 million Muslims." Such positions undoubtedly undermine the wider political and security context in the case of BiH and will negatively affect EUFOR's standing.

When Hungary takes command of EUFOR, it will increase both the number and the share of its soldiers and equipment in the mission. And while the chain of command within EUFOR is professional and should be devoid of bias, an international peacekeeping force, regardless of its structure, will often reflect the country it comes from. All of this creates an increased mistrust by citizens and institutions in BiH toward EUFOR and its readiness, both military and political, to protect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of BiH in the event of a conflict.

A "New Security" Pact for BiH

After the U.N. Security Council's unanimous renewal of EUFOR mission in November 2023, there is little indication that its mandate is in jeopardy in the long term. However, this is not enough to ensure strength and deterrence in BiH. As such, EUFOR should not serve as the sole guarantor of a safe and secure environment in the country. NATO is well positioned to ameliorate this goal, and there are several steps that the alliance can take in this direction.

First, while the NATO Headquarters in Sarajevo supports Operation Althea, the United Kingdom in NATO should rethink its withdrawal and instead push for an additional battalion-level deployment to EUFOR in BiH, along with necessary equipment. This would strengthen EUFOR's deterrence posture and further increase the U.K.'s footprint in the region. It would also boost EUFOR's capacity to respond to potential situations.

Additionally, NATO could help strengthen the Bosnian state's defense and security capacity. Existing capacities are met through the current DCB package, and strict NATO oversight, follow-up, and a clear timeline for implementation and usage of projects proposed by BiH is key to its success. In creating new capacities, NATO and individual alliance members can work on establishing, whether jointly or bilaterally, a framework of strategic investment opportunities into BiH's defense industry, one of the few high-value industries in the country that continually boasts record-breaking export and profit numbers. The upgrading of this industry through the transfer of technologies and production processes would enable further interoperability with NATO, strengthen the Bosnian economy, and create a domestic supply for the AFBiH. Externally, it would allow BiH to contribute to NATO with its own industry. Furthermore, signing commercial contracts with NATO partners and Bosnian defense companies fosters knowledge-sharing, not only within the industry but also within the AFBiH as the end user. But more than anything, such an investment sends an unmistakable political message of deterrence against potential aggressors.

If NATO wants to ensure conflict is avoided and BiH continues its slow but steady Euro-Atlantic integration, it needs a transformative strategy. A "New Security" pact — a quadrilateral strategic partnership framework consisting of the United States, United Kingdom, Turkey and Norway — could serve as a transition mechanism in safeguarding peace and security in BiH. The United States and United Kingdom share aligned positions on BiH and remain the country's most important allies. Adding Turkey, whose military already contributes troops to EUFOR, would elevate this position and enhance deterrence. Finally, Norway has been among the most ardent political, financial and military supporters of Ukraine since the Russian invasion, and it currently serves as the NATO point of contact for BiH. This positions Norway uniquely to fill out the quadrilateral pact.

If these countries were to pledge security assistance and agree to come to BiH's defense in case of attack, it likely would deter Russian adventurism in the country and would offer an ironclad environment in which BiH can focus on its defense and security priorities while developing its industry. Moreover, the quadrilateral pact would be able to focus on supporting and further developing a well-trained, well-equipped, modern and professional security and defense establishment in the country. Once BiH uses the transition mechanisms to fulfill needed reforms within the DCB and adopt further standards and practices of NATO, it will be able to significantly contribute to the deterrence and defense posture of the alliance.

Finally, it is rumored that during his visit, Stoltenberg conveyed to the country's presidency that BiH cannot become a member state with its current constitutional arrangement. While expected, demystifying unrealistic expectations for Bosnian leaders will affect calculations. Currently, achieving consensus for integration, as Stoltenberg reportedly insists on, is an unattainable goal, and the Kremlin, with support from Belgrade and Banja Luka, will make sure this remains the case. It is a quagmire that will chip away at the security of the country, and consequently the stability of Europe and the Euro-Atlantic alliance. To maintain the ability of Russian proxies to block BiH's NATO integration has become the most efficient platform for the permanent incorporation of Russian geostrategic interests in the Balkans. This will open a vacuum with possibilities for Russian and Chinese influence that will naturally encourage further divisive

rhetoric, secessionist goals, and Serbian nationalism for an aggressive policy toward their neighbors, an unsustainable position for NATO both in terms of its interest in BiH's security and its wider interest in countering Russia in Europe.

This does not imply that NATO should integrate BiH under its current constitution. Indeed, the return of a militant ethnocracy in Europe could easily produce new hotspots across the continent in pursuit of ethno-national exclusivity. The ethno-national exclusivity in BiH's constitution was incorporated into the Dayton Agreement as a painful compromise to stop aggression against the country and save lives. As such, the Dayton Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina is a sui generis creation of the international community which, after 28 years, cannot meet European human rights standards nor security standards needed for NATO membership. This is now made obvious, the former by the [frequent verdicts of the European Court of Human Rights against BiH](#), and the latter by the latest comments of the NATO secretary general.

Stoltenberg's words are constructive for BiH's sovereign interests, if NATO members are ready to [support amending the country's constitution](#). This entitles a categorical Dayton revision, in accordance with principles of European democracy, while fulfilling the necessary transformation that will enable BiH to replace its outdated "consensus" decision-making for NATO integration. The above quadrilateral security pact would enable a safe environment, political cohesion and further encouragement for Bosnian leadership to embark on the final categorical constitutional reform necessary for the progress of the state. Among other things, it would ensure the security and defense of the Bosnian state against possible escalations if it were to come under attack from internal or external actors. It would also cut at the root of the Russian proxies' skillful use of constitutional mechanisms to continue hindering BiH's Euro-Atlantic progress and extinguish RS's agenda of secessionism.

The citizens of BiH and its international partners have an obligation to support a revision of the Dayton Agreement. Therefore, a prudent political and military engagement of NATO that ultimately will lead to full membership remains vital for Bosnia and Herzegovina in securing long-term peace and stability in the Balkans. Every other alternative gives more space for the region to become Moscow's next theater of disruption in Europe.

Ismet Fatih Čančar is a political economist and a researcher. He's currently a doctoral student at the International University of Sarajevo and an International Strategy Forum 2024 Fellow. He is a former Partnership for Peace Fellow at the NATO Defense College and served as an adviser to the minister of security of Bosnia and Herzegovina. He has published on issues of Western Balkans, Bosnia and Herzegovina, U.S. policy toward the region, and energy security for numerous outlets, including RUSI, The National Interest, New Eastern Europe, Just Security, CEPA, NATO Defense College, and others.

Sources: NED, ESRI
© 2024, The New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy

From Crisis Management to Stability and Integration:
Navigating Kosovo's Security Landscape

Prepared by Dr. Ramadan Ilazi and Leureta Lumi
(Kosovo Center for Security Studies–KCSS)

Introduction

Growing ethnic tensions in Kosovo have prompted changes in the country's security landscape in recent years, leading to shifts in the roles of the Kosovo Police, Kosovo Security Force (KSF), and NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR). Kosovo's defense and law enforcement apparatus has evolved, from the legal frameworks governing the Kosovo Police's autonomy to strategic advancements in the KSF. The country is particularly seeing ethnic tensions in the north, where a

terrorist attack on the village of Banjska in September 2023 has had severe repercussions.

The delicate balance among Kosovo's aspirations for NATO membership, evolving regional dynamics, the enduring Kosovo-Serbia dispute, and the intricacies of community trust in the Kosovo Police are crucial to understanding the country's challenges. The complexities surrounding the integration of the north into Kosovo's security framework and the effect of trust disparities on law enforcement underscore the

From Crisis Management to Stability and Integration:
Navigating Kosovo's Security Landscape –
Dr. Ramadan Ilazi and Leureta Lumi

NEW LINES INSTITUTE
FOR STRATEGY AND POLICY

10

nuanced nature of regional security issues. How the international community – particularly NATO and the EU – responds to growing tensions and security challenges in Kosovo matters for the stability of the entire Western Balkans.

Kosovo's Evolving Security Landscape

Kosovo's security situation remains complex, exacerbated in recent years by persistent ethnic tensions. The November 2022 resignations of the mayors of the ethnic Serbian majority municipalities North Mitrovica, Zvecan, Leposavić, and Zubin Potok, followed by the swearing in of their ethnic Albanian replacements in April and May 2023, sparked the most recent increase in tensions. The United States, France, Italy, Germany, and the United Kingdom, commonly referred to as the Quint, issued a joint public statement condemning "Kosovo's decision to force access to municipal buildings in northern Kosovo despite our call for restraint." A few days after this statement, the NATO-led KFOR peacekeeping force in Kosovo reported its troops sustained injuries during clashes with ethnic Serbs who were attempting to take over municipal offices. The United States announced punitive measures against Kosovo for disregarding its advice to avoid escalating tensions, criticizing its use of force and barring it from joining a U.S.-led military exercise in Europe.

There were other warnings about the potential for violence and destabilization in northern Kosovo from civil society reports. A scenario-planning exercise by civil society in Kosovo had forecast these developments more than a year before the Sept. 24, 2023, Banjska attack, which represented a culmination of the growing tensions. Masked gunmen ambushed a police patrol, killed one officer and injured another. Milan Radojičić, the deputy leader of the Serb List, the largest party representing Serbs in Kosovo, publicly claimed responsibility for the attack. U.S. Ambassador to Kosovo Jeffrey Hovenier said an organized structure or entity seemed to be behind the attack, and the European Parliament approved a resolution calling it a terrorist attack and demanding accountability from Serbia.

The Banjska attack and the prevailing instability in the north of Kosovo serve the strategic interests of

Russia, aligning with its active efforts to undermine the influence of the EU, U.S., and NATO in the Western Balkans. Russia aims to impede the integration of the region into the EU and NATO and to divert attention from Ukraine by creating new conflicts. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has publicly asserted that "Russia is preparing for war in the Balkans." Central to Russia's agenda is the exposure of NATO as a weak security actor and the portrayal of the EU as an unreliable partner. The situation in Kosovo, particularly in the north and its close ties with Serbia, presents an opportunity for Russia to advance its interests.

Ongoing disputes with Serbia and the persistence of ethnic tensions in the north, including issues related to vehicle registration plates and identity cards, continue to strain relations, diverting attention from broader governance, economic, and human security concerns shared by Kosovar Albanians and Serbs.

A strong sense of hopelessness pervades Kosovo with respect to a sustainable and meaningful resolution of the dispute with Serbia and integration of the Serbian community. A survey conducted in early 2023 by the International Republican Institute found that 25% of Kosovars believe Kosovo is further away from normalizing relations with Serbia than it was two years ago, while 34% perceive no change. A small yet notable number (11%) of Kosovars hold a pessimistic view, believing that Kosovo will never normalize relations with Serbia. More than half of the population (56%) expresses concern, ranging from somewhat worried to very worried, that current tensions with Serbia could escalate into violence, highlighting the widespread anxiety about the potential for a resurgence of hostilities and the fragile state of peace in the region. Furthermore, according to the Security Barometer from the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, 21% of Kosovars believe that a war with Serbia is somewhat or very likely, while 41% think the dialogue for normalizing relations between Kosovo and Serbia is not progressing in the right direction.

The developments in the north of Kosovo have had an impact on the interethnic relations in the country's south as well, where the Serbian community is considered more integrated compared to the north. However, there is a looming risk that the Albanian-majority community will target the

From Crisis Management to Stability and Integration:
Navigating Kosovo's Security Landscape –
Dr. Ramadan Ilazi and Leureta Lumi

NEW LINES INSTITUTE
FOR STRATEGY AND POLICY

11

vulnerable Serb minority in southern Kosovo as ethnic scapegoats if ethnic tensions in the north persist and violence returns.

Kosovo in July 2022 approved the Security Strategy 2022-2027, which outlines four vital interests: protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity, upholding constitutional order and public safety, ensuring human security and social development, and integration into Euro-Atlantic structures and other international mechanisms. The Security Strategy further states that Kosovo is committed to constructive cooperation with neighbors, notably Serbia, based on reciprocity and holds that Serbia's growing militarization poses a threat to Kosovo and the region.

In January 2021, the Kosovo Assembly unanimously approved a government proposal to deploy KSF members in international peacekeeping missions under the U.S. Central Command, following a U.S. invitation. Three months later, Kosovo sent a military platoon to Kuwait for its first international peacekeeping mission, with troops serving under the command of the National Guard of Iowa. A ceremony in Pristina, attended by top leaders and Western military attaches, marked the deployment. Kosovo saw the occasion as an important milestone marking its contribution to international peace efforts. This participation marks a significant step for Kosovo in gaining international recognition and legitimacy, allowing the country to demonstrate its commitment to Western-led security norms and values, enhancing its stature and credibility both on the international stage and with its key strategic ally, the United States. By engaging constructively in international security operations, Kosovo can indirectly contribute to easing regional tensions and fostering a more favorable environment for dialogue and normalization of relations with Serbia.

Challenges in Kosovo's Policing

The Kosovo Police, with an estimated 8,000 personnel, operates within the framework of Law No. 04/L-076, adopted by the Kosovo Assembly in 2012. This comprehensive law delineates the authorizations, duties, and organizational structure of the force and establishes the guiding principles for its activities.

Police officers also must adhere to the Police Code of Ethics. As a public service entity, the Kosovo Police functions within the Ministry of Internal Affairs, employing a unified chain of command that spans Kosovo's entire territory, though operational management rests under the direct control and supervision of the general director of the Kosovo Police. The Ministry of Internal Affairs' authority does not extend to operational aspects, emphasizing the police's day-to-day autonomy.

