

Western Balkans

**A Topic Paper Submitted for the 2026 NFHS Topic Selection Meeting
Sawyer Partney, Truman State University
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Western Balkans

Preferred Resolutions

1. Resolved: The United States federal government should substantially increase its engagement with one or more Western Balkans nations in one or more of the following areas: democratic institutions, independent media, civil society.
2. Resolved: The United States federal government should substantially increase its anti-corruption enforcement efforts in the Western Balkans.
3. Resolved: The United States federal government should substantially increase its economic engagement with one or more Western Balkans states.
4. Resolved: The United States federal government should substantially increase its support for energy security in the Western Balkans.
5. Resolved: The United States federal government should substantially increase its security cooperation and/or assistance with one or more Western Balkans nations.

Affirmative Case Types

Under the Western Balkans topic area, participants would argue for one or more modes of United States engagement with or within Western Balkans states. Core plan areas within the topic include anti-corruption initiatives which could involve Magnitsky-style sanctions, judicial reform, or enhanced financial transparency and enforcement; cases involving the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which would include Dayton Accord enforcement, institutional stabilization, or support for international oversight mechanisms; Kosovo–Serbia relations cases centered on normalization strategies spanning from diplomatic mediation to conditional incentives or security guarantees; cases on democratic governance would likely support civil society building, election monitoring, strengthening independent media, and anti-disinformation proposals; then cases of energy security would focus on energy diversification, infrastructure, and reduced dependence on coercive/conditional suppliers. Advantages within aforementioned cases could include democratic resilience, anti-corruption/transnational crime, constitutional stability, conflict prevention, reduced malign influence, energy resilience, and Euro-Atlantic integration.

Core Negative Approaches

Negative teams have a deep well of policy rhetoric to pull from paired with plentiful critical material. Likely disadvantages would include escalation of US conflict with Russia or China, diplomatic backlash, EU backlash or alliance friction, great-power competition, corruption absorption, and nationalist (particularly Serbian) backlash. Counterplans naturally include EU-led reform/conditionality, NATO-led security coordination, European External Affairs Service (EEAS)-led diplomacy, Office of the High Representative (OHR)-backed Bosnia enforcement, and broader multilateral financial conditionality. Kritiks include intervention or trusteeship, Balkanism, or Orientalism, neoliberal stabilitocracy, securitization, and techno-politics or surveillance critiques.

Debatability

This topic provides a strong Aff/Neg balance because virtually every affirmative mechanism naturally generates an equally intelligible negative response. Economic or governance cases face corruption-absorption and EU-duplication arguments. Security-cooperation cases face escalation, securitization, and NATO counterplans. Bosnia and Kosovo cases are highly researchable but remain unresolved enough to preserve clash between teams throughout the season. Additionally, the topic is inherently limited by geography, by the distinct policy problems of the six Western Balkan states, and by the limitations set by requiring a “substantial increase in engagement”; meaning, it would be difficult for either side’s ground to explode over the course of a singular season.

Topic Synopsis

The Western Balkans represents a strong and durable topic area for the 2026-27 season. Even though almost three decades have passed since the Yugoslav wars, Bosnia and Herzegovina remains constrained by the Dayton framework, Kosovo and Serbia still have not achieved stable normalization, and the region continues to face democratic backsliding, along with corruption, media capture, organized crime, malignant foreign influence, and a growing energy-security crisis. Simultaneously, the Western Balkans is positioned at the intersection of EU expansion, NATO security, Russian influence ambitions, and growing Chinese digital infrastructure. Affirmative teams under the Western Balkans topic would argue in favor of specific increases in U.S. engagement through anti-corruption efforts, democratic-governance support, energy security initiatives, economic engagement, diplomacy, or security cooperation. In comparison, negative strategies consist of equally strong ground through backlash disadvantages, alliance-friction arguments, EU and NATO counterplans, and critical literature questioning paternalism, stabilitocracy, securitization, and Balkanist framings. A Western Balkans topic is accessible because major materials are available from the EU, NATO, U.S. Treasury, OFAC, U.S. Congress, think tanks, and regional media provided in English. The Western Balkans provide a timely topic area because core disputes over Bosnia, Kosovo, sanctions, and enlargement are happening now and unlikely to fade during the debate year.

Appendix References

The attached appendix includes a directory of 41 “cards,” or articles cited and marked for use as evidence in a debate space. In this paper, I will reference these cards in their numerical order rather than broadly directing references to the appendix. The cards are in numerical order from 1-41 and generally parallel the paper in their relevancy.

Introduction to Key Issues

The Western Balkans is typically defined as the six-country group outlined by the European Union (EU) during the Vienna European Council in 1998. The term was a political designation to delineate the regions around Albania and the former Yugoslav republics (excluding Slovenia and Croatia) that were not yet EU members but were making progress toward accession. The countries included in the EU's definition are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo (not universally recognized), Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. The strategic importance of the Western Balkans arises from where the countries rest geographically: proximity to European security infrastructure, credibility for EU enlargement, and cyclical centers of crisis where the U.S., along with European states and various international institutions, repeatedly intervene.

The History of Balkan Political, Ethnic, and Religious Conflict

The Balkans region has historically been viewed as Europe's powderkeg. Until the dawn of the 20th Century, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire fought for influence or territorial control over most of the region. Germany and Russia also fought for influence. The spark that started World War I is often said to be the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, who was killed by a Serbian nationalist in Sarajevo, in what is now Bosnia and Herzegovina. During World War II, the relatively young Yugoslavia was a front in the war, with Italy seeking colonial control and Germany backing-up their presence with the force of NAZI arms. From World War II, a Croatian leader of the Communist Partisan movement, Josip Broz "Tito," would emerge as a great unifier of the multi-national Yugoslav state. Nearby, Albania turned into an extreme Stalinist dictatorship under the rule of Enver Hoxha. Both Tito (died 1980) and Hoxha (died 1985) would remain in power into the 1980s. Then, in 1989, when their successors struggled to maintain the states without their founding dictators, the facade started to crumble as one by one the communist dictatorships of Eastern Europe collapsed. While the region is very similar in many respects (most of the former Yugoslav states speak essentially the same language, Serbo-Croatian), religious and cultural differences shaped by the former territories of Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, leave enclaves of significantly different traditions scattered throughout the region. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Bosnia and Herzegovina where Muslim Bosniaks, Catholic Croats, and Orthodox Serbians all have significant communities within the Republic's territory. (Office of the Historian, n.d.)

An October 18, 1990, US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) 15-90 stated: Yugoslavia will cease to function as a federal state within a year, and will probably dissolve within two. Economic reform will not stave off the breakup. [...] A full-scale interrepublic war is unlikely, but serious intercommunal conflict will accompany the breakup and will continue afterward. The violence will be intractable and bitter. There is little the United States and its European allies can do to preserve Yugoslav unity. (Office of the Historian, n.d.)