Financial autonomy is a crucial aspect of this independence. The Kosovo Police operates with its own budget, distinct from within the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the general director is entitled to prepare the police budget independently. This budget is then submitted to the minister for review and further processing, adhering to established legal procedures.

The First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalization of Relations, reached in 2013, included the dissolution of parallel Serb police structures in the north of Kosovo, integrating personnel into the Kosovo Police, and terminating salary payments from the Serbian budget. An Implementation Plan, introduced in May 2013, set the integration timeframe. Serbia closed police stations in July 2013, handing over equipment under a verification process led by the European Union Rule of Law Mission to Kosovo (EULEX). The Serbian government included personnel in an early retirement scheme, maintaining 60% of their salary as a pension. Serbia continues health insurance until Kosovo develops its health coverage.

Kosovo introduced the Law on Amnesty (September 2013) to facilitate the integration of Serb police personnel. In July 2013, the Police Regional Directorate covering four northern municipalities was established, and a Kosovar Serb was appointed as director for North Mitrovica. By late 2013, Kosovo Police integrated 287 former Serbian police members. A one-week orientation training familiarized them with the Kosovar legal system. Integration faced challenges, with some Serbian candidates for officer positions not passing background checks or refusing to sign a loyalty declaration. The Serbian police's civil administration was also integrated into Kosovo institutions. With this integration, Kosovo Police became the sole law enforcement agency operating throughout the country.

NEW LINES INSTITUTE
FOR STRATEGY AND POLICY

From Crisis Management to Stability and Integration:
Navigating Kosovo's Security Landscape –
Dr. Ramadan Ilazi and Leureta Lumi

12

Despite improvements in the security situation and a reduced number of ethnic incidents, other challenges like the language barrier and civil registration persist.

Kosovo's security situation, particularly in policing the north, faces two primary challenges: reintegrating the north into Kosovo's security framework and navigating trust issues with the local community. Addressing the first challenge, it's noteworthy that the 2013 agreement between Kosovo and Serbia initially achieved important results in integrating the north into Kosovo's security apparatus, consolidating the Kosovo Police as the exclusive security entity across the entire country. However, integration in northern Kosovo encountered a setback with the mass resignations of November 2022.

The situation in northern Kosovo has the potential to further deteriorate. The police resignations created a major security vacuum currently being filled by enforcers linked to organized crime groups. There also is the potential for infiltration of troops from Serbia under the pretense of maintaining order. An investigative report by a Kosovar news outlet has shed light on a concerning development in the northern municipalities of Kosovo, where illegal taxi drivers with Belgrade license plates are engaging in surveillance activities against Kosovo police officers. These drivers, equipped with gear usually reserved for law enforcement, have been linked to Radojičić, the suspected mastermind of the Banjska attack and primary suspect in the 2018 killing of Kosovo Serb politician Oliver Ivanović.

This gains additional significance against the backdrop of the 2013 agreement aimed at integrating parallel security organizations in the north of Kosovo into the Kosovo Police. The 2013 agreement was supposed to dismantle organized crime groups like Civil Protection (Civilna Zaštita) and the North Brigade (Severna Brigada), with their members joining the Kosovo Police. However, the mass resignation of Kosovo Serbs in the north from the police force in 2022 has led to widespread belief that these individuals have returned to their original, illicit activities under the guise of these organizations, as evidenced by the Kosovo government's recent designation of these groups as terrorist organizations.

The Kosovo government bolstered the deployment of specialized police units in the north, citing escalating tensions and an effort to combat organized crime. These measures have yielded significant results over the past two years, effectively disrupting the crime networks. A major development in this endeavor was the arrest of Milun "Lune" Milenković, a prominent figure in organized crime in northern Kosovo and the purported leader of the illicit "Civil Protection" group. Milenković was suspected of orchestrating attacks against NATO peacekeepers in late May. Kosovo Police also seized a lavish villa belonging to Radojičić.

Nonetheless, the heightened presence of specialized police units has created serious concerns within the local Serbian population in the north. In May 2023, concerns arose over the expropriation of land for a planned Kosovo Police station in Leposavić and Zubin Potok. Residents, highlighting potential violations of expropriation laws, have protested these plans and blocked access to the construction site with heavy machinery. The EU Office in Kosovo questioned the lack of clarity in the government's decision and demanded transparency. Kosovo Ombudsperson Naim Qelaj visited the residents of Leposavić to assess the situation regarding land expropriation before reviewing three complaints he received. In the meeting, he noted the complaints of the citizens about lack of transparency in the government's decision and their concerns about the lawfulness and implementation of legal procedures.

The situation remains sensitive, emphasizing the need for legal procedures and adequate compensation for locals, as well as communication challenges for the government with the local Serbian population. Essentially, maintaining a high presence of specialized policing units in the north of Kosovo is not a sustainable approach, and the government must find a more durable solution that recognizes the needs of the local community in the north.

According to the 2022 Security Barometer by the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, trust in the Kosovo Police varies significantly between different ethnic communities. While 77% of Kosovar Albanians express trust or complete trust in the Kosovo Police, only 14.2% of Kosovo Serbs share a similar level of confidence. A majority of Kosovo Serbs, approximately

NEW LINES INSTITUTE
FOR STRATEGY AND POLICY

From Crisis Management to Stability and Integration:
Navigating Kosovo's Security Landscape –
Dr. Ramadan Ilazi and Leureta Lumi

13

Kosovo Defense Minister Ejup Maqedonci and other Balkan and NATO leaders attend the inauguration of the Kucova Tactical Air Base – NATO's first air base in the Western Balkans, in Berat, Kosovo, on March 4, 2024. (Olsi Shehu / Anadolu via Getty Images)

60%, indicate little or no trust at all. Recent events in northern Kosovo may have exacerbated this decline in trust.

The substantial trust disparity among ethnic communities highlights a crucial challenge for the Kosovo Police, particularly in fostering a sense of security and cooperation among Kosovo Serbs. Addressing this issue is vital for several reasons. First, effective policing relies on community trust, cooperation, and the active involvement of all citizens. A lack of trust can hinder the police's ability to prevent and solve crimes. Second, trust-building is essential for maintaining public order and preventing the escalation of tensions, especially in ethnically sensitive areas like the north of Kosovo. The recent decline in trust among Kosovo Serbs may be linked to specific incidents or perceptions, making it imperative for the Kosovo Police to understand and address these concerns. Third, a disparity in trust levels can impact the legitimacy of the Kosovo Police in the eyes of the entire population. Building trust is not only a matter of effective law enforcement but it also contributes to the broader goals of community cohesion and the establishment of the rule of law. This is especially important for the efforts of the Kosovo Police and the government to fight organized crime in the north of Kosovo.

Kosovo Security Force, NATO, and Regional Stability

The KSF, an estimated 4,500-strong institution, has evolved from crisis management to a cornerstone of Kosovo's defense and security architecture since its establishment in 2008. In 2018, the Kosovo Assembly amended legislation to elevate the mandate of the lightly-armed KSF to that of an army in a vote that Kosovo Serb members of the Assembly boycotted. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg expressed regret over the law despite NATO's concerns, acknowledging that the transition is within Kosovo's prerogative but calling the timing inappropriate.

In recent years, and especially since Prime Minister Albin Kurti took office in 2021, Kosovo's defense budget has increased significantly. The KSF budget for 2024 is planned to be around 200 million euros, which represents over 2 percent of the country's GDP and a significant increase when compared to previous years. At the start of 2022, Kurti announced the establishment of the Security Fund, inviting the business community, diaspora, and citizens to contribute. The establishment of the fund, according to the government, was necessary in the wake of Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine. The Security Fund remains shrouded in secrecy, with minimal information available regarding the accumulated amount and

From Crisis Management to Stability and Integration:
Navigating Kosovo's Security Landscape –
Dr. Ramadan Ilazi and Leureta Lumi

NEW LINES INSTITUTE
FOR STRATEGY AND POLICY

14

its designated purposes. The Ministry of Defense of Kosovo asserts that the [fund will be allocated to fulfill its primary objective](): ensuring the safety of citizens and territorial defense.

In 2021, the United States donated 55 armored security vehicles to Kosovo, and the KSF used its annual military allowance of 9.7 million euros from the Turkish government to purchase [14 armored vehicles from Turkey](), including four Vuran-type and 10 KIRPI-type vehicles equipped with weapons. Additionally, in 2023, Kosovo received Turkish Bayraktar TB-2 drones. However, [NATO's KFOR mission publicly emphasized]() its primary authority over Kosovo's airspace, implying that the drones cannot be used without its consent. Despite NATO's stance on the drone acquisition, Kosovo's defense modernization arguably reflects an important step toward NATO membership.

NATO has been the leading security mechanism in Kosovo since 1999 through KFOR. However, following the declaration of independence by Kosovo in 2008, NATO started to review its mission. It assisted in disbanding the Kosovo Protection Corps and establishing the KSF, and in 2009 it shifted KFOR's posture toward deterrence. The NATO Advisory and Liaison Team (NALT), formed in 2016, provides practical support to the KSF and cooperates with the Ministry of Defense. With a focus on areas like logistics, procurement, and cyber defense, NALT plays a key role in enhanced interaction with Kosovo, aligning with the nation's aspirations for advanced relations with NATO. Kosovo's government sees access to NATO's Partnership for Peace and, ideally, a Membership Action Plan, as [essential incentives for compromising with Serbia]() on Serb-majority municipalities in Kosovo.

Amid heightened tensions and violence in the north of Kosovo, particularly after the Banjska attack, [NATO has bolstered its peacekeeping force]() with "combat power." Following the incident, a battalion of 200 troops from the United Kingdom and 100 from Romania within KFOR have been equipped with heavier armament to enhance their combat capabilities. The shift in KFOR readiness and the evaluation of the security situation in Kosovo may impact NATO's perception of Kosovo as a potential candidate for membership. This change could lead NATO to view Kosovo more as a source of crises rather than a rational actor contributing to regional stability.

The KSF is restricted from conducting missions in the north of Kosovo without the consent of KFOR. This arrangement, stipulated in a letter exchange in 2013 between Kosovo's then-Prime Minister Hashim Thaçi and then-NATO General Secretary Anders Fogh Rasmussen, was a confidence-building measure. It affirmed that the establishment of the KSF does not pose a threat to the Kosovo Serbs in the north or the mandate of NATO/KFOR in Kosovo, aligning with NATO's practical demands.

The equipment upgrades for the KSF and KFOR can also be contextualized against the backdrop of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its significant presence in Serbia, particularly within the country's security institutions.

The prompt responses from NATO and Kosovo to the Banjska attack carry a clear message, especially aimed at countering destabilization efforts in Kosovo, which might be inspired by Russia using Serbia as a proxy. It also sends a clear message to Milorad Dodik, the leader of Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, who has made no secret of his plans to secede from BiH. In other words, how NATO and the EU respond to destabilizing efforts in Kosovo has regional relevance.

For, Kosovo, NATO membership is a vital interest, especially following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, increased Russian influence in Serbia, and Serbia's interest in destabilizing the north of Kosovo. To achieve this goal, partnership with the United States is key. Since 2018, the United States has been supporting the KSF's comprehensive 10-year transition plan 2019-2027 to develop a transparent, multiethnic, professional, and NATO-interoperable territorial defense force. U.S. assistance includes leading multilateral exercises to boost confidence in the KSF, building regional trust and relationships.

The path to NATO membership for Kosovo is complicated by political factors, including the non-recognition of Kosovo's independence by four NATO member states. A potential comprehensive agreement with Serbia could alter this dynamic. However, Serbia appears uninterested in a sustainable

NEW LINES INSTITUTE
FOR STRATEGY AND POLICY

From Crisis Management to Stability and Integration:
Navigating Kosovo's Security Landscape –
Dr. Ramadan Ilazi and Leureta Lumi

15

resolution of the Kosovo dispute due to domestic nationalist pressures and the potential loss of relevance and appeasement from the EU that would come with resolving the issue.

One cost-effective way for NATO to send the right messages to Kosovo in the current context is to officially recognize and accredit a Centre of Excellence (COE) in Kosovo, such as the International Training Center for Search and Rescue in Pomozatin/Kosovo. COEs are organizations dedicated to training and educating leaders and specialists from NATO member states and partner nations. They play a crucial role in developing military doctrines, extracting insights from past experiences, enhancing the interoperability and capabilities of forces, and conducting experiments to validate new concepts. These centers are valued for their specialized knowledge and experience, contributing significantly to NATO's ongoing transformation and ensuring that the alliance does not unnecessarily replicate existing assets, resources, and capabilities.

COEs typically focus on a specific area of expertise, providing authoritative knowledge in their respective fields. Despite their close relationship with NATO, COEs operate independently from NATO's direct financial support and its command structure. They receive funding from individual or multiple nations and form part of a wider network that facilitates the sharing of information both within and outside NATO. The coordination and optimal use of COEs within NATO are overseen by the Allied Command Transformation in cooperation with the Supreme Allied Commander Europe. As of 2024, 28 COEs have been accredited by NATO in different countries.

Establishing a COE in Kosovo would provide specialized training and education for leaders and specialists, not only from Kosovo but also from NATO member and partner countries. This would enhance the capabilities and interoperability of Kosovo's security forces with NATO standards. Accreditation of a COE in Kosovo by NATO would signify recognition, validation, and support, elevating Kosovo's relations with NATO. By hosting a NATO-accredited COE, Kosovo would become a hub for international cooperation in its area of specialization. This would foster stronger relationships with NATO members and partner nations, facilitating the exchange of knowledge and best practices, and fostering a collaborative security environment.