The 1990 prediction was prescient. Angered by the dominance of Serbian leadership under Slobodan Milosevic, Slovenia and Croatia were the first to secede in 1991, followed by Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia (now North Macedonia). While Slovenia and Macedonia left Yugoslavia largely unharmed, significant civil wars broke out in Croatia and Bosnia as Serbia intervened to protect sizable Serbian minorities living in the new countries and to carve-out a "Greater Serbia." The rump state of Yugoslavia would then consist of Serbia and

Montenegro until Montenegro declared its own peaceful independence. The Dayton Accords, brokered by the Clinton administration, brought an uneasy end to the conflict in Bosnia (OSCE 1995). Kosovo (majority ethnic Albanian) and Vojvodina (majority Serbian with a large Hungarian minority) existed as autonomous regions within the Serbian state until Kosovo broke away, with NATO intervention, during a civil war. Vojvodina remains within Serbia. The wars in Croatia and Bosnia were extremely costly. While Croatia has emerged as a strong, democratic, and European-integrated state, Bosnia remains a divided state with a complex system of governance perpetually teetering on the edge of dissolution. While NATO intervention brought about a tenuous peace in the Serbia-Kosovo conflict, the states do not recognize one another and major tensions remain over the status of Serbian communities within Kosovo. Serbia struggles with its own identity, being pulled by Russia and Western forces in different directions.

Albania, while neither a part of Yugoslavia, nor directly involved in the former state's conflicts, shares significant affinity with the people of Kosovo and unification of the two states does get discussed from time to time. Albania's transition from a Marxist command economy to a free market economy has been challenging and the state faces many of the same problems that persist in the states that neighbor it.

Thirty-six years after the conflict began, post-conflict frameworks continue to drive contemporary disputes. Two long-lived post-conflict arrangements continue to structure policy debates. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Office of the High Representative was created to oversee the civilian implementation of the peace settlement that ended the war, and it describes itself as responsible for supervising implementation of civilian aspects of the Dayton peace agreement. That system is crumbling. In Kosovo, NATO's peace-support mission (KFOR) is still described by NATO as operating under a mandate rooted in UN Security Council Resolution 1244 and maintaining a safe and secure environment and freedom of movement. Years after Kosovar independence, a durable peace remains elusive. These frameworks generate stable, recurring controversies for debate so that the topic is less likely to be "resolved away" throughout the year. As one will further see, a range of other problems broaden the possibilities for debate.

Core Western Balkans Controversies

Kosovo

A major point of contention in the Western Balkans is normalization of Kosovo–Serbian relations. Kosovo is a culturally significant region in Serbian history as the location of the Battle of Kosovo between Serbians and the Ottoman Empire. Kosovo plays a central role in Serbian folklore and the so-called "Kosovo Myth" has been a key feature in the rise and continued strength of Serbian nationalism. Serbians view Kosovo as the cradle of their identity and religion and several important Orthodox monasteries are located in Kosovo. Kosovo's 2008 declaration of independence from Serbia was painful as was the period of UN administration of the territory that preceded it. The cultural feeling that Kosovo is integral to Serbia has parallels in how Russians feel about the Kievan Rus (Ukraine) or how China feels about Taiwan, but more acute because of the role the land plays in their cultural origin story. Yet, the violence perpetrated by the Serbian government against Kosovar Albanians is still fresh in the memory of Kosovo's citizens. The Serbian minority, mostly living in Kosovo's north, also feels mistreated by the government there. The European External Action Service (EEAS), the diplomatic service of the European Union, facilitated the Ohrid Agreement (also known as the "Agreement on the path to

normalisation”) (Feb. 27, 2023) and a related “Implementation Annex” (March 18, 2023). These documents represent a framework and objectives for “normalization” between the parties that has not been fully realized.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Another regional pressure point involves Bosnia and Herzegovina’s constitutional stability paired with its continued territorial integrity. Under the Dayton Accords a single unitary state was created in Bosnia composed of the Serbian majority Republika Srpska and a Croat-Boznjak majority Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. A rotating presidency ensures representation from each territory. Most of the governance of the country is devolved to the regions, but there is a unified presidency, constitutional court, and national bank. The position of “High Representative” (currently a German) has enormous power and oversees the implementation of the civil aspects of the Dayton Agreement. The High Representative can impose and nullify laws and appoint and remove officials. The High Representative is appointed by the Peace Implementation Council. The degree of power accorded to the High Representative is a source of significant controversy, among other criticisms of the complex Dayton agreement. NATO has described the Dayton Accords as a “cornerstone of stability” and said it will not accept a “security vacuum” in Bosnia. In parallel, the Council of the European Union has repeatedly renewed a sanctions framework connected to the Bosnia situation, including the ability to impose restrictive measures on actors who undermine sovereignty/constitutional order or the Dayton settlement.

Bosnian integration has been threatened recently by political controversies in Republika Srpska that point toward secession. Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik was stripped of his presidency in 2025 for refusing to carry out decisions by the High Representative. A snap election was called (Milsik, n.p.). While he is out of office, the Serb leader continues to agitate for secession and observers fear that the delicate balance that holds the government together could give way, possibly leading to renewed civil conflict.

Governance and Corruption

One of the most prominent areas of concern across the entire Western Balkans region is democratic governance and corruption. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) explicitly argues that post-2008 U.S. disengagement from the Western Balkans in favor of EU-centric support coincided with democratic decline and “stabilocratic” (semi-authoritarian) politics, and that assistance frameworks should change to emphasize civil society, accountability, and transparent economic ecosystems. Transparency International CPI 2025 frames weak institutions and shrinking civic space as key dynamics in Eastern Europe/Central Asia and flags Western Balkans vulnerabilities tied to opacity in high-value investment decisions (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2021; Transparency International, 2026).

Additionally, a growing area of concern is information integrity and media freedom. The Reporters Without Borders 2025 index provides country-by-country snapshots and rankings for the region (e.g., Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, etc.), creating an accessible evidence base for debates about media capture, political pressure, and democratic resilience (Reporters Without Borders, n.d.; Kurić, 2025).

Following are external influences or “standards competition,” particularly with China’s digital infrastructure engagement (Haxhixhemajli, 2025; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2021). The German Marshall Fund (Haxhixhemajli, 2025) has a dedicated analysis on China’s “Digital Silk Road” in the Western Balkans that specifically links tech infrastructure choice to national security, governance, and geopolitical alignment.

Finally, the region features durable controversies about organized crime, security capacity-building, and trafficking of drugs, humans, and weapons. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime produced a report framework under the auspices of the Regional Programme for South-Eastern Europe which supports the MACRO Project. The MACRO Project seeks to overcome historical limitations to data collection and publication on issues related to organized crime in the region. The framework also includes measures of anti-corruption and sustainable development and initiatives to engage with each. Past and current EU training and capacity-building efforts to address these issues (e.g., firearms trafficking and cybercrime investigation training) provide both empirical models based on prior interventions and the opportunity for well-grounded alternate actor counterplans (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020; CEPOL, 2024).

State of Current US Policies

Current Focus

The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) describes the arc of US involvement in the Balkans as trending away from a once-dominant force in the region, especially in regards to the Western Balkans. After the 1990s, the United States took an active role in reconstruction and post-conflict stabilization, but largely withdrew starting in 2008, signaling a desire for the EU states to drive ongoing engagement. Consistent with this aspiration, the US State Department defines its policy in the Western Balkans as “focused on helping the states of the region cement peace and build stability and prosperity by deepening cooperation and advancing their integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions, including NATO and the EU.” The CSIS reports that, because progress in many areas has largely stalled out since 2013, the return to a more engaged American policy in the region represents an opportunity to reinvigorate support for the region (Center for Strategic and International Studies, n.d.). See card [1].

Solutions Currently Being Proposed

Congress recently provided a facing policy through the Western Balkans Democracy and Prosperity Act, which proposes support for democratic governance, rule of law, anti-corruption efforts, and institutional resilience (Congress.gov). Yet, there has been a lack of substantial action by the Trump Administration in pursuing the Act as well as actions directly contrary to the Act’s purpose that question the legitimacy of it wholesale at achieving effective policy ends (Atlantic Council).

Application of the NFHS Criteria

Timeliness and Durability

The Western Balkans is a timely topic area as the EU considers expansion into the macro-Balkan region. The EU is actively investing in enlargement financing (growth plans) and sanctions regimes. Security commitments continue to perpetuate historic problems while simultaneously introducing a myriad of new ones. America's "America First" turn under the Trump administration has also perpetuated a recent trend of turning away from Balkan engagement in US foreign policy despite the ongoing potential for conflict in a region already challenged by nearby wars, as well as the growing influence of Russia and China. The path to EU (or NATO) integration for these nations is too long for these issues to lose inherency prior to or during the topic year (European Commission, 2023; European Commission, n.d.; NATO, 2026; Vasovic & Mcallister, 2026).

Accessibility and Material

The Western Balkans is a material-rich area because major policy documents are openly available from U.S. agencies (State/Treasury/OFAC), EU institutions (Commission/Council/EEAS), NATO, and large think tanks. Despite many documents being produced by European agencies, there is a strong English literature base on the topic. Ample scholarship on the region is available through publicly accessible resources. Popular news media in the US does not cover these countries as often as it does others, but access to English media via the internet does mean access to regular coverage of regional issues.

Student Interest and Engagement

When debaters talk about Europe, it is usually in the context of Russia and its global reach, NATO and its position as a defensive alliance, or the European Union's role in addressing major global issues. Western and Central Europe's relative stability has not made a European topic a particularly attractive option for debate since the end of the Cold War, with Ukraine being the exception though still tying the topic to Russia. In contrast, the Western Balkans region represents a portion of Europe that is novel and often overlooked. Debaters (and some coaches) were born well after the conflicts that plunged the region into division and instability. To many students, the issues faced by these countries will seem totally new, yet still feature significant actors they may be familiar with (such as China and Russia) within the debates. There is also a significant Balkan diaspora in the United States - particularly Bosniaks and Albanians - making the topic relatable to certain domestic students whose heritage has been overlooked among the debate space. Furthermore, some corruption and organized-crime networks in the Western Balkans directly implicate U.S. legal and financial jurisdiction, as U.S. sanctions authorities block property in the United States, or under the control of U.S. persons, and prohibit transactions involving designated actors which provides a relevant domestic tie-in (Office of Foreign Assets Control, n.d.; U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2023).

Educational Quality

There is a vast breadth of information available for students to learn within this topic about the history and culture of a region that has been extremely important across two world wars and that has remained in conflict well into the 21st century. The problems of the region are so strongly rooted in the clash of religions, cultures, economic systems, and former empires that students cannot escape greatly expanding their knowledge about a host of issues that influence current events. In fact, a strong argument for the Western Balkans topic is the mere fact that the region has been ignored in policy spaces like debate for so long that any exposure to the topic naturally brings education to those involved.

Balance

A topic on the Western Balkans has even debatable ground: affirmatives can defend increased U.S. engagement through diverse avenues with multiple tools of enforcement or method, while negatives can contest the solvency of these efforts, backlash of various groups or communities, opportunity costs of the plan, along with a myriad of counterplan options involving actions by the EU, NATO, or other multilateral groupings. Geography is an important source of this balance. Ongoing instability does not suggest singular solutions. There are strong arguments on either side of NATO and EU enlargement efforts as well as genuine concern about how Balkan nations could factor into preventing or triggering spillover from the Russia-Ukraine conflict (and other Russian ambitions to reclaim its former empire and sphere of influence). Additionally, the growing role of China in the region produces material benefits for the region in terms of infrastructure, but has broader negative implications for Western states and the U.S.

Ground

Affirmative Cases and Ground

The affirmative ground on a Western Balkans topic is strong because the literature supports several distinct areas of possible plan focus grounded in specific nations or in transnational issues of governance. The attached bibliography offers a good sampling of the issues of democratic backsliding, corruption, sanctions, Bosnia's constitutional fragility, Kosovo–Serbia normalization, malign Russian and Chinese influence, energy dependence challenges, and Euro-Atlantic integration. That means the topic can generate affirmatives centered on governance reform, coercive pressure, economic or energy resilience, and security coordination without collapsing into a single repetitive plan model (European Commission, 2023; European External Action Service, 2023; NATO, 2025). See card [2].

Governance and Anti-Corruption

Governance and anti-corruption is an attractive affirmative direction because the literature repeatedly identifies weak institutions, corrupt networks of patronage, and democratic stagnation all as barriers to generating stability in the Western Balkans. The clearest affirmative advocate is the Center for Strategic and International Studies, which argues that U.S. assistance should move away from its current position tolerating “stabilocratic” systems and instead emphasize civil society, accountability, and transparent economic exchange.

Affirmatives in this area can plausibly defend judicial reform funding, election-monitoring assistance, anti-kleptocracy tools, beneficial-ownership transparency, procurement reform, and civil-society expansion. There is also room for more coercive plans: the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) and the U.S. Treasury Department currently hosts a prerogative classifying corruption and less concrete “destabilization” in the Western Balkans as sanctionable conduct. That suggests further Magnitsky-style sanctions (targeted measures against individuals or specific entities who are responsible for severe human rights abuses and corruption that impose asset freezes and travel bans) could reasonably be implemented; therefore, focusing on punishment through the restriction of global financial systems is an advocative outlet (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2021; Congress.gov, n.d.; Office of Foreign Assets Control, n.d.; U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2023). See cards [3] [4].