Conclusion

Kosovo's evolving security posture reflects a dynamic interplay of internal and regional factors, as well as aspirations for NATO integration. The transformation of the KSF into a military institution, coupled with an increased defense budget and international support, underscores the nation's commitment to bolstering its security. However, the absence of normalized relations with Serbia stands out as the paramount security concern, intensifying the security dilemma and fostering instability, particularly in the north of Kosovo. The ongoing crisis in the north has prompted Kosovo to deploy specialized police units in response to violence. While these units have effectively executed their mandates, their presence has failed to instill a sense of security among the local Serb population. Addressing the aftermath of the mass resignations of Kosovo Serb police officers is an urgent imperative. Rectifying this vacuum is essential not only to restore stability but also to rebuild trust and confidence within the affected communities. Swift and comprehensive action is crucial to mitigate the repercussions of this security gap.

Recommendations for Policymakers

Strengthen partnerships: Kosovo should foster international partnerships and secure support for defense modernization. Kosovo must increase engagement with NATO and coordinate any response to the security concerns emanating from the north of Kosovo and relations with Serbia.

Address the challenges of the north of Kosovo: Develop a comprehensive strategy to reintegrate the north into Kosovo's security framework, addressing trust issues and potential infiltration risks. Explore diplomatic avenues to mitigate tensions and seek solutions to enhance security without relying solely on a high presence of specialized police units. Policing the north with these units is not sustainable. It is urgent that the Kosovo government polices the region with members of the Serbian community.

NEW LINES INSTITUTE
FOR STRATEGY AND POLICY

From Crisis Management to Stability and Integration:
Navigating Kosovo's Security Landscape –
Dr. Ramadan Ilazi and Leureta Lumi

16

Engage the community and build trust: Prioritize community engagement, particularly with Kosovo Serbs to bridge trust gaps in the Kosovo Police. Implement measures to address concerns, improve public order maintenance, and enhance the legitimacy of law enforcement. Also, provide capacity development support for the KSF, such as in the field of cybersecurity.

Increase Security Fund transparency: Ensuring that the fund's allocation aligns with strategic security priorities will enhance public trust and provide clarity on how funds contribute to Kosovo's defense capabilities.

Prepare for potential destabilization: Develop contingency plans in collaboration with NATO and the international community to address potential destabilization efforts, especially in response to heightened tensions. This preparedness should include strategic responses to events like the Banjska terrorist attack, ensuring a robust defense against destabilizing influences.

NATO should officially recognize and accredit a COE in Kosovo: The International Training Center for Search and Rescue in Pomozatin is a strong candidate to become a COE since it is already being used by NATO member states for capacity development. By accrediting a COE in Kosovo, NATO can make a cost-effective investment in strengthening its relations with Kosovo.
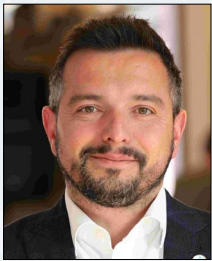
Ramadan Ilazi is currently serves as the head of research at the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies. He holds a doctorate in politics and international relations from Dublin City University in Ireland, and a master of letters in peace and conflict studies from St. Andrews University in Scotland. Previously, Ilazi held the position of Kosovo's deputy minister for European integration (2015-2016), where he was involved in supporting the process of preparing a national plan for the implementation of the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the European Union and developing the European Reform Agenda for Kosovo. His most recent book is "The European Union and Everyday Statebuilding: The Case of Kosovo" (Routledge 2022).

Leureta Lumi is a researcher at the Kosovo Center for Security Studies. She holds a master's degree in international relations from Webster University in Geneva with a focus on the European Defense Community, as well as a master's degree in diplomacy from the Geneva School of Diplomacy and International Relations with a focus on counterterrorism. Previously, Lumi served as an adviser to the minister of defense of the Republic of Kosovo, covering international cooperation.

NEW LINES INSTITUTE
FOR STRATEGY AND POLICY

From Crisis Management to Stability and Integration:
Navigating Kosovo's Security Landscape –
Dr. Ramadan Ilazi and Leureta Lumi

17

Sources: NED, ESRI
© 2024, The New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy

Fortifying Montenegro:
Navigating Security Challenges in the NATO Era

Vladimir Vučković

Introduction

Montenegro, a small Balkan country with a complex geopolitical landscape, has encountered myriad security challenges influenced by its location, history, and internal dynamics, particularly following its accession to NATO in 2017. NATO membership was aimed at bolstering Montenegro's security and defense capabilities, but it also brought to the fore new and existing security threats that require meticulous consideration and strategic planning. As a result, security challenges in Montenegro encompass a spectrum of issues that significantly affect the country's internal political stability, sovereignty, and regional security dynamics.

Montenegro's Security Tapestry

Montenegro's strategic location between the Adriatic Sea and the Western Balkans has made it

a focal point for competing geopolitical interests. The imposition of Russian and Chinese influence in Montenegro, particularly after it joined NATO, has become a significant factor in shaping the country's foreign policy, economic relations, and strategic considerations. This influence has prompted Montenegro's government to prioritize the development of effective strategies to address its diverse security challenges. The complex security situation arises from the distinct geostrategic interests of both Moscow and Beijing, which deeply affect Montenegro's geopolitical positioning and regional dynamics.

Although Russia has maintained a close and multifaceted relationship with Montenegro, rooted in cultural, historical, and economic ties, the relationship has grown more intricate in recent years, particularly following its accession to NATO. Russia has vehemently opposed NATO's enlargement in the Balkans and has resisted the EU integration process for Balkan states, perceiving it as a direct threat to its strategic interests. Consequently, heightened tensions and geopolitical competition between Russia and the Western alliance have emerged, with Montenegro in a key position. By capitalizing on various opportunities such as nationalism and identity divisions, high unemployment rates, the rise of populism, and the reinforcement of authoritarian governance, Russia consistently seeks to harness its substantial influence by undermining the core values of the EU and NATO in the Balkans. Moscow's zero-sum approach holds significant importance in its foreign policy toward the Balkans region, which plays a pivotal role in maintaining Russian influence and serves as a buffer zone where Russia aims to establish a dominant position.

In its efforts to influence internal political processes in Montenegro and undermine the credibility of the alliance and the EU, Russia has used both hard- and soft-power tactics. Moscow has shifted its Western Balkan strategy from a policy-based initiative to one capitalizing on divisions within the states. The Russian political elite actively supported a coup in Montenegro to hinder its NATO accession. In 2016, on the eve of its full membership in NATO, Montenegro accused Russia of interfering in its parliamentary elections with a plot to overthrow Prime Minister Milo

Đukanović by financially supporting the Democratic Front (DF), a Serbian right-wing populist and nationalist opposition party. Subsequently, the Montenegrin Special Prosecutor's Office initiated legal proceedings, implicating two leaders of the Democratic Front, several Serbian nationalists, and two Russian military intelligence officers in the coup attempt. Therefore, Russia's influence in Montenegro raises security concerns due to its historical ties and strategic interference in internal political processes, which have the potential to undermine regional stability and the country's alignment with Western alliances.

China's approach to the Balkans differs significantly from Russia's. China does not oppose EU and NATO enlargement into the Western Balkans; instead, it focuses on leveraging its economic power to enhance its regional influence through the Belt and Road Initiative. A prominent example of this is the "project of the century," the Bar-Boljare highway project (2014-2021), and the construction of 41 kilometers of the most challenging priority section of road connecting the towns of Smokovac, Uvač, and Mataševo, which represents a major Chinese investment in Montenegro. However, the project has sparked controversy, particularly regarding the credit agreement, which includes provisions requiring Montenegro's government to provide financial guarantees for loan repayment and stipulates arbitration procedures in the event of delays or disputes. The arrangement raises concerns about possible disputes and the country's sovereignty, as any arbitration decisions would be binding and controlled by Chinese laws.

Montenegro's significant indebtedness to China has sparked worries about its reliance on Chinese loans for critical infrastructure projects. The country has found itself in a subordinate position by relying on those loans for the completion of the remaining highway sections. Despite these concerns, Montenegro's ruling elites have welcomed China's commercial involvement, as it provides infrastructure loans without interfering in internal political processes or threatening their political legitimacy. This policy holds particular significance for China, as it anticipates Montenegro's future EU membership and aims to advocate for Chinese political interests.

Navigating Contemporary Security Challenges

Montenegro's complex security posture is shaped not only by its geopolitical position but also by the legacy of the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the subsequent conflicts in the 1990s. As a small country in the historically tense Western Balkans, it has experienced ethnic and political tensions, unresolved border disputes, and the lingering effects of past conflicts. Montenegro's history as part of the former Yugoslavia continues to shape its security environment. The complex web of historical, ethnic, and political dynamics in the Western Balkans has proven to have strong implications on internal political processes and changes in Montenegro, as it navigates its relationships with neighboring countries to maintain internal stability.

The legacy of conflict in the Balkans and the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia helped create serious problems of limited statehood issues, i.e., ethnonationalism, contested states, and secessionist movements, affecting fragile peace and stability among the post-Yugoslav states. Also, the glorification of war criminals and historical revisionism have hindered the reconciliation process and exacerbated ethnic tensions. These factors have complicated the security situation in Montenegro, especially considering its multicultural character and efforts to maintain ethnic cohesion. Interethnic tensions and political polarization in neighboring Serbia, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina also directly impact Montenegro's security. The unresolved sovereignty status of Kosovo and ongoing political-ethnic tensions between Priština and Belgrade in the context of the normalization of bilateral relations could spill over, creating security challenges that Montenegro must be prepared to address.

Another significant security threat comes in the form of potentially increased tensions with neighbors, particularly Serbia. Montenegro's participation in NATO is met with suspicion by the Serbian government, which aims to uphold its influence in Montenegro's internal political processes. This situation can exacerbate existing tensions and pose security challenges, given Serbia's active interference in Montenegrin political affairs. In recent years, Serbia has actively pursued an ideological initiative known as the "Serbian World" (Srpski Svet), with the objective of legitimizing the expansion of Serbia's political influence beyond its borders. The informal identity politics of the Serbian World is primarily driven by the actions of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) and the DF in Montenegro, as these entities hold significant sway in shaping internal political dynamics and societal transformations. The endeavor to shape a flexible Montenegrin identity in contemporary times closely aligns with the emergence of a climate marked by diverse sociopolitical crises and instabilities, spanning from large-scale anti-NATO demonstrations in 2015 to the DF-led boycott of parliamentary elections in 2016.

The Serbian World initiative has sought not only to legitimize the expansion of Serbia's political influence but has also actively promoted interethnic polarization between Serbs and Montenegrins. This deliberate fostering of ethnic divisions has contributed to the escalation of tensions and the promotion of religious animosities, creating an environment where doubts about the existence of Montenegrin national identity and its rightful claim to statehood are openly expressed and intensified. Serbia's refusal to acknowledge the results of the Montenegrin referendum and the intensified campaign of interference in Montenegro's internal affairs by Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić have further exacerbated these tensions. Serbian interference in Montenegro's 2020 parliamentary elections has raised significant concerns about Belgrade's intentions in the broader European security environment. Montenegro's NATO membership has the potential to further exacerbate these tensions, as it may be perceived as a direct challenge to Serbia's influence in the region, thereby intensifying the security implications of Montenegro's NATO membership.

During this period, Montenegro experienced other significant political-security turmoil, marked by the enactment of the Law on Religious Freedom and subsequent large-scale protests organized by the SOC and its supporters in 2019 and 2020. The law was perceived as discriminatory and specifically targeted the SOC, prompting the church, in collaboration with the DF, to orchestrate widespread public demonstrations, known as street church liturgies, to pressure the government to revoke the legislation. Following the 2020 elections, the SOC's influence

in Montenegro's sociopolitical landscape became paramount. Not only did it successfully push to amend the controversial law, it also played a pivotal role in the election of a new government led by Zdravko Krivokapić, who shared the church's preferences. The SOC's intervention in the 2020 elections not only led to the downfall of the long-standing Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS)-led government but also reinforced a perception of Serbian national identity in Montenegro, potentially amplifying security concerns stemming from the Vučić administration.

The SOC's involvement in Montenegrin politics has raised significant concerns about the erosion of Montenegro's sovereignty and the potential for increased influence from external actors, particularly Serbia. The church's ability to mobilize widespread public demonstrations and effectively shape legislative outcomes underscores the extent of its influence and the implications for Montenegro's internal security. This has not only heightened tensions within Montenegro but has also raised broader concerns about the erosion of democratic processes and the potential for external interference in the country's governance. Moreover, the SOC's intervention in the 2020 elections has deepened divisions within the country, particularly along ethnic and religious lines. The reinforcement of Serbian national identity in Montenegro, facilitated by the SOC's involvement, has the potential to exacerbate existing interethnic tensions and further complicate its security environment. This situation underscores the intricate interplay of religious, ethnic, and political dynamics and the need for a comprehensive approach to addressing Montenegro's multifaceted security challenges.