Possible Affirmative Cases in This Area Include

- Magnitsky-style enforcement expansion through sanctions. See cards [5] [6].
- Asset freezes.
- Financial scrutiny against corrupt elites and enablers.

Counter-Russia and Counter-China

Counter-Russia and counter-China affirmatives have remarkably clear advocates since the Western Balkans are already discussed as a site of forms of standards competition, along with operations to gain influence, and infrastructure jockeying. Haxhixhemajli’s analysis of China’s Digital Silk Road in the Western Balkans directly links technology infrastructure choices to governance, national security, and geopolitical alignment, while Kisić details how pro-Russian media campaigns shape Serbian political discourse. Additionally, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s coverage of U.S. efforts to fund alternatives to Huawei-style 5G expansion shows that telecommunications procurement is already a recognized policy lane, and Reuters reporting on U.S. sanctions against malign actors in the region supplies a more coercive advocate for counter-influence cases. Together, those sources support affirmatives focused on 5G procurement restrictions, cyber and digital-resilience programs, media support and anti-disinformation initiatives, sanctions targeting malign networks, and energy diversification designed to reduce Russian leverage over the region’s economic and political choices (Haxhixhemajli, 2025; Kisić, 2022; Landay, 2023; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2021; Vasovic & Mcallister, 2026).

Possible Affirmative Cases in This Area Include

- 5G procurement restrictions to limit dependence on Chinese network infrastructure and digital penetration. See card [7].
- Energy diversification funding to reduce Russian leverage through alternative supply, infrastructure, and transition support. See card [8].
- Expanded sanctions authorities targeting malign regional actors, foreign enablers, and destabilizing networks.
- Media support and disinformation countermeasures through independent journalism funding, resilience programs, and anti-disinformation assistance. See card [9].

Bosnia Integrity

The literature clearly identifies Bosnia and Herzegovina as a continuing flashpoint in the post-Dayton order. NATO issued a 2025 statement that Dayton remains a cornerstone of stability, and that NATO will not accept a security vacuum. Supporters of NATO's stance point to affirmatives that advocate for stronger peacekeeping or cases in support of security. The Council of the European Union's 2026 extension of its Bosnia sanctions framework, together with the U.S. Department of State's 2025 statement sanctioning anti-Dayton actors and Treasury's earlier designation of Milorad Dodik, provides an example of contemporary targeted sanctions, anti-secession pressure, and institutional defense cases. However, cases of targeted sanctions are incredibly narrow and critiqued for only being used in cases of extreme violation leaving open the door for broader and less prejudiced sanctions stances. Still, those sources make targeted sanctions expansion, reinforcement of Bosnia's stability architecture, and OHR-backed enforcement against constitutional destabilization especially defensible. Conditional-finance could also be explored, in that conditional international leverage is already visible in EU reform financing, which would provide yet another affirmative route (Council of the European Union, 2026; NATO, 2025; U.S. Department of State, 2025; U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2022). See card [14].

Possible Affirmative Cases in This Area Include

- Targeted sanctions expansion against anti-Dayton actors and their financial enablers. See card [10].
- Peacekeeping mandates reinforcement through stronger support for Bosnia's stability architecture and international security presence. See card [11].
- Conditional international financial leverage tied to anti-secession compliance, governance benchmarks, or institutional functionality. See card [13].
- OHR-backed institutional enforcement to strengthen Dayton compliance and deter constitutional destabilization. See card [12].

Kosovo–Serbia

Kosovo–Serbia normalization is another straightforward affirmative area since the literature already supplies a named diplomatic framework, has identified disputes over implementation, and recognizes an ongoing security presence. The European External Action Service's agreement on the path to normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia is the core affirmative framework for plans that deepen, enforce, or restructure the normalization process. Muharremi's analysis of the Washington Agreement gives students another source for arguing about what outside mediation can and cannot achieve, while NATO's continuing role in Kosovo supplies a security advocate for cases involving guarantees, de-escalation, and support with implementation. However, neither agreement has seen structural, long term, or consistent success. Therefore, conditional aid incentives tied to normalization benchmarks, expanded U.S. mediation, and NATO-coordinated security guarantees all make defensible affirmative routes grounded in direct policy literature (European External Action Service, 2023; Muharremi, 2021; NATO, 2026). See card [15].

Possible Affirmative Cases in This Area Include

- Binding recognition framework or a structured path toward mutual recognition and durable normalization. See card [17].
- Conditional aid incentives linking economic assistance or integration benefits to measurable normalization steps.
- Expanded diplomatic mediation through more active U.S. involvement in the dialogue process. See card [16].
- Security guarantees via NATO coordination to reduce escalation risk and support implementation credibility. See card [18].

Regional Integration and Euro-Atlantic Alignment

Regional integration and Euro-Atlantic alignment affirmatives are broader than Bosnia or Kosovo-specific affirmatives, but they are still well-supported by the literature and give the topic important comparative breadth. The Council of the European Union's overview of EU–Western Balkans relations and the European Commission's Growth Plan both function as advantage literature for market integration, reform conditionality, and accession-oriented economic restructuring. The U.S. Congress's support for North Macedonia's accession to the European Union provides an example for how an American voice for deeper alignment with Euro-Atlantic institutions can be beneficial. These sources support affirmatives centered on accession support measures, regional market integration, democracy-and-prosperity packages, and NATO interoperability or partnership expansion for states seeking closer Western alignment. The main virtue of this area is that it captures the region-wide integration story without forcing every affirmative into a single crisis spot; students can debate whether the best U.S. role is to accelerate institutional integration, reinforce conditionality-based reform, or coordinate more closely with existing European frameworks (Council of the European Union, n.d.; European Commission, 2023; European Commission, n.d.; U.S. Congress, 2024). See card [19].

Possible Affirmative Cases in This Area Include

- EU-accession support measures tied to reform benchmarks, technical assistance, or integration incentives.
- NATO interoperability and partnership expansion for states seeking deeper Euro-Atlantic alignment. See card [20].
- Regional market-integration initiatives connected to the EU growth framework.
- Democracy-and-prosperity assistance packages combining governance reform with economic integration.

Energy Security

Energy security is not simply a subordinate issue in a strategy to counter Russian influence; it is also a standalone policy area with clear advocates, financing models, and solvency mechanisms. The European Commission's Growth Plan and related materials regarding EU expansion connect regional economic modernization to energy infrastructure and resilience, while Reuters reporting on Serbia's efforts to secure more EU gas deals as it reduces Russian supplies illustrates how diversification has become an immediate policy question. These advocates could then support affirmatives focused on interconnectors, storage, transmission upgrades, renewable integration, and diversification assistance designed to reduce

strategic energy dependence (European Commission, 2023; European Commission, n.d.; Vasovic & Mcallister, 2026).

Possible Affirmative Cases in This Area Include

- Gas-diversification assistance through interconnectors, LNG access, or joint-purchasing support designed to reduce dependence on Russian supply. See card [21].
- Electricity-transmission modernization and cross-border power interconnection projects to improve reliability, reduce bottlenecks, and strengthen regional energy integration.
- Region-wide energy-resilience packages combining infrastructure financing, technical assistance, and accession-linked reform incentives to anchor the Western Balkans more firmly in European energy systems. See card [22].

Negative Arguments and Ground

The negative ground on this topic is robust because many affirmative mechanisms are initially subject to solvency indicts and strong backlash disadvantages (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2021; Office of Foreign Assets Control, n.d.; NATO, 2026). A key negative strategy will be utilizing turns or fully-developed, case-specific disadvantages against potential affirmatives, that employ sanctions. Criticisms of sanctions include that: sanctions fuel nationalist narratives, they worsen political polarization, or they enable external actors to brand the U.S. as coercive interventionists. The U.S. Treasury notes that sanctions targeted at destabilizing corruption networks can generate political blowback as a predictable outcome). Counterplans are also a core tool for the negative. EU counterplans are exceptionally strong since the EU conditionality and financing is explicit: look to the Growth Plan's funds conditional on direct reform, then the Reform and Growth Facility's structure (European Commission, 2023; European Commission, n.d.). NATO counterplans or limits to "security-only" plans are also viable since NATO defines its continuing mission parameters and its partnership statements in the region in accessible documents describing potential direct advantages of NATO action to U.S.-only leverage (NATO, 2026). Alternative-actor counterplans regarding Russia and/or China could also see success, especially if employed alongside a backlash disadvantage from either nation to avoid the harms of the disadvantage, supporting external implementation.

Counterplans

EU & Multilateral

Multilateral counterplans are among the strongest potential negative positions on the topic because the Western Balkans are already governed through increasing institutional overlap between the EU, NATO, the EEAS, the Office of the High Representative, and other international bodies. The negative can assert the existing sufficiency of EU leadership on enlargement, conditionality on reform, market integration, or sanctions enforcement by citing the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans along with broader EU–Western Balkans relations documents (European Commission, 2023; Council of the European Union, n.d.). In Kosovo–Serbia-focused rounds, the EEAS's role in producing the path-to-normalisation agreement gives the negative a clear advocate for an EU-led dialogue process rather than a more muscular U.S.-driven one (European External Action Service, 2023). These counterplans are strong because they don't just "let someone else do it"; but they redirect the plan to actors that are already doing it. While it is debatable whether citing these plans would be a winning

inherency argument (as they haven't achieved their objectives), they form a good basis for a viable counterplan. See card [23].

NATO

For security cooperation, border management, peacekeeping, or crisis-stability affirmatives, NATO is a highly credible alternate actor. NATO's official materials on Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo demonstrate existing mission authority, established relationships with local partners, and an institutional rationale for continued security-sector engagement (NATO, 2025; NATO, 2026). The counterplan literature is therefore unusually good: the negative can claim that NATO already has the operational architecture, legitimacy, and burden-sharing mechanisms that a unilateral U.S. plan would lack. This is especially persuasive against affirmatives that are functionally seeking more alliance activity but trying to route it through the USFG alone. See cards [24] [25].

International Institutions

When the negative faces affirmatives regarding corruption, governance, or broader reconstruction, the negative can utilize the IMF, World Bank, or broader multilateral conditionality as a superior alternative to unilateral U.S. assistance. The negative can argue that if the affirmative's theory of change is institution-building through conditional support, then multilateral lenders are both more credible and more sustainable. They can reduce perceptions of American favoritism and then distribute political ownership across multiple stakeholders (European Commission, 2023; Council of the European Union, n.d.). See card [27].

Disadvantages

Escalation with Russia

A Russia disadvantage will be strongest against affirmatives that work to expand sanctions, or employ anti-corruption measures that could target Russian-linked actors, coordination with NATO, restrictions surrounding 5G expansion, or energy diversification offsetting Russian influence in the region. The core argument claims that stronger U.S. involvement raises costs to Russian influence networks which could incentivize retaliation through obstruction, proxy pressure, or escalatory signaling in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, or regional energy relationships. Reuters reported in 2023 that U.S. sanctions policy in the Balkans was explicitly framed as a response to Russian influence, which gives the negative a clean link story that U.S. policy in the region is not merely technocratic reform but part of a broader strategic contest (Landay, 2023). Vasovic and McCallister (2026) likewise show that Serbia's energy realignment remains geopolitically sensitive because reductions in Russian supplies immediately create new bargaining pressure over alternative energy partners. Against security or cyber cases, the negative can extend that link by citing NATO's continuing role in Kosovo and Bosnia to argue that additional U.S. moves may be read as further securitization of a region already defined by alliance politics (NATO, 2025; NATO, 2026). See cards [28] [29].

Diplomatic Backlash

The diplomatic backlash disadvantage argues that open pressure from the U.S. can harden local elites, reduce political flexibility, and make negotiated settlements less likely. This is especially potent against Bosnia sanctions affirmatives and Kosovo–Serbia diplomacy cases.

The argument is not simply that leaders dislike pressure; it is that external coercion can be converted into domestic legitimacy by nationalist actors who frame themselves as resisting foreign diktat. The CSIS explains how externally tolerated elites have learned to survive by performing cooperation while consolidating power internally; negative teams can leverage that logic to argue that additional pressure will not produce liberalization but strategic adaptation (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2021). The Just Security reporting on Dodik also supports a backlash scenario in Bosnia: international punitive strategies do not necessarily remove destabilizing actors from politics and can instead feed a politics of grievance and defiance (Bassuener, 2025). See card [30].

EU Backlash & Alliance Friction (Anti-Unilateralism)

EU backlash or alliance friction disadvantages essentially encompass transatlantic coordination arguments. The European Union already dominates enlargement policy, growth financing, and conditionality in the region. The link is that unilateral U.S. activism can duplicate, crowd out, or disrupt policy sequencing that the EU is already using, creating burden-sharing disputes or mixed signals for local governments. The European Commission's Growth Plan and Reform and Growth Facility provide strong uniqueness for this position because they show that Brussels is already attempting to use conditional finance, market integration, and reform incentives to move the region toward convergence (European Commission, 2023; European Commission, n.d.). Council of the European Union materials on EU–Western Balkans relations further establish that accession and stabilization remain embedded in a multilateral European framework rather than a U.S.-led one (Council of the European Union, n.d.). Against economic, governance, or accession-related affirmatives, the negative can argue that the plan undermines alliance coherence precisely because Washington would be muscling into a lane Brussels already occupies. See cards [31] [32].