Montenegro's diverse ethnic and religious composition also presents significant security challenges. With a population comprising Montenegrins, Serbs, Bosniaks, Albanians, and other ethnic groups, as well as adherents of Orthodox, Muslim, and Catholic faiths, the potential for tensions and divisions along ethnic and religious lines to impact social cohesion and stability is a pressing concern. Historical grievances and competing national narratives further complicate this landscape. During the three-decade rule of the DPS, it consistently fostered political divisions and ethnic-religious tensions between the Serb minority and Montenegrins, as well as ethnic national minorities such as Bosniaks, Albanians, and Croats. This

approach ultimately strengthened the perception of an alternative identity among the Serb minority, reflecting a form of political resistance. The DPS-led government implemented identity policies in the post-independence period to further solidify Montenegrin self-awareness. These included the introduction of new state symbols, the recognition of the Montenegrin language, and support for the autocephaly of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church. These measures essentially resulted in a reluctance among resident Serbs to embrace Montenegro as their homeland.

The emergence of cybersecurity threats and hybrid warfare tactics poses a contemporary security challenge for Montenegro, particularly following its decision to introduce comprehensive sanctions against Russia in response to its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This decision has heightened concerns about potential cyberattacks and hybrid warfare threats targeting Montenegro's digital infrastructure and information systems.

As a small and relatively vulnerable state, Montenegro may be susceptible to such hybrid threats, including disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, and other nontraditional security challenges. The imposition of sanctions against Russia has the potential to provoke retaliation aimed at destabilizing Montenegro's institutions and society. These hybrid tactics could undermine the country's stability and security, posing significant risks in the post-NATO accession period. Given the evolving nature of hybrid warfare, which emphasizes nontraditional security challenges, a comprehensive approach to bolstering Montenegro's cybersecurity capabilities is essential. This includes investment in advanced cybersecurity infrastructure, improved information systems, and the development of robust counter-disinformation strategies to mitigate the risks posed by hybrid warfare.

Internal Challenges

Internal obstacles present significant hurdles as Montenegro pursues integration into the EU, as they substantially hinder its progress toward membership. The Western Balkans region has long been linked to organized crime networks engaged in drug and human trafficking and other illicit activities. Moreover, Montenegro has been identified as a transit route

for illicit activities, including smuggling and weapon and cigarette trafficking. The influence of organized crime groups on facets of society such as politics and the economy poses a threat to the rule of law and governance. Corruption within state institutions and the judiciary further compounds these challenges, undermining the effectiveness of security and law enforcement efforts. These criminal networks pose a significant security threat to Montenegro, as they can undermine the rule of law, diminish public trust in state institutions, and create vulnerabilities that can be exploited by external actors.

Over the past three decades, Montenegro's political landscape has undergone significant changes, leading to the resurgence of an authoritarian leadership shaped by organized crime and corruption. This form of governance, often termed "stabilitocracy," is characterized by several distinct features. First, it involves the attraction of financial and economic investments through opaque procedures with the involvement of external actors. Additionally, formal democratic institutions coexist with government elections that are conducted under semi-fair and free conditions, ultimately reinforcing clientelist and informal management methods. These practices aim to undermine democratic institutions, consolidating autocratic control.

Former President Milo Đukanović, the autocrat, has recognized the critical importance of external support for maintaining internal stability. By positioning himself as a pragmatic reformist and a guarantor of political stability, he has garnered support from the West, fortifying autocratic governance. Consequently, the presence of an unconsolidated democracy in Montenegro has provided opportunities for Đukanović's authoritarian regime to manipulate the decision-making process for personal gain and misuse government powers to ensure that political decisions align with clientelist interests.

Recommendations

Montenegro's accession to NATO has brought forth a new set of security challenges, stemming from its geopolitical environment, historical legacies, diverse ethnic and religious composition, and susceptibility to hybrid warfare, organized crime, and corruption. The

Then-Montenegrin President Milo Đukanović (left) and German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier review an honor guard on May 16, 2023, in Berlin, Germany. The two leaders discussed Montenegro's application for EU membership, among other issues. (Carsten Koall/Getty Images)

potential for heightened tensions and security threats arising from Serbia's active involvement in Montenegrin affairs, particularly through their main actors, the SOC and DF, adds complexity to the security landscape. Additionally, the rise of cybersecurity threats and hybrid warfare tactics presents a contemporary security challenge for Montenegro, further compounded by the resurgence of an authoritarian leadership characterized by clientelist and informal patronage networks. Navigating relationships with neighboring countries, managing internal stability, and addressing potential spillover effects from regional conflicts are crucial for Montenegro to uphold stability and security in a multifaceted and dynamic security environment. This calls for a comprehensive and nuanced approach to addressing the country's security posture.

By implementing the following recommendations, Montenegro can work toward fortifying its security posture and addressing its multifaceted challenges, ultimately advancing its stability and resilience in a complex security environment.

Strengthen Regional and International Partnerships: Montenegro should continue to collaborate closely with regional and international partners, including NATO and the EU, to address security challenges and bolster its resilience against external threats.

Foster Social Cohesion and Inclusivity: Initiatives aimed at fostering social cohesion and inclusivity, particularly in the context of Montenegro's diverse ethnic and religious composition, are vital to mitigating internal divisions and promoting stability.

Strengthen Cybersecurity Capabilities: Given the evolving nature of hybrid warfare and the prevalence of cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns, Montenegro should invest in advanced cybersecurity infrastructure in line with NATO standards and enhance its information systems to mitigate the risks posed by nontraditional security challenges.

Address Organized Crime and Corruption: Montenegro should prioritize efforts to combat organized crime and corruption, bolstering the rule of law and governance. This includes implementing comprehensive measures to counter illicit activities such as drug and human trafficking and cigarette smuggling as well as enhancing anticorruption initiatives across various sectors of society.

Promote Transparency and Accountability: Transparency and accountability in governance are crucial to combatting clientelist and informal management methods, thereby reinforcing democratic institutions and the rule of law.

Enhance Democratic Institutions: Efforts to fortify democratic institutions and ensure free and fair elections are essential to counter the influence of authoritarian regimes and reinforce the country's democratic foundations.

Vladimir Vučković is is an assistant professor at the Department of International Relations and European Studies and an academic researcher at the International Institute of Political Science at Masaryk University. His research interests focus on the European Union, in particular Europeanization and EU integration and enlargement; Western Balkan political and socioeconomic developments, geopolitics, small states, and populism in Europe. Vučković is author of the monograph "Europeanizing Montenegro: The European Union, the Rule of Law, and Regional Cooperation," published by Lexington Books – Rowman & Littlefield (2021), and editor of the volume "Balkanizing Europeanization: Fight against Corruption and Regional Relations in the Western Balkans" published by Peter Lang (2019).

Sources: NED, ESRI
© 2024, The New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy

Identity Insecurity:
North Macedonia's Challenging Relationship With Itself and Others

Ivana Jordanovska

Abstract

This analysis offers an overview of the interplay among foreign policy, national identity, and security perspectives. It attempts to show how a country's identity is an important factor in state confidence and how it impacts foreign and security policy decisions. For a young country like North Macedonia, the construction of this identity has seen a number of setbacks, some of which originated domestically, while others were orchestrated abroad. For a small and open country like North Macedonia, these foreign challenges are particularly impactful. The insecurity in its own state makes the citizens of North Macedonia adopt non-democratic stances, support autocratic leaders, and approve of military invasions. An awareness of these mechanisms is important for foreign policy makers to be aware of how they impact North Macedonia's state confidence, identity and foreign policy.

Just seven short years ago, North Macedonia was on a stellar trajectory. It had successfully overcome a two-year political crisis and peacefully replaced a semi-authoritarian government with a pro-European, pro-democratic coalition voted for by citizens from all ethnic backgrounds. Soon after, it signed a friendship treaty with its eastern neighbor, Bulgaria, and even more importantly, an international agreement with Greece. After more than 25 years, the disagreement with Greece over its name was resolved with a comprehensive agreement ratified by the parliaments of both countries. NATO and EU accessions seemed reachable and a matter of technical progress. A sweeping local elections victory for the government coalition parties promised ease of reform.

Today, however, on the eve of parliamentary elections, the trajectory for the next five years seems far less spectacular. While NATO accession did happen, it was overshadowed by the French and then Bulgarian vetoes blocking the start of EU accession negotiations and the COVID-19 crisis. Inflation and economic hardship were felt extensively and challenged the government's ability to answer the needs of individuals and groups. The country's rampant corruption is often the topic of U.S. State Department press releases.

Under these conditions, how is North Macedonia's security position faring? My assessment is bleak: The confluence of domestic narratives and international challenges has created a figurative earthquake rattling the very identity of Macedonian citizens. Being told their place in Europe and the world does not quite match what a series of political elites have presented has shaken the nation to the core, resulting in a series of questionable decisions and harmful narratives. The identity insecurity has been exploited by domestic and foreign actors, often with dubious and self-serving goals. An understanding of the European and domestic security landscape is constructed through the warped perspective of identity insecurity. While these identity troubles mostly affect ethnic Macedonians, they also create apathy and disillusionment that is high among ethnic Albanians. But I am getting ahead of myself: Let's go back.

A State Captured: How Greek Nationalism Played Into the Hands of a Local Autocrat

When the first of hundreds of conversations recorded illegally were leaked in 2015, the country had been led by the governments of VMRO-DPMNE's Nikola Gruevski for almost 10 years. Over that near-decade, what had started as a progressive center-right government ended up as a semi-authoritarian regime. In 2008, after two years in power, Gruevski's government faced a Greek veto at the NATO summit in Bucharest. This was an important blow to the conscience of a nation whose first official parliamentary document stating the intent to join NATO was issued in 1993. Since then, multiple governments from across the political spectrum promised NATO accession in the "near future." Stability was more important in the 1990s, and 2001 brought an interethnic conflict to the country itself. So, finally, in 2008, after years of progressive democratization, it seemed like the country might join the alliance after all. However, when the Greek veto was announced, it was more than just a blow to the country's NATO aspirations.

Greek objections to the name were part of a much longer and complicated Balkan history of nationalist romanticism and the ghosts of ethnic cleansing. In a nutshell, the modern Greek state spent the majority of the 20th century denying the existence of ethnic minorities in its territory, and in particular in the parts of northern and eastern Greece that were won in the Balkan wars of 1912-13. A large Macedonian minority was expelled, and the Greek official policy was to deny that these people ever felt Macedonian or had the right to return to Greece. In Yugoslavia, the problem was chronic, but not acute. As soon as independence was declared, the new state was seen as a potential patron of those who had a claim to or maybe even still lived in Greece. The newborn Republic of Macedonia was accused of irredentism – even though its own military capabilities were reduced to World War II levels thanks to the policies of Slobodan Milošević.

The plight of the Macedonian refugees from Greece was well known even to the non-refugees: Each city and town in today's North Macedonia has a neighborhood named "Aegean" after the refugees who settled there. Greek treatment of Albanians didn't

help matters. So, when Greece vetoed the country's NATO accession, it was double-edged: On one hand, it challenged the notion of belonging to NATO as a security organization that was being built since 1993, and on the other hand it brought up decades-old policies of ethnic prosecution and renewed anger against them.

From this perspective, we know that Gruevski's government (as many other governments) didn't have the capacity to channel the public sentiment into productive means. Instead, he did what every other nationalist has done since the dawn of time: He strengthened his hold on power, began a democratic decline, and started manufacturing history. He tapped into antiquity and attempted to build a public consciousness of a national identity spanning continuously from Alexander the Great to today. While his aim might have seemed noble at first glance, it was also accompanied by a massive corruption scheme that built statues and covered brutalist buildings with neoclassical facades made out of Styrofoam. In order to control both opponents and possible dissidents within his own government, he established a massive wiretapping operation.

Bottom-up Democratization, a Foreign Policy Focus, and a Global Pandemic

Once the wiretapped conversations were made public by the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) in 2015, widespread protests began that lasted for close to two years. As the biggest opposition party, SDSM coordinated the work with activists across the country. By covering a number of scandals and issues that happened over the years, a cross-issue coalition was built on promises for democratization, rule of law and overall quality of life improvements. These ideas were closely intertwined with the promise of EU accession: Once the country gets back on track to being a democratic nation, our effort will be recognized, and we will rejoin the European family of states, where we rightfully belong.

After a prolonged protest period, a series of internationally mediated agreements and a violent attack on the Parliament, a new SDSM-led government was formed in June 2017. A number of activists joined in politically appointed posts, strengthening the reform power of the new government. In the spirit of full disclosure, I also served as an adviser to the prime minister for cooperation with international organizations. In my humble opinion, the potential for reform stemming from the sheer concentration of knowledge and drive in these former civil society activists was enormous. However, the results paint a different picture.

In the first year of the mandate, the focus of the government was on foreign policy. A friendship treaty was signed with Bulgaria while Boyko Borisov was its prime minister. He was also the first Bulgarian prime minister to attend the annual commemoration of the deportation of Jewish residents from North Macedonia, which had been carried out by Bulgarian occupying force during WWII. The appearance fell short of an apology, but it still meant progress. A long process of improving relations with Greece resulted in the signing of the Prespa Agreement, which finally put an end to the decades-long name issue between the two countries. It changed the name of the country to "The Republic of North Macedonia," thus distinguishing from and confirming the Macedonia region of Greece, recognizing the Macedonian identity of citizens in both countries, regardless of their heritage, and adding an additional layer of recognition to the Macedonian language as such.