Great-Power Competition Spiral

The great-power-competition spiral disadvantage is broader than Russia alone. The negative claim is that framing the Western Balkans as a theater for strategic competition with Russia and China encourages local elites to forum-shop between patrons, deepens bloc politics, and subordinates democratic reform to geopolitical alignment. Haxhixhemajli's analysis of China's Digital Silk Road in the Western Balkans is valuable here because it directly links infrastructure choices to questions of national security and geopolitical alignment, which means affirmatives that claim to counter malign influence may intensify rather than resolve standards competition (Haxhixhemajli, 2025). Kisić's discussion of pro-Russian media campaigning in Serbia further supports the idea that information politics in the region are already interpreted through rival patronage and geopolitical frames (Kisić, 2022). The negative can thus argue that an affirmative that openly seeks to pull the region deeper into a U.S.-aligned orbit may worsen polarization, not reduce it. See cards [33] [34].

Aid Tradeoff & Corruption Absorption

Aid tradeoff is not reduced to simplistic representations of spending; rather, the argument suggests that external assistance and capacity-building are frequently absorbed by the same weak institutions, patronage networks, and stabilitocratic elites that the affirmative claims to reform. CSIS explicitly warns that prior assistance structures in the Western Balkans too often tolerated illiberal governance in the name of short-term stability, producing a system in which external money and legitimacy propped up semi-authoritarian actors rather than transforming governance (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2021). Transparency International's

2026 regional analysis reinforces that concern by tying weak institutions, shrinking civic space, and opaque high-value investment decisions together. That combination gives the negative both a corruption absorption disadvantage and a solvency deficit: more aid or support can disappear into elite capture while burning political capital and crowding out more targeted tools (Transparency International, 2026). See cards [35] [36].

Nationalist Backlash

This disadvantage is distinct from diplomatic backlash because it foregrounds ethnonational mobilization rather than routine diplomatic friction. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo–Serbia are especially susceptible because sovereignty, recognition, and territorial integrity remain emotionally loaded and symbolically central. NATO’s repeated statements that it will not accept a security vacuum in Bosnia and that KFOR continues to guarantee security in Kosovo establish how sensitive these theaters remain to outside military and diplomatic signaling (NATO, 2025; NATO, 2026). A negative team can argue that affirmatives involving sanctions, security guarantees, OHR-backed enforcement, or recognition frameworks risk triggering a rally-around-the-flag response that empowers secessionists or hard-liners. This disadvantage is strongest when paired with evidence of continued mobilization by actors like Dodik or with the broader literature on Serbian and Bosnian nationalist grievance politics (Bassuener, 2025). See card [37].

Kritiques

Intervention, Paternalism, & Trusteeship

This kritik family suggests that many affirmative plans reproduce a paternalistic model of interaction in which the West governs the Balkans through supervision, conditionality, and externally rooted claims to expertise over executive function. Bosnia is the clearest site for this criticism because the Office of the High Representative literally exists to oversee civilian implementation of the Dayton settlement and possesses extraordinary authority over domestic institutions (Office of the High Representative, n.d.). A kritik team can argue that aff advocacy normalizes external trusteeship and depoliticized rule, portraying Balkan societies as objects to be managed rather than political communities capable of self-determination. This kritik is strongest against democracy-promotion, anti-corruption, Bosnia-integrity, and institution-building affirmatives. See card [38].

Balkanism & Orientalism

The region also supports a specifically place-based critique: Balkanism. This argument holds that the Balkans are often narrated as Europe’s unstable, backward, semi-civilized frontier, which licenses exceptional outside management. The kritik can indict affirmative rhetoric that treats the region as a permanent crisis space that must be rescued or disciplined by the West. This is not merely a generic discourse argument. It is supported by the topic literature itself insofar as so much policy writing frames the region through instability, malign influence, and democratic deficiency. A kritik debater can argue that such framings erase local political agency and reproduce a hierarchy between a rational “Europe” and a disorderly Balkan periphery. The CSIS stabilitocracy piece can even function as a negative link turn here: diagnosing illiberal structures is important, but policy discourse often folds quickly into managerial interventionism (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2021). See card [39].

Neoliberal Governance & Stabilitocracy

Against affirmatives with strong anti-corruption, economic-engagement, accession, or democracy-support routes, the negative can argue that the plan merely repackages the same or recurring stabilitocratic logic only with new funding outlets/governance outlines. A neoliberal governance or stabilitocracy could prove to be one of the strongest generic negative positions on the topic. The core claim is that Western engagement in the Western Balkans has too often favored market stability, elite compliance, and geopolitical alignment over genuine democracy. CSIS's "Confronting stabilitocracy" article is an intuitive advocate because it explicitly criticizes the prior assistance framework for rewarding semi-authoritarian leaders who promised stability while undermining accountability and civic development (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2021). See card [40].

Securitization

Securitization kritiks could be effective against affirmatives that work to handle information integrity, aspects of migration, or organized crime as primarily security questions, ignoring their political and institutional aspects. Some examples of securitization-linking affirmatives would be security-cooperation, cyber, trafficking, NATO, border security, and anti-malign-influence. The argument is that the plan turns political and social problems into security threats, privileging coercive institutions and narrowing democratic contestation. NATO's centrality to regional stability and the repeated use of crisis language in Bosnia and Kosovo provide an easy link story: the affirmative seeks to solve uncertainty by expanding security logics that may themselves intensify exclusion and militarization (NATO, 2025; NATO, 2026). See card [41].

Techno-Politics & Surveillance

Any affirmative built around 5G procurement, cyber cooperation, digital resilience, anti-disinformation architecture, or information integrity creates access to techno-politics critiques. Haxhixhemajli's analysis of China's Digital Silk Road in the Western Balkans makes tech infrastructure choices a central site of geopolitical and governance struggle, which means the negative can argue that the affirmative responds to one technological enclosure by deepening another (Haxhixhemajli, 2025). A kritik team can then pair that link with broader literature on surveillance, technological enframing, or the reduction of political judgment to technical management. This is not region-exclusive ground, but the Western Balkans topic gives it unusually concrete application through telecommunications, cyber training, and anti-disinformation programming.

Region, Ethnicity, & Identity

Identity-based kritiks are available but should not be designed as generic shells for the topic and instead work as situational tools if the affirmative invites a critique of this nature. The most natural kritiks in this family would likely challenge affirmative framings that flatten religious, ethnic, or minority dynamics into a simple story promoting liberal-management. For examples, these kritiks could be employed against cases involving Bosnia's constitutional order, Kosovo–Serbia normalization, or media/disinformation policy that erase the political salience of ethno-religious identity.

Novice Packet Options

Recommendations for the novice packet are contingent upon which of the resolutions proposed is selected. Assuming the first resolution or a close variant is selected, an accessible set of options for early novice rounds include the following.