The Prespa Agreement was a compromise, which many in North Macedonia felt was more generous toward the Greeks. Was the name dispute negotiated in a state of power imbalance? Absolutely. The Greek state was already a veto-carrying member of NATO and the EU, and joining those alliances had been the two main goals of North Macedonia's foreign policy for decades. Not to mention that Greece was economically and militarily superior: In 2017, the Greek GDP was just shy of $200 billion, while North Macedonia's was at $11.31 billion. In the same year, Greece spent 2.6% of this GDP on defense; North Macedonia spent 0.9%. Was North Macedonia going to get a better deal than the one that protects its identity and language, while adding an adjective to its name? I remain highly skeptical.

However, the problem with compromises born out of a power imbalance is that they will always carry a sting of unfairness. This, together with the historical

disagreements over the "Aegean Macedonians," creates a mostly unfavorable view of the Prespa Agreement, especially among more conservative Macedonians. The main opposition party of the Macedonian voting body, VMRO-DPMNE, has tried to capitalize on this dissatisfaction by promoting a narrative of national defeat at the hands of the Greeks, alongside their domestic "traitors."

The long-awaited NATO accession was thereafter fast-tracked, and on March 27, 2020, North Macedonia became NATO's 30th ally. However, the news was almost fully eclipsed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The government's efforts were more positive than negative, and North Macedonia spent about 10% of its GDP on stimulus payments to people and businesses in 2020 alone. Still, the panic, confusion and helplessness of a global pandemic triggered the public's anger at the government, somewhat undeservedly. However, it was the vaccine nationalism of rich countries that truly raised the public's pulse, which saw it as a failure of North Macedonia's government to effectively represent them abroad. The Balkans' leading autocrat, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, who allowed North Macedonia's citizens to get vaccinated in Serbia and later sent donated vaccines, only increased with the envy and glorification of Serbia's, which has always been regarded as bigger, better, and more advanced.

A Faraway Union: How the EU Threw the Country Into Turmoil, Again

The story of North Macedonia's identity crisis wouldn't be complete without the ever-looming presence of the European Union. Once the Prespa Agreement was signed, it seemed that the last obstacle for starting North Macedonia's accession negotiations was removed. Until the French said: "*Mais, non!*" President Emmanuel Macron vetoed North Macedonia's accession negotiations in October 2019 as collateral damage in his power struggle with then-German chancellor Angela Merkel. This was a strong and decisive blow, both to the government that signed the Prespa Agreement and the beliefs and identity held by most citizens. The author strongly believes that the French veto was a tipping point for the downward slope that North Macedonia is still on to this day.

How did the French decision exercise so much power? First, it emboldened Bulgaria to demand further concessions from North Macedonia along purely nationalist lines. To say that Bulgaria's demands were unreasonable is an understatement: It even went as far as a demand to label the internationally recognized Macedonian language as Bulgarian. It struck a chord right at the heart of the Macedonian identity: Once again, they were told by a neighbor who they were, what they spoke, and how they should identify, while being backed by a powerful entity such as the EU. Second, it allowed various euroskeptics to claim they were always right in doubting the EU's willingness to admit the country. If taking down an autocrat and changing one's name is not enough to even start negotiations (which is a long process that does not always end in accession), what is enough?

In 2022, France played a mediator: It offered an agreement that would make some of Bulgaria's demands milder, while conditioning North Macedonia to amend its constitution yet again to include the Bulgarian minority, among other demands. North Macedonia's government accepted, but it hasn't been able to deliver on its promise. The opposition to the constitutional change, particularly with regards to the Bulgarian minority, remains very high.

Identity (In)Secured: Why State Confidence Matters

How does a string of unfortunate foreign policy events and turbulent domestic politics play into a security challenge? Well, dangerously. Citizens of any country have a certain opinion of themselves, their country, and their and their country's position in the wider world of international relations. Americans see themselves as serving the greater good from WWII onward; the Chinese are in pursuit of their lost superiority; and the British are the world's "gentlemen." Deserved or not, these conscious and unconscious opinions held by individuals form the public opinion. On the other side of the public opinion are the political elites who act as the translators for the public. They observe and participate in the international system and construct a foreign policy that is then communicated to the citizens. The foreign policy is a response and a construction of what the citizens believe their country can and should do in the international sphere. It is reflexive: It flows in both

VMRO–DPMNE, the largest opposition party in North Macedonia, protests and demands early general elections in Skopje in June 2022. (Edita Zekjirovikj / Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

directions, and identifying with what one's country stands for and is able to accomplish is important in feeling secure. It offers coherence.

So, when there is a strong disconnect between what is expected and what happens, and when this is a pattern of behavior, it results in a deep crisis. For a country like North Macedonia, the problem is compounded by its relative youth and highly corrupt system. Despite what nationalists like to believe, the country has been in charge of its own security or foreign policy only since 1991. And with state building comes identity and confidence building, the latter being particularly deficient in North Macedonia. On the other hand, ever since its independence and to this day, impunity for corruption is widespread and plenty of politicians have promised a better life, while only securing a better life for themselves.

For all of its positive steps, the government led by SDSM has had numerous failings: First and foremost, it has an absolute inability to manage expectations. While the political crisis caused by Gruevski's government was ongoing, it was important to

maintain morale. However, at some point the citizens started to believe that as soon as Gruevski was gone, everything would miraculously change for the better: The corruption would disappear, the country would immediately become an EU member, salaries would increase dramatically, and everyone would start picking up after their dog's public defecations. When SDSM failed to manage expectations, and then very obviously, failed to deliver on these impossible expectations, it was met with enormous disappointment.

This began a vicious circle: Many of the original activists and believers in the cause left the government in the first two years, slowly emptying the professional capacity of the institutions. Those who were left were overworked and bitter. Many felt that anything they did in their official capacity was never positively accepted by the public. Being negative – privately, but also publicly – turned into the country's favorite sport. Everything bad came from North Macedonia, everything good was outside of it. This opened a dangerous pathway for foreign malicious influence.

Maleficent 'Friends': How North Macedonia's Insecurity Helps Serbia's Autocrat

A country like Russia has never paid as much attention to North Macedonia as it does to Serbia. However, it has also never needed to pay as much attention, simply because of a simple causal pathway: Serbia is an extremely fertile space for Russian propaganda, and ethnic Macedonians consume everything that comes out of Serbia, often uncritically. It ranges from proclaiming Western holidays, such as St. Valentine's Day, as a product of LGBTQ+ propaganda, to infiltrating the Macedonian Orthodox Church – Archdiocese of Ohrid. This propaganda never comes in Russian, and it is rarely translated into Macedonian; instead, it is spread and consumed mostly in Serbian.

The relationship between North Macedonia and Serbia is complicated, to say the least. Historically, Serbia had held the power center of both the federal Yugoslavia (1945-1991) and colonial Yugoslavia (1918-1941). While citizens of the federal state of Macedonia participated equally in the decision-making of the second Yugoslavia, they had far less influence in the first one. Since the occupation of today's North Macedonia by the Serbs in 1912 to the

German defeat of the Yugoslav Kingdom in 1941, the Orthodox Christian population was forced to identify as southern Serbian. The official language was Serbian, all the personal names were Serbianized, and profitable agricultural products, such as tobacco, were monopolized by the state. My own grandmother's family was renamed to Stošić in this period. (For those unfamiliar with family name nomenclature in North Macedonia, a name ending with -ić is identified most often as Serbian. While there are plenty of names ending in -ov in North Macedonia proper, there is a much larger identification with the construct with Bulgarian names. On the other hand, having a name that ends in -ski is almost always recognized as Macedonian. Of course, these are very broad definitions to a very complex population, so plenty of exceptions exist.)

Vučić had a hot-and-cold relationship with the SDSM-led movement even before it formed North Macedonia's government in 2017. During the political crisis in 2015-16, Vučić kept warning the Serbian citizens of the "danger of a Macedonian scenario." At the most volatile moment of the crisis, when a mob of insurrectionists stormed the Parliament, a member of the Serbian intelligence service was caught on camera entering the Parliament as well. Once the SDSM-led government was formed, in June 2017, one of the first major crises it faced was the complete withdrawal of all diplomatic personnel from the embassy in Serbia just two months later.

Fast forward seven years, and the relationship seems better, on paper. Ever since the French, and then Bulgarian EU veto, North Macedonia, Serbia and Albania have participated in creating Open Balkan – an initiative to open borders and facilitate trade across the region. It sounds reasonable, and yet – it is a profoundly bad idea within the context. It envisages essentially a free flow of people, goods and services across the borders, a sort of mini-Schengen Area. First, it reads as an overly sugarcoated distraction for North Macedonia and Albania, whose EU accession is stalled because of vetoes by the union's members. Second, it gives Vučić something to sell to his electorate after failing to make barely any progress in Serbia's EU accession. Third, it allows an even freer flow of organized crime from Serbia to North Macedonia. And

fourth, Russia likes the idea of distracting these three countries from pursuing EU membership full steam.

In an attempt to appease an insecure citizenry, the government of North Macedonia wholeheartedly embraced the Open Balkan project. Since the country's, and especially the ethnic Macedonians', identity is trembling, the worse Serbia treated North Macedonia, the more its people believed that it is well-deserved. If our own politicians can't deliver on the EU promise, why wouldn't we be closer to Vučić and his version of Serbia? After all, he's been effectively playing off the EU's attempt to normalize Serbia-Kosovo relations, thus strengthening Serbia's identity security. To a desperate nation, it is an example of a politician helping one's own nation to feel more secure in its identity.

An Ally Unconvinced and the Road Ahead

The identity insecurity experienced creates a vulnerable position to judge foreign policy issues. The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 triggered a fierce division within North Macedonia along several lines. On one hand, the political elites strongly supported Ukraine, while a large portion of the voting body found that Russian leader Vladimir Putin's hand was forced (and justified) by NATO's actions. Similarly, a division along ethnic lines is evident: A much larger portion of ethnic Macedonians support Russia, while ethnic Albanians are against Russia. At first glance, one might associate the ethnic Macedonian support with some sort of pan-Slavicism; I'd argue this is unfounded. Most pro-Russian Macedonians see a hero in a figure like Putin because he stands up to the hypocritical "West."

The position of ethnic Albanians in this situation is important to note. On one hand, there is a high level of disillusionment with the largest Albanian party still in government, the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI). DUI was the junior partner of VMRO-DPMNE during the most corrupt period in the country, but most of its members were never prosecuted. At the same time, there is a strong urge to join the EU, and ethnic Macedonians' concerns about Bulgarian identity claims can be seen as an obstacle to EU accession. As a minority in the country, many Albanians feel unfairly held back. However, while Macedonians blame everyone else, Albanians often blame Macedonians.

While this analysis focuses on the interplay of foreign policy and identity, it would be wrong not to acknowledge the other factors that impact North Macedonia's identity and security position. Corruption remains rampant, and the judicial system is [particularly bad](#). The inability to get justice, unless they have connections, makes citizens furious with the system altogether. Brain drain and migration have remained high, further siphoning human capital from the country. The [public administration](#) remains proportionally too big for the size of the country and inefficient. All of these factors contribute to the state of the country and its citizens' lack of trust. However, for a small and open country like North Macedonia, the influence of outside forces is felt disproportionally.

Looking to the future, one can only hope that North Macedonia's state confidence in itself will be built internally, through a positive and value-based interaction with the country's partners. It is high time for the European Union to start acting on its values and not adopt the parochial interests of some member states as its own. An ever-stronger engagement with NATO and information sharing about the role of the alliance in vulnerable regions such as Ukraine is important, especially for the ordinary citizen. The U.S. should remain committed to its role of a global partner for democratization, instead of the isolationism that some propose.

The process of building confidence and trust will be long and closely intertwined with the process of democratization. The more North Macedonia changes its expectations and values and learns to believe in standing on one's own two feet, the less it will support authoritarian leaders. Given our history, this may be our biggest challenge to face. However, with the ever-greater technological development, globalization, and feminist struggle, societal change in North Macedonia is possible and already underway. To put it simply: Our short term may be a downward slope, but our long term is a cautiously optimistic upward trend.

Ivana Jordanovska is a doctoral candidate in political science and international relations at the University of Southern California. Her research focuses on the intersection of international security and political psychology, with a particular interest in NATO and emerging challenges. Before pursuing a doctorate, she worked as an adviser for cooperation with international organizations for the prime minister of the Republic of North Macedonia. Her professional experience includes work for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Westminster Foundation for Democracy. As a Balkan native, she has extensive experience in political, as well as nongovernmental work across the region.

She earned her master's in international relations from New York University as a Fulbright Fellow, her bachelor's in political science with focus on transatlantic relations from the Institute for Political Science in Paris (Institut d'Etudes Politique de Paris – Sciences Po) and is an alumna of United World College in Mostar.

Spinning and Hedging:
Serbia's National Security Posture

Filip Ejdus, Faculty of Political Science, University of Belgrade

Introduction

In postcommunist Europe, Serbia stands out for its unique security posture. Following the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, Serbia was involved in a series of wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and finally Kosovo, which ended with NATO intervention in 1999. It strongly opposed Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008, an act that has been recognized by most other Western countries. Partly because of NATO's overall role in this process, Serbia declared military neutrality and developed strategic partnerships with Moscow and Beijing. Simultaneously, Serbia

identified EU membership as a priority, became an official candidate country in 2009, and commenced negotiations in 2014. Today, Serbia has a hybrid regime that domestically relies on tight media control, while internationally it has pursued a policy of hedging.

To understand the many apparent contradictions of Serbia's national security posture, it is important to keep in mind both the structure of the Serbian security apparatus and the perceptions, both official and popular, of the security threats the country faces. Perhaps most important to that understanding would be an examination of Serbia's Kosovo policy, which

wields a significant influence over its foreign, security, and defense policies.

The National Security System in Serbia

The national security system in the Republic of Serbia is composed of governing and executive components. The National Assembly, the president of the Republic, the government, and the National Security Council constitute its governing arm. The National Assembly adopts legislative and strategic documents, holds purse power by adopting the annual budget, has the power to declare war, scrutinizes the work of the government, and ratifies international agreements.

Although the normative framework ascribes significant competencies to the legislative branch, in practice, it has served as a rubber-stamp institution controlled by the ruling party, particularly since the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) rose to power in 2012. Laws are often passed in an emergency mode, bypassing public hearings and debate. Furthermore, the ruling party frequently employs filibustering and other forms of obstruction to prevent the National Assembly, especially opposition lawmakers, from meaningfully scrutinizing the executive branch.

According to the normative framework, Serbia operates under a semi-presidential system in which the government and the president divide executive power. The president coordinates and directs the national security system, presides over the National Security Council, commands the Serbian Armed Forces (SAF), and promulgates laws. The president also issues decrees within his jurisdiction in the fields of security and defense.

In practice, the Serbian president wields much more influence than constitutional and legal frameworks outline. Even before the democratic backsliding that occurred in the 2010s, the power of the directly elected president hinged on whether the officeholder also held control over the government. In such cases, the president's actual influence would significantly increase, approximating that of a pure presidential system. While democratic backsliding began not long after ascension of the SNS in 2012, it accelerated following the victory of its leader, Aleksandar Vučić, in the 2017 presidential election.

Since then, Serbia's score on the Freedom House index declined from "Free" to "Partly Free" in 2019, with a continuing downward trend, due in part to the unconstitutional consolidation of powers in the hands of the president. Another term that captures well the essence of the Serbian regime under Vučić is a "spin-dictatorship," as its authoritarian rule is based on spin and disinformation thanks to its near-total control of the media.

The normative framework ascribes the primary executive power to the Government of Serbia, which consists of the prime minister and the Cabinet. It oversees the state administration, including ministries and other entities within the security sector, such as the ministries of Defense, Interior, Justice, and Foreign Affairs, and intelligence agencies. The government also influences the security sector by proposing and implementing the budget for public expenditure. Additionally, it contributes to shaping the normative framework by initiating legislation and adopting bylaws in the fields of security and defense. In practice, however, contrary to constitutional stipulations, the government is de facto appointed by and entirely subordinate to the president. The technocratic Prime Minister Ana Brnabić (serving since 2017) with limited political influence of her own has publicly referred to Vučić as "her boss."

The National Security Council (NSC) addresses issues related to defense, internal affairs, and intelligence agencies. It oversees interagency cooperation and suggests measures for the advancement of national security. Additionally, the council coordinates the activities of intelligence agencies. The NSC comprises the president and prime minister, plus the ministers of Defense, Internal Affairs, and Justice and chief of the general staff. Within the NSC, the Coordination Bureau is tasked with coordinating the intelligence agencies and implementing the council's decisions. The bureau is headed by a secretary appointed by the president. Given the secretary's power in setting the bureau's agenda and access to highly sensitive information, it considered one of the most influential roles in the security sector. The Office of the National Security Council and the Protection of Classified Information provides administrative support for the NSC.

The executive component of the national security system comprises the SAF, police forces, and security-intelligence agencies. As of 2023, the SAF consists of 28,150 active members and 50,150 reservists. Although mandatory conscription in the SAF was suspended in 2011, government officials on numerous occasions, including the general staff in January 2024, have suggested the reinstatement of compulsory military service, a popular position among two-thirds of Serbians. Since Vučić assumed office in 2017, the defense budget has doubled, reaching $1.4 billion in 2022. This increase has enabled the SAF to modernize, enhanced their maintenance and readiness, and bolstered air-defense capabilities. The Serbian police force comprises 27,000 uniformed personnel Serbia has three intelligence agencies. The civilian Security Information Agency encompasses both intelligence and counterintelligence functions and is directly accountable to the Government of Serbia. The Military Intelligence Agency and the Military Security Agency are administrative bodies within the Ministry of Defense responsible for intelligence and counterintelligence activities, respectively.

Threat Perception

In terms of threat perception, official and public views diverge. Strategic documents and broader policy discussions reflect the official perception of threats to Serbia, with the National Security Strategy being the main document outlining perceived official security threats. The latest version of that report (2019) lists, in order of concern, separatist aspirations in Kosovo and associated armed rebellions, terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, ethnic and religious extremism, hostile foreign intelligence activity, organized crime, drug addiction, mass illegal migration, economic and demographic challenges, infectious diseases, energy insecurity, incomplete demarcation processes with neighbors, disasters and accidents, climate change, and cyber threats. Similarly, the latest Defense Strategy of the Republic of Serbia (2019) identifies key threats as armed aggression, which was considered unlikely in 2009 separatism in Kosovo and the south of Serbia, armed rebellion, terrorism, ethnic and religious extremism, disasters and accidents, cyber threats, and disinformation, among others.

In wider policy discourse, separatism in Kosovo is considered to be the predominant security challenge. The only exception was the COVID-19 pandemic, which eclipsed all other threats, especially in the early phase when Serbia declared a state of emergency. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the threat of war has been heightened in the policy discourse. The list of securityt challenges has been expanded with potential isolation and even sanctions due to Serbia's decision not to join the EU's restrictive measures against Moscow. Even before these developments, Vučić and the SNS frequently made dubious claims in the media of foiling attempts by foreign or domestic perpetrators to stage a color revolution or coup d'etat or assassinate the president. Domestic critics of the regime, including the independent media, civil society organizations, and opposition figures, are routinely portrayed in the government-controlled media as enemies of the state, allegedly instrumentalized by Western powers to destabilize the country. In the aftermath of elections in December 2023, which international and domestic observers characterized as deeply irregular, the regime-controlled media portrayed protesters who decried the electoral fraud as bloodthirsty puppets of the West who want to create another Maidan in Belgrade.

The public's perception of threats looks quite different. According to the most recent polls conducted by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy in 2023, the top national security threats, according to citizens, are inflation (83.0%), economic crisis (82.8%), energy crisis (82.1%), organized crime (82.1%), and the trafficking of illicit drugs (80.5%). Threats traditionally prioritized by the government, such as armed conflicts in the region, violent extremism and terrorism, or cyberattacks, are seen as less threatening (60.3%, 47.1%, and 45.9%, respectively). According to another poll conducted by the Regional Cooperation Council, the biggest perceived threats include crime, organized crime, drug trafficking, violence, and vandalism (77.0%); the possibility of an armed conflict between ethnic groups or political instability in the Western Balkans (50%); the misuse of firearms and trafficking of arms (52%); economic crisis, poverty, and social exclusion (36%); the influx of migrants (36%); and terrorism (36%).

When asked to predict the next three years, a significant share of respondents expected organized

crime (47%), cybersecurity threats (42%), terrorism (37%), and armed conflicts between ethnic groups or separatist political ideologies (35%) to increase. In this respect, respondents in Serbia are both growing more pessimistic than in previous years and more pessimistic than respondents in other Western Balkan countries, where an average percentage of people expecting threats to increase in the next three years are lower (terrorism 23%, armed conflicts 24%, cybersecurity threats 32%, migrants 34%).

Serbia's Kosovo Policy

Kosovo became a part of the Kingdom of Serbia in 1912. It remained an integral part of Serbia and Yugoslavia for the next 87 years. Then, following the civil war from 1998 to 1999, NATO intervention, and the withdrawal of the Yugoslav military and Serbia's police, Kosovo came under the international military and civilian jurisdiction of the Kosovo Force (KFOR) and the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK). The only remaining Serbian state presence in Kosovo consisted of the so-called parallel institutions in the Serb-majority municipalities, especially in the north of Kosovo, in the field of health, justice, and civil defense, which were, at that time, still financed and operated by the government in Belgrade. According to Serbia, Kosovo remains its autonomous province, which is stipulated in both the Serbian Constitution and in UNSC Resolution 1244. The fall of the Slobodan Milošević regime in 2000 initiated Serbia's democratization, but there has been little change in the policy rhetoric across the political spectrum that Kosovo is, and should remain, a Serbian province. In 2008, Kosovo declared independence, a move Belgrade strongly objected to and is still seen as fundamentally undermining national security.

In 2012, following the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice, which stated that the unilateral declaration of independence did not breach international law, the EU initiated and facilitated a normalization dialogue. Since then, in addition to many technical agreements that have been concluded, two political deals have also been struck: the Brussels Agreement signed on April 19, 2013, and the so-called second Brussels Agreement verbally agreed to on Feb. 27, 2023, followed by the Implementation Plan signed in Ohrid on March 18, 2023. The deals have

been marred by slow and incomplete implementation, ambiguity, and occasional escalations, for which Belgrade and Pristina accused each other.

One of the reasons behind this outcome has been the policy of Vučić and the SNS toward Kosovo, which has oscillated between irreconcilable calls for EU-led normalization and a discourse that Serbia should never recognize Kosovo and that the Serbian military should eventually return there. In the context of the EU-facilitated normalization dialogue, the government showed a commitment to normalization of relations short of full recognition, as evidenced by the conclusion of the two milestone Brussels agreements. Moreover, in contrast to previous governments, Vučić dismantled parallel institutions and implemented most technical agreements, although some were implemented after considerable delay. A recent example was the implementation of an agreement on license plates, concluded in 2011 and implemented following the contested elections on Dec. 17, 2023, a development likely to neutralize international interest in election irregularities.

Vučić and his government have maintained strong nationalist rhetoric that Kosovo is part of Serbia and that Belgrade will never recognize its independence, regardless of the consequences. Under his watch, the Serbian public discourse on Kosovo, with some exceptions, has shifted to the right. Graffiti in Serbian cities depicts Serbia's military returning to Kosovo. Government-controlled tabloids routinely promote anti-Albanian sentiment. Serbia's rulers and its media defame anyone who publicly advocates a more conciliatory approach to the Kosovo issue while supporting the growth of far-right opposition parties that call for the military reconquest of Kosovo. Although Vučić dismantled the parallel institutions, he undermined pluralism among the Kosovo Serbs by creating the Serb List, a political party that monopolized the political space using incentives, coercion, and intimidation. In September 2023, a group of armed men, led by the vice president of the Serb List, Milan Radojičić, who has been sanctioned by the U.S. and U.K., were involved in an attempted military uprising in the North and were hailed as heroes in Serbia.

Although the discrepancy may seem paradoxical, this apparent ambiguity is a reflection of a rather consistent two-pronged logic. The first aspect is related to signaling. By maintaining a tight grip on the Serbian media, Vučić presents himself as the guardian of Serbian national interests, capable of outmaneuvering his opponents, protecting Kosovo Serbs, preventing full secession of Kosovo and its joining of the United Nations, and buying time before a new balance of power emerges in world politics, which could lead to preconditions for a fairer resolution to the Kosovo issue. On the international stage, Vučić carefully curates his image as a pragmatic leader willing to compromise, in contrast to the hotheaded politicians in Pristina who are blamed for the normalization dialogue failures. His primary argument is Pristina's lack of willingness to establish the Association of Serb Municipalities, an agreement reached in 2013.

The second aspect of this ambiguity is strategic. Until 2008, Vučić was a high official in the extreme nationalist Serbian Radical Party, championing the Greater Serbia project. Since then, he has moderated these views and repackaged these aspirations under the concept of the "Serbian World." In essence, this concept aims for an ever-closer economic union among Serbs in the region, potentially leading to peaceful political unification. Consequently, Kosovo Albanians fear that the association could create a "state within a state," potentially turning Kosovo into another Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although these fears might seem unfounded given the Association's weak competences, as outlined in the 2013 Brussels Agreement, Belgrade's rhetoric on the "Serbian World" has only intensified these anxieties.

Foreign, Defense, and Security Policy

Serbia's multipronged foreign policy is based on a strategy of hedging, which can be defined as "ambiguous alignment vis-a-vis one or more major powers." Since 2000, pursuing EU membership has been one of its foreign policy priorities. It signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement in 2008, became a candidate in 2012, and started accession negotiations in 2014. However, in recent years, negotiations have not progressed due to Serbia's deficit in the rule of law, challenges in normalization talks with Pristina, and reluctance to align with EU sanctions against the Russian Federation. Overall EU enlargement fatigue, although not a critical factor at this stage of the accession process, also did not contribute positively in this context.

Another Serbian foreign policy priority is its international diplomatic efforts against the recognition of Kosovo's independence. To that end, Serbia has maintained close relations with countries that do not recognize Kosovo, most importantly within the U.N. Security Council (China and Russia). Moreover, Serbia initiated a campaign of de-recognition, claiming that it has convinced 27 countries to withdraw their recognition of Kosovo. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kosovo contends the accuracy of that number is contested. Independent research has established that 13 countries have withdrawn their recognition of Kosovo, though the recognition status by an additional 13 countries remains unclear while one country restored its recognition.

Although both the EU and Serbia have advanced the narrative that Serbia's entry into the EU will not be conditioned on Belgrade's recognition of Kosovo's independence, in practice, these two foreign policy priorities contradict each other. Even if the EU, which lacks a consensus on this matter, has not explicitly stated it, 22 of its 27 member states have recognized Kosovo and expect Serbia to come to terms with this reality before joining the EU. Moreover, Russia's and China's opposition to Kosovo's independence has bolstered their bilateral relations with Belgrade, which includes growing defense cooperation and arms sales, a development that concerns both Brussels and Washington. In the past, Serbia has acquired weapons from Russia, including MiG-29 jets, Mi-17V-5 and Mi-35M helicopters, and the Pantsir-S1 air defense system. Serbia also ordered electronic warfare systems, such as Repellent and Krasukha, and there has been speculation that these systems might have arrived in early 2024. From China, Serbia acquired CH-92A drones as well as the FK-3 air defense system.