Affirmative:

For a novice affirmative, a strong position would be to advocate that the U.S. federal government should substantially increase its engagement with Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) through democratic institutions and independent media by increasing their Magnitsky sanctions, see card 6 (Ruy & Conley '21). Advantages could include both enhanced democratic institutions in BiH preventing authoritarian takeover and war, but another advantage could be U.S. internal reform as a result of policy follow-on as card 6 suggests may occur with a reproach to U.S. foreign international policy.

For this position, card 19 (Svilanović '26) works as strong inherency because it says that the Trump Administration's "transactional" approach to foreign policy is poor for democratic Western Balkans institutions. Combined with card 4 (Thorpe & Tare '26) that say the U.S. is directly promoting stabilitocracy through current policy which means a failure to change the status quo represents a direct harm. Uniqueness to the plan would come from card 9 (Sokol '25) which explains that reliable, consistent, and democratic journalism is failing in the Western Balkans and needs funding. Card 9 specifically mentions Bosnia and Herzegovina. Solvency is given through card 1 (Center for Strategic International Studies '26) that claims U.S. reengagement with the Western Balkans can break up stabilitocracy directly and also achieve policy success. Card 1 works to preempt an EU counterplan by claiming the EU has tried and failed to assist the Western Balkans states and the nations are not making progress, in some areas they're regressing democratically.

Negative:

A simple counterplan would be an EU counterplan: card 23 (Bechev & Iliriana '25) claims that the EU needs to lead Western Balkan development to better enhance the EU's security against Russia and increasing Russian presence in the Western Balkans.

A natural disadvantage would be a Russia disadvantage centered around lashout. Card 28 (Tisdall '26) directly talks about russian lashout from Putin whereas card 29 (Bojicic-Dzelilovic '26) focuses more on escalation by claiming Russia will increase hybrid warfare against the West through the Western Balkans if Russia continues to feel pressured.

A strong disadvantage would be an EU backlash disadvantage. Here, utilize card 31 (Aris '26) which states that U.S. policy without the EU's involvement encourages anti-Europe sentiment and also undermines EU ascension. In turn, Russian and Chinese influence in the region is codified: this acts as a turn for "counter-russia/china" advantages of an affirmative. Furthermore, card 32 (Bassuener '25) states that the U.S. unilaterally taking policy action weakens the EU's leverage in the region and emboldens authoritarianism while increasing likelihood of war

The most novice-friendly critical position to run would be a straightforward security K. Card 41 (Tomic '17) explains that specifically using political and linguistic language to frame the Western Balkans as a "security" issue directly works to militarize politics and directly suppresses the democratic solutions that the West claims to represent.

Resolutions

1. Resolved: The United States federal government should substantially increase its engagement with one or more Western Balkans nations in one or more of the following areas: democratic institutions, independent media, civil society.
2. Resolved: The United States federal government should substantially increase its anti-corruption enforcement efforts in the Western Balkans.
3. Resolved: The United States federal government should substantially increase its economic engagement with one or more Western Balkans states.
4. Resolved: The United States federal government should substantially increase its support for energy security in the Western Balkans.
5. Resolved: The United States federal government should substantially increase its security cooperation and/or assistance with one or more Western Balkans nations.

Discussion about Resolutional Wording

The first resolution has a particularly compelling educational case since it shifts the debate beyond hard politics and security to stability-focused relationship engineering. Current regional literature repeatedly cites connections between weak institutions, a shrinking space for the civic voice, direct corruption, levels of disinformation, and democratic backsliding. The EEAS specifically identifies disinformation and information manipulation as active threats in the Western Balkans and emphasizes support for societal resilience through work with both governmental and nongovernmental actors. Transparency International's latest regional findings similarly tie corruption in the Western Balkans to weak institutions and pressure on civil society, while RSF data show continuing press-freedom stress in parts of the region. The wording is defensible because "assistance for democratic institutions, independent media, and civil society" identifies the core recipients and sectors rather than leaving the topic at the vague level of "democracy promotion," working to narrow the aim of the affirmative in its cases. The resolution also correctly avoids limiting action "with states," since independent media outlets and civil-society organizations are often nongovernmental. Negative ground has an open field to contest the efficacy of policy, who should specifically interact with the affirmative's targets, and the outcomes of policy action from the affirmative.

The second resolution is especially strong because it is precise, timely, and tied directly to U.S. legal authorities. The United States already maintains a Balkans-related sanctions regime under executive orders and OFAC regulations; moreover, the U.S. Treasury has continued to use that OFAC framework to target networks within the region linked to destabilization and avoidance of sanctions. The phrase "anti-corruption enforcement" also solves a common wording problem because sanctions alone are often framed as purely punitive measures; therefore, anti-corruption enforcement broadens the topic area to include subjects including financial transparency, asset freezes, money-laundering prevention, and tools enabling prosecution. The phrase "in the Western Balkans" is preferable to "with states in the Western Balkans" because many of the most prominent offenders are not states at all, rather, individuals, small coalitions, business networks, and intermediaries operating both between and across

borders. This wording allows for precise affirmative cases along with equally precise negative responses about overreach of the United States, backlash from their actions, selective enforcement of policy leading to diverse disadvantages, then the broad literature accounting for the history of coercive tools (and their varying levels of success).

The third resolution includes “economic engagement,” which is a familiar policy-debate term with prior NFHS use, which gives the wording predictability without being broadly defined such as “support” or “cooperation.” Economic engagement also fits the direction of current regional policy literature. The EU’s Growth Plan and Reform and Growth Facility explicitly focus on market integration, infrastructure, private-sector development, and socioeconomic convergence in the Western Balkans. Additionally, recent EU support continues to fuel some level of infrastructure expansion and business growth throughout the region. Furthermore, limiting the resolution to engagement “Western Balkans states” constrains the topic such that it excludes every imaginable NGO or transnational program, while still preserving strong affirmative ground in areas like trade, development finance, investment, industrial policy, digital infrastructure, and state-to-state economic agreements. Negative ground is also significant since debaters can argue that U.S. economic initiatives would be reductive to EU programs, implementation would leave vulnerability to corruption, vulnerability to co-opting, or directly counterproductive if the affirmative intensifies geopolitical competition without solving root-cause governance problems.

The fourth resolution is simple and direct since it is narrow enough to be manageable by both sides of the debate while still hosting large enough ground to generate plan diversity. Energy security and diversification are central themes currently in European policy toward the Western Balkans. The European Commission’s energy support package was designed both to blunt the energy crisis and to accelerate the region’s energy transition. There is a strong literature base involving interconnectors, grid modernization, renewable deployment, gas diversification, and energy resilience. The word “support” is a good choice here because it captures grants, finance, technical assistance, infrastructure backing, and partnership programs without forcing the plan into a single instrument and grossly limiting ground. At the same time, the resolution remains bounded because “energy security and diversification” is a more defensible limiting phrase than a general resolution about economics or development. Negative ground is strong as well, including disadvantages about cost, cross-interference with broader European measures, fossil-fuel lock-in issues, corruption in infrastructure procurement, then various tradeoffs between speed, affordability, and sustainability.