In addition to the arms trade, Serbia has maintained close relations with Russia in several other sectors, including energy, as Russia commands a significant portion of Serbia's gas industry. In 2012, the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Centre was opened in Niš in 2012, raising speculation about its potential

militarization. During the parliamentary and local elections held Dec. 17, Russian media operating in Serbia (RT and Sputnik) openly sided with the government in its smear campaign against the opposition and civil society organizations, labeling them as Western puppets. Following the contested elections, the Kremlin condemned the opposition's protests and depicted them as an attempt to stage a color revolution in Serbia. Meanwhile, the FSB provided intelligence to the Serbian government about concrete plans to violently overthrow state institutions. The aftermath was a violent crackdown on the protest and the arrest of 40 individuals, including many students and even high schoolers, who were charged with seeking a violent change to the constitutional order.

The most controversial issue has been Serbia's reluctance to join the EU sanctions against Russia. As early as 2014, Serbia declared neutrality regarding the war in eastern Ukraine and did not join the EU's sanctions against Moscow. Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022, Serbia reiterated its support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine and joined the U.N. General Assembly's resolutions condemning the invasion. However, it refrained from joining EU sanctions despite multiple warnings from Brussels that noncompliance might seriously hinder its EU membership prospects. Although the Serbian government pledged that the country would not be used to circumvent U.S. and EU sanctions, media reports indicated that Serbian companies had been exporting dual-use goods to Russia. In the latest Country Report on Serbia, the EU stated, "Serbia is expected to urgently improve its alignment with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy, including adherence to EU restrictive measures, and to refrain from actions contrary to EU foreign policy positions."

An important aspect of Serbia's foreign and security policy is its stance within the Western Balkans region. Officially, Serbia adheres to a status quo policy, which entails full respect for territorial integrity as guaranteed by international law. This includes adherence to UNSCR 1244, which stipulates that Kosovo is part of Yugoslavia/Serbia, as well as to peace agreements such as the Dayton Peace Agreement, which ensures the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina and also affirms the prerogatives of Republika Srpska. According to the 2019 Defense Strategy,

"the preservation of Republika Srpska as an entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina, in accordance with the Dayton Agreement, and the enhancement of the position of Serbs in the region and the world, are of particular importance for the security and defence of the Republic of Serbia."

However, there is also a rising concern, especially among Serbia's neighbors, that Belgrade has a revisionist agenda in the Western Balkans. In recent years, Serbia has also developed the policy discourse of the "Serbian World" akin to the Russian policy for the near abroad (Russian: Russkiy mir). The concept, popularized by then-Defense Minister Aleksandar Vulin in 2020, implied the political unification of Serbs. However, the policy has never been formally articulated in any document and remains subject to various interpretations. These range from views that it represents a form of benevolent soft power and concern for the Serbs in the diaspora, to accusations that it is a thinly veiled Greater Serbia project aiming to include all territories where Serbs live, such as Republika Srpska, Montenegro, and North Kosovo.

In terms of defense policy, Serbia declared military neutrality in December 2007. Owing to the carefully cultivated trauma of the NATO intervention in 1999, military neutrality has become one of the country's few policies, alongside the nonrecognition of Kosovo, that enjoys a stable majority of over two-thirds in public opinion. Consequently, Serbia's defense doctrine is based on the concept of total defense, which entails a comprehensive reliance on one's own military and civilian capacities and strengths. Since 2011, Serbia has suspended mandatory military service, although there have been increasing calls for its reintroduction in light of the deteriorating geopolitical situation in Europe.

Serbia is the largest weapons producer in the region, and in 2021, it sold weapons worth $384 million to the United Arab Emirates, the U.S., Cyprus, Algeria, Uganda, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Bulgaria, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia. According to Pentagon documents leaked in April 2023, Serbia agreed to supply arms to Kyiv. However, Serbian officials deny this, insisting that while Serbia condemns the invasion of Ukraine, it has not joined sanctions nor sold arms to any of the conflict's parties.

Serbia was struck by [two consecutive mass shootings](#) in May 2023, resulting in 17 deaths and 21 injuries. The first occurred when a 13-year-old boy embarked on a shooting spree at his elementary school in downtown Belgrade using his father's gun, while the second was a copycat incident involving a 20-year-old shooter who fired randomly at people in two villages 50 kilometers south of the capital. These unprecedented events deeply shocked the nation and incited the largest protests since 2000, under the banner "Serbia against Violence." Moreover, the mass shootings highlighted the fact that Serbia has one of the highest numbers of illicit weapons per capita in Europe. In response, the government swiftly initiated [a weapons collection campaign](#), resulting in nearly 60,000 firearms, 2.6 million rounds of ammunition, and 20,451 explosive devices being surrendered to the police by June.

Conclusion

Serbia's security posture is unique in post-communist Europe. Domestically, it's akin to a spin dictatorship, pursuing a strategy of hedging in its foreign, security, and defense policy. While officially neutral, Serbia engages in an ambiguous alignment policy with several great powers, including the U.S., EU, Russia, and China, with the goal of both extracting benefits (investments, arms, intelligence, etc.) as well as securing safeguards in case any one of them attempts to exert too strong a pressure on Serbia. While this policy might come across as contradictory, it appears perfectly rational from the perspective of how Serbia sees itself and its national interests. It's a state that perceives itself as a victim of the unipolar hubris of the West, whose territorial integrity and regional interests are protected by Russia and China, while economically, its interests are oriented toward the West.

While such a security posture seems quite solid in terms of support both among the policy elites and public opinion, its future remains uncertain. There are two forces each pulling in opposite directions. On the one hand, in addition to the self-perception of being a victim of NATO, one can expect a relative decline of the West and the rise of the rest to continue well into the 21st century, developments expected to increasingly favor such a hedging posture. On the other hand, for a country whose trade and economy depends on the EU, which it aims to join, that policy seems to be unsustainable. With Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, it seemed that the policy of hedging had reached its expiry date. However, Belgrade managed to weather the storm and resist joining the EU sanctions, showing that the policy is much more resilient than it appears at first glance. Critics of this policy argue that it has pushed Serbia further from Brussels than ever, while proponents see the stalling of EU accession as yet another vindication of the policy, considering EU membership to have always been nothing more than a mirage for many of them.

Filip Ejdus is a professor of security studies with the Faculty of Political Sciences at the University of Belgrade. In his academic research, he studies how identity, memory, emotions, and rationality affect security policy and international interventions. He also specializes in security sector reform, defense policy, civil-military relations, and the European Union as a global actor. The geographic focus of his interests are the Western Balkans, the Horn of Africa and the Middle East. His most recent book is "Crisis and Ontological Insecurity: Serbia's Anxiety over Kosovo's Secession" (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). He is also the founder and co-editor in chief of the Journal of Regional Security. In addition, Ejdus is the president of the Central and Eastern European International Studies Association, a board member of the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, and the co-chair of the Regional Stability in South East Europe Study Group at the PfP Consortium of Defence Academies and Security Studies Institutes. In November 2023, he was one of the initiators of ProGlas, a pro-democracy group. Ejdus obtained his bachelor of arts and doctorate degrees at the Faculty of Political Sciences, a joint master's degree at the London School of Economics and Sciences Po Paris and was a Marie Curie postdoctoral fellow at the University of Bristol.

Health care workers at a Sarajevo hospital are on duty during the coronavirus pandemic in December 2020. (Samir Jordamovic/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

Insecurity and Economies of Care

Aida A. Hozić

Introduction

For more than three years, starting with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2019 until December 2023, the largest hospital in the Bosnian capital Sarajevo – Clinical Center Koševo – remained closed to visitors. And every day, for those three years, the same scene repeated itself at the main entrance to the hospital complex.

Rain or shine, a large group of people would assemble around 2:30 p.m. In their hands they clutched plastic bags filled with nightgowns and underwear, medications and magazines, carefully hidden and disguised food items, and money for bribes. On the bags, they wrote patients' names and names of their clinics. While waiting, they walked around, sometimes for more than an hour, anxiously talking about their loved ones in the hospital. They exchanged information about medical staff, grumbled about how difficult they were to reach, and whined about public transportation and rising prices.

All talk would stop with the arrival of nurses from nearby clinics who came with carts and wheelchairs to collect the bags. In exchange, the nurses delivered dirty clothes, soiled linens, empty plastic containers, and occasional letters from the patients. As the nurses

approached, the crowd would rush through the gates. Whispers turned into shouts; everyone desperately trying to engage the nurses in conversation, attempting to extract at least some news about the status of their loved ones. The nurses rebuffed dialogue, sometimes rudely. The crowd would then disperse, holding tightly the bags they had just received, each person back to their pain and a solitary trek home.

Security is imagined differently when all one values in life can fit into a plastic bag. People carrying the bags – in the Western Balkans region and throughout peripheral worlds where conflict reigns – recognize each other when they see them. They are migrants, refugees, internally displaced, living on the margins, generally powerless. They do not figure in the peace agreements, infrastructure deals, resource politics, and military procurement that preoccupy stakeholders at home and in the big metropolitan centers, where key decisions about the periphery are often made. Yet contemporary politics thrives on their insecurities, on fears emanating from the precarity contained in their bags, on everyday violence they encounter, and on repeated messaging that their lives are disposable and insignificant.

There is a reason why protests in Western Balkans are so frequently driven by concerns over babies' and children's lives, health care, wrongful deaths, or gender-based violence and discrimination. To understand how power operates in Western Balkans and where the region's politics may be heading, it is imperative to look beyond geopolitics and ethnic politics, where the gaze of outsiders is most often focused. Feminist perspectives, which "make invisible visible," help illuminate structural forces at work that keep the Western Balkans in its perpetual security limbo and easy prey to predatory powers in its broader neighborhood.

Feminist Political Economy and Security Studies

The Western Balkans is a fictional political space. It denotes a group of countries in Southeastern Europe whose main common feature is their status as rejects by the European Union. Although most states in the region except Albania were once part of Yugoslavia, even that common past has been violently pushed back – not only by the wars of the 1990s but also by the uneven politics of international interventions and oversight in the post-conflict period. To speak of security of the Western Balkans is therefore a contradiction in terms: The region's real or perceived insecurity is the very reason for its continued rejection and marginalization by the EU. Without that abject insecurity, which is constantly reproduced by the world's great powers and their client local elites, the Western Balkans would not need to exist as such.

Feminist security studies and feminist political economy enable us to see the Western Balkans differently – not only as a perpetual site of geopolitical competition and instability but also as a terrain of everyday struggles and survival: of love and funerals, of child-rearing and existential worries, of laughter and gossip, of home and distant caring. And while there are many feminisms, and now even many feminist foreign policies, most feminist scholars of international politics would agree on two aspects of war, aspects not sufficiently recognized by scholars and practitioners of international relations and international security.

First, feminist political economists emphasize continuums and circuits of violence, thus questioning the usual dichotomies of war and peace, economy, and security, domestic and international, public and private. By raising the treacherously simple, quintessentially feminist question – where are the women? – feminist scholars see wars as extending along conceptual, temporal, and spatial lines of usual inquiry.

Conceptually, they do not just see women as victims of violence or discrimination, as usually assumed, but instead illuminate a wide gendered space of difference, in which men, women, and queer people, whose status is always complicated by race and class, experience wars and their aftermaths in dramatically divergent ways. In this wide terrain, feminist scholars conceptualize violence as stretching from daily and seemingly disorganized acts of gender-based violence to organized violence of conflicts, including sexual violence, and then to post-conflict violence propped by pathologies of postwar political economy as well as trauma.

As a corollary of this reconceptualization, wars are also temporally altered. They do not have clear beginnings and ends as scholars of war insist that they do; they

are enunciated with extremism, crime, femicides, various acts of symbolic violence – and they last well into the future with suicides among the veterans, domestic abuse, partner-killings, war-related diseases, mnemonic wars and denials, and yet more femicides.

Spatially, too, wars are not bound to battlefields in specific territories. Instead, they are linked to areas of alleged peace – and to each other – via moving armies, mercenaries and arms trafficking, refugee flows, humanitarian assistance, and the aid industry. Thus, wars cascade into each other and translate into new forms of violence, linking people and places who would otherwise have little in common. Consider, for instance, the impact and the resonances of the Yugoslav wars on a seemingly lone extremist like Andre Brevik in Norway, or on terrorist attacks in Western Europe, or on the Ukrainian war.

Second, and as previously argued in relation to the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement in Bosnia, and the war in Ukraine, feminist scholars stress enduring and transformative aspects of wars, analyzing ways in which wars affect men, women, sexualities, and gender relations more broadly. Wars can mobilize women, pushing them into activism and participation but also entrench power agreements dominated by men even after wars end.

Wars reshape the economic landscape, creating new wealth and obliterating livelihoods with significant consequences for gendered divisions of labor. They redistribute resources and create new gendered hierarchies based on politics of commemoration and narratives of mourning, heroism, and victimhood. Economic reconstruction typically privileges marketization and privatization of natural resources, physical infrastructure rebuilding, and other foreign investment opportunities that overall benefit men's jobs, incomes, and assets more than women's, even when controlled for age, race or ethnicity.

In our work on the World Bank and International Monetary Fund in conflict and post-conflict settings, my colleague Vesna Bojičić-Dželilović and I have demonstrated that although such frameworks increasingly include measures that are sensitive to gender inequalities and differences, such as gender budgeting, they nonetheless exacerbate gendered insecurities. Such insecurities are often carried by women, whose unpaid labor predominantly attends to human trauma and recovery and whose paid labor is neglected in financing for post-conflict reconstruction.

For both these reasons, from a feminist perspective, wars – and their aftermaths – are not isolated phenomena; they are integral to the global political economy and its gendered and racial hierarchies. Viewed through such lens, the Western Balkans is not an exiled region with deep, self-inflicted wounds and problematic sovereignty issues but rather a space intimately connected to the European and world economy through movements of bodies, transfers of remittances, and networks of care, which further accentuate its insecurities.

Western Balkans: Economy of Care and Neglect

It is, indeed, care – with its multiple, even contradictory meanings – that most radically transforms our understanding of the Western Balkans' security needs and geopolitical positions. "Care" has long been associated with women's invisible work. Relegated to the "hidden abode" of social reproduction, it was assumed to be unpaid, voluntary, sacrificial, and fundamentally feminine. Mothers would care for children, daughters would take care of parents and in-laws, sisters would cover care for their brothers. Indeed, in the Western Balkans, as in many parts of the world, caregivers, cleaners, and housekeepers are simply called "women."

In post-conflict contexts, care is almost never treated for what it is: the key factor of sustainable peace. For, in post-conflict spaces, care is more than just a feminine duty; it is also an affective disposition, shared by both men and women. It is an antidote to the harms and violence of wars, a connective tissue for renewal of communities, a collective mechanism of self-help that acts as a surrogate for destroyed institutional infrastructures of support. In the world of capital and profit, driven by privatization and reduced social spending, care is also an economic sector – formal and informal, increasingly transnational, and no longer as clearly linked to gendered households as it was once assumed to be.

> " But because it is so central and existential, care is also subject to perpetual political manipulation. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for instance, public expenditures on health care are higher than in the EU, but nearly one third of that spending is private, mostly on treatments and medications. "

The scene at the gate of the Koševo hospital is a window into the dynamics that frame life, death, and security in the Western Balkans. Woefully understaffed, like most other hospitals in the region, Clinical Center Koševo bled health workers during the pandemic because of mismanagement, corruption, and low pay. At one point, an entire team of anesthesiologists left in protest over faulty respiratory ventilators. The breathing machines had been purchased from China, without a tender, by a company that otherwise traded in raspberries. The owner, a TV personality, had close ties to the governing Bosniak Party. The hospital's director – wife of the most powerful Bosniak politician – insisted on the continued use of the ventilators to save face at the expense of patients' lives.

The staff continued to leave the hospital. By December 2022, there were wards at Koševo hospital where one nurse was responsible for as many as 24 patients plus countless visitors in the outpatient clinic. Patients complained of poor treatment, while families suspected that visitors were not allowed just so that no one would witness the conditions within the hospital. Meanwhile, the director – by that point also embroiled in a politicized fight over her own academic credentials – openly used visitation rights as a bargaining chip to demand funding for new hires from the local government.

For most ordinary people in the Western Balkans, the entire world revolves around care. Tensions surrounding its financing, availability, and delivery bring people together and pull them apart. For years now, the supply of cancer-treatment drugs has been spotty. CAT scans and MRI appointments can take years. Mammograms are not a part of regular care provisions.

Not surprisingly then, everyday conversations inevitably include references to doctors, discussions about hospitals, suggestions of alternative remedies, confessions about health problems, recollections of recent ailments, deaths, and funerals. Far from being morbid, or too intimate to be voiced, these conversations forge bonds within families and among friends. They are also clear indicators of priorities: In a world with so much violence and hardship, life is reduced to bare life. It is also meant to be shared. Like food, talk about health is an offering that once made must be reciprocated, no matter how poor the household.

But because it is so central and existential, care is also subject to perpetual political manipulation. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for instance, public expenditures on health care are higher than in the EU, but nearly one third of that spending is private, mostly on treatments and medications. The public system is bloated and inefficient, a reflection of the complex institutional structure created by the Dayton Peace Agreement. The private system is poorly regulated and insufficiently integrated with the public one. Thus, while a majority of Bosnian citizens are nominally covered by insurance, their access to health care is limited by politics, location, and decaying infrastructure. The politicization of the Koševo hospital and its director, which was even highlighted by the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State James O'Brien during his February 2024 visit to Bosnia, is just a small part of a system where both jobs in and delivery of health care are completely driven by party patronage and private interests.

In Serbia, by contrast, health care is centralized and ripe for exploitation by the ruling party. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić skillfully played his "neutrality" card to obtain vaccines in excess of Serbia's population – from Russia, China, and the EU. Vučić then offered vaccines to citizens of neighboring countries, benefitting from this generous "vaccine diplomacy." In a similarly shrewd gesture, based on astute readings of the critically important women's vote, Vučić opened new mammogram screening facilities around Serbia in the months before the December 2023 parliamentary elections. The legitimacy of those elections is being challenged by citizens' protests, international observers, and the European Parliament.

Conditions are not significantly different in Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, or Albania. Scandals keep rocking their health care systems, despite new generations of doctors and varied levels of public expenditures on social infrastructure. The reasons for the catastrophic state of care in the region are similar: During the multiple transitions from conflicts and communism, the entire sphere of social protection – associated with women who were never part of peace agreements – was depleted, neglected, and ultimately destroyed. At the same time, changes in the global political economy, and particularly in the EU, as well as wars elsewhere, have transformed Western Balkans into an attractive source of care labor and mineral resources and, increasingly, a depository for Europe's unwanted migrants. This is now a volcano of misery that simmers under the geopolitical fragility of the entire region.

Global Crisis of Care and Western Balkans

The crisis in care industries is a global phenomenon, But the crisis in the Balkans has been exacerbated by its handling by the European Union and especially in Germany. Demographic decline, an aging population, and the shortage of care workers make many European countries dependent on immigrant labor in the care sector. According to the OECD, migrants' role in health care is essential – they represent around 23% of medical doctors and 14% of nurses in the EU. Migrants make up half of the doctors and nurses in London and Brussels. COVID-19 put additional pressure on health care workers throughout

Europe, who had the highest absolute number of infection and mortality, leading to quitting, early retirement, and frequent strikes. The response in the most affected states was relaxation of work permits and visa requirements for workers in critical sectors, including care.

In the effort to stave off an expected shortage of millions of nurses and doctors by 2035, Germany was particularly aggressive in its recruitment of health care workers in areas beyond the borders of the EU. According to a Pillars of Health report from September 2022, Germany imported as many as 200,000 nurses since 2013, 17.3% of whom came from the Western Balkans, representing 29.3% of nurses in the region itself. The move was facilitated by the Western Balkan Regulation of 2016, which opened Germany's labor market to "Western Balkan nationals of all skill and German language proficiency level" if they had an offer from a German employer.

The regulation made "refugee talent visible and accessible to EU labor markets." While intended to ease political pressures over the "refugee crisis" in Europe, the development of these new "complementary pathways" effectively linked conflicts and crises elsewhere with the fulfillment of needs for skilled workers within the EU. The most recent German legislation, which came into effect in November 2023, raised the annual quota of workers from the Western Balkans from 25,000 to 50,000 and indefinitely extended the previous legislation. "The systematic brain-drain of health workforce towards Germany," suggested a Pillars of Health report, "is a European and a global health scandal" that poses "a significant risk for the source countries."

Departures of care workers and health professionals from the Western Balkans are putting an added strain on the already precarious infrastructure of care in the region. According to some estimates, over the last 13 years, more than 400,000 workers have left Bosnia and Herzegovina, including more than a thousand medical doctors and thousands of nurses. In Serbia, a reported 600 doctors leave every year. In Albania, departures were estimated at 3,500 medical professionals over the last decade, prompting the Albanian government to work to keep them at home with home credit, wage increases, and requirements to practice locally. But

most of the statistics remain inaccurate – individual caregivers and house care providers cannot be counted, as they often work in Germany for three months at a time without work permits or registration. And departures are putting upward pressures on pay for care within the Western Balkans, especially in the informal sector, which mostly caters to the elderly. Thus, in words of Alida Vračić, a Bosnian political scientist who works on migration, "emigration stretches health systems to the point of collapse and results in a loss of vital services."

Gendered Effects

The exodus from the health care systems in the Western Balkans, demographic decline, and the escalating numbers of often quite literally abandoned elderly relatives puts women in a structurally untenable position. Consequently, labor participation is much lower for women than for men across the region. According to the International Monetary Fund, almost two-thirds of working-age women in the Western Balkans were either inactive or unemployed in 2017. The labor participation gap is especially pronounced for women with low levels of education – who are usually the caregivers in their families and in the informal labor market. Indeed, lower educational attainment and family responsibilities are often cited as the primary reasons for women's inability to enter into the formal labor force.

These disadvantages are even more apparent among women in rural areas and women from minority groups that face high amounts of discrimination, such as the Roma. While many act as pillars of their families and informal breadwinners, they lack both time and resources to participate in public life and in politics. Low levels of labor participation translate into political invisibility despite an entire industry of nongovernmental and international organizations devoted to women's empowerment, gender mainstreaming, and implementation of quotas in parliaments. Within such structural constraints, women who enter politics tend to do so by obliging the dominant ethno-nationalist or populist matrix, often – because they are so very few – with great success. Their leadership roles, however, only obscure the depth of the constraints that hold so many women back from meaningful participation.

These structural constraints also translate into continued violence against women – both symbolic and physical. For women who survived the conflicts of the 1990s, the unfinished business of justice and war crimes, continued genocide denial, and political bullying are daily reenactments of the war trauma. Physical violence against women, which remains largely unaddressed by state institutions and political leaders, is a reminder that they will never be safe in their bodies. The number of femicides has been on the rise, not only because they are now being noticed.

Echoes of #MeToo have traversed borders of Western Balkans and of different economic sectors where women are prevalent – from education to entertainment. Actresses, teachers, and pop singers throughout Western Balkans have shared their stories about sexual harassment and bullying in professional environments. And just recently, bringing together catastrophic conditions in health care and death among women, sparked by an experience of a Romani woman, Serbia has been shaken by a stream of testimonies from women who are alleging that they had been victims of obstetric violence as they were giving birth. The outcries, unfortunately, do not change policies. Often, like all scandals, they are simply used to divert attention from the institutional and power structures that made abuse possible in the first place.

Where to, Western Balkans?

The focus on the economies of care and on the perverse gendered effects of their neglect in post-conflict contexts is an important corrective to the dominant framings of security in Western Balkans. While the elite chatter in Brussels and Washington revolves around the Western Balkans' accession to the EU, NATO membership, and malign influences of Russia and China, it is the everyday insecurities and collective anxieties about the diminished value of life that govern and motivate political choices. They are a gold mine for populist and authoritarian leaders, the bedrock of corruption, and the key reason for the exodus from the region. They feed the vicious cycle upon which the key paradox of the Western Balkans rests: that its security would be best guaranteed if it ceased to exist as such, as a region defined by European rejection.

But Western Balkan insecurities carry lessons for other conflict and post-conflict zones by illuminating how war kills: years, sometimes decades, after it is supposedly over, if gender is not made a part of the peacebuilding equation. As more and more wars intentionally target civilians, women, children, and social reproduction infrastructure, there is a lot to be learned from emphasis that feminists put on the political economy of gender-based violence and structures that uphold it. This includes research on depletion of resources – both material and emotional – through politics of austerity and extractivism, and, most importantly, from research on economies of care.

No longer a domain of non-wage labor yet still almost entirely feminized, care is indispensable to social, not just individual, survival. If we were to combine childcare, health care, and care for seniors, it would be one of the fastest growing economic sectors – and women, and women's bodies – still hold it together. At the moment, care is aggressively privatized and made more exclusive in many parts of the world. It could be otherwise. Care could and should be prioritized, especially in conflict and post-conflict zones. Thus, feminist political economy and feminist security studies both offer a more realistic picture of the contemporary security posture in the Western Balkans and – by shifting priorities, by pushing our glance elsewhere to the huge swaths of the economy in which mostly women dwell – they also paint a way out from its abject insecurity.

Aida A. Hozić is an associate professor of international relations at the University of Florida, Gainesville. Her research is situated at the intersections of feminist political economy, cultural studies, and international security. She is the author of "Hollyworld: Space, Power and Fantasy in the American Economy" (Cornell University Press, 2002) and co-editor (with Jacqui True) of "Scandalous Economics: Gender and Politics of Financial Crises" (Oxford University Press, 2016). Her public writing has appeared in Slate, Foreign Policy, Politico, Al Jazeera, Le Monde, Guernica and other media. She is spending the spring of 2024 as a Fulbright Distinguished Scholar at Oxford University's Pembroke College.

Contact

✉ For media inquiries, email media@newlinesinstitute.org

✉ To submit a piece to the New Lines Institute,
email submissions@newlinesinstitute.org

✉ For other inquiries, send an email to info@newlinesinstitute.org

📍 1776 Massachusetts Ave N.W., Suite 120
Washington, D.C., 20036

📞 (202) 800-7302

Connect With Us

𝕏 @newlinesinst

in @New Lines Institute
for Strategy and Policy

▶ Subscribe

f Sign up

NEW LINES
INSTITUTE
FOR STRATEGY AND POLICY