The final resolution is the most conventional debate resolution since it includes the phrase “security cooperation and/or assistance” which has a precedent in past policy topics and a literature base. NATO continues to treat the Western Balkans as strategically important, remains deeply engaged through KFOR, and supports reform and capacity-building partnerships in places like Bosnia and Herzegovina. NATO statements from 2025 and 2026 also show that regional stability, defense reform, and cooperation with Western Balkan partners remain current priorities. Including the phrase “Western Balkan nations” is especially important here because it prevents the topic from drifting into unilateral U.S. military action or some free-floating regional intervention. Instead, the wording pushes the resolution towards tools that can involve traditional aspects such as training, interoperability, cyber cooperation, border security, defense reform, intelligence coordination, and military assistance while also leaving open the door for non-state actors within the subject nation. That creates robust affirmative and negative ground on escalation, alliance entanglement, securitizing political problems, and duplication with NATO or EU structures operating in the region.

Definitions

Anti-Corruption Enforcement

“Historically, corporations were outside the scope of the criminal law, which focused on personal guilt and notions of culpability and blame. Anti-corruption enforcement, accordingly, was aimed at individuals and primarily targeted public officials engaging in bribe-taking and embezzlement of public funds and individuals offering bribes - although the latter were targeted to a much lesser degree. Recently, however, the debate on how to get companies to comply with domestic and international anti-corruption laws and regulations has intensified. Many of the biggest corruption investigations concern legal persons rather than natural persons. The liability of legal persons such as corporations is also known as “corporate liability” and is a key feature of the global fight against corruption (Lee-Jones, 2018).” **(United Nations Office on Corruption and Crime, n.d.)**

“The FEPA has the potential to invigorate the U.S. Department of Justice’s (DOJ’s) global anti-corruption efforts by allowing DOJ to pursue more fulsome prosecutions of all individuals and entities involved in illegal bribery schemes. Currently, DOJ’s main international anti-corruption tool, the FCPA, criminalizes only the “supply” side of bribery by making it illegal for individuals or companies to *offer, promise, or provide* a bribe to foreign officials. While DOJ has used other tools to attempt to criminalize the “demand” side of foreign bribery (i.e., the corrupt foreign officials themselves), DOJ has not had a law analogous to the FCPA in its toolkit that specifically targeted those foreign officials. This is precisely what the FEPA aims to do: It gives DOJ authority to prosecute foreign officials who accept or demand bribes, and it has the potential to significantly expand the scope and depth of U.S. anti-corruption enforcement.” **(Sidley Austin, LLP, 2023)**

“The Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) should be expected to continue with enforcement of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA), particularly with regard to foreign entities and individuals. The DOJ’s anti-corruption enforcement arsenal also now includes the recently enacted Foreign Extortion Prevention Act (FEPA). Individuals and companies conducting international transactions subject to the FCPA and FEPA face significant risk due to enactment of similar anti-corruption laws by foreign countries, strengthened export control laws and heightened scrutiny of cross-border transactions. FEPA, which criminalizes the “demand” side of bribery by expressly prohibiting the solicitation and acceptance of bribes by foreign government officials, expands the government’s ability to prosecute foreign corruption, acting as a complement to the decades-old FCPA.” **(Baker Hostetler, n.d.)**

“According to Duke Law professors Rachel Brewster and Samuel W. Buell, greater international cooperation combined with U.S. legal culture spurred this growth in anti-corruption enforcement. In a recent article, they argue that a better understanding of the effects of corruption prompted countries to support U.S. anti-corruption enforcement efforts and gave U.S. prosecutors access to evidence located abroad, which improved their ability to investigate and bring cases against both American and foreign corporations. In addition, U.S. legal culture rewards prosecutors for handling anti-corruption cases, and a symbiotic relationship between prosecutors and corporate defense attorneys formed over time. Brewster and Buell suggest that, due to these factors, anti-corruption enforcement will continue to grow in importance. The main U.S.

anti-corruption law – the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA) – always allowed prosecutors to target both U.S. and foreign companies that bribed foreign government officials. But, as Brewster and Buell note, since evidence of illegal bribes was often located overseas, U.S. prosecutors needed the help of local authorities to collect this evidence. And many governments refused to aid U.S. anti-corruption enforcement efforts. Indeed, the prevailing theory held that bribery actually benefited developing countries by facilitating investment, and some countries even considered bribes a tax-deductible business expense.” **(Kramer, 2017)**

Assistance

“the act of helping or assisting someone or the help supplied : aid”

(Merriam Webster, “Assistance”

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/assistance>)

In its broadest sense, U.S. foreign assistance, or foreign aid, is defined under the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 (P.L. 87-195, as amended, FAA), the primary legislative basis of these programs, as

any tangible or intangible item provided by the United States Government [including "by means of gift, loan, sale, credit, or guaranty"] to a foreign country or international organization under this or any other Act, including but not limited to any training, service, or technical advice, any item of real, personal, or mixed property, any agricultural commodity, United States dollars, and any currencies of any foreign country which are owned by the United States Government....
 (§634(b)) [.] **(Brown & McCabe, 2022)**

Civil Society

“Civil society refers to the collective of non-governmental organizations, community groups, and associations that operate independently of the state and the market. It fosters civic engagement, promotes social justice, and advocates for public interests. Civil society is essential for strengthening democracy and enhancing community resilience.” **(UNSECO, n.d.)**

“According to the World Bank: “Civil society ... refers to a wide array of organizations: community groups, non-governmental organizations [NGOs], labour unions, indigenous groups, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and foundations.” The term became popular in political and economic discussions in the 1980s, when it started to be identified with non-state movements that were defying authoritarian regimes, especially in central and eastern Europe and Latin America. When mobilized, civil society - sometimes called the “third sector” (after government and commerce) - has the power to influence the actions of elected policy-makers and businesses. But the nature of civil society - what it is and what it does - is evolving, in response to both technological developments and more nuanced changes within societies.” **(Jezard, 2018)**

Democratic Governance

“The UN does not advocate for a specific model of government but promotes democratic governance as a set of values and principles that should be followed for greater participation, equality, security and human development. Democracy provides an environment that respects human rights and fundamental freedoms, and in which the freely expressed will of people is exercised. People have a say in decisions and can hold decision-makers to account. Women and men have equal rights and all people are free from discrimination.” **(United Nations, n.d.)**

Democratic Institutions

“Democratic institutions have been created in varying degrees to meet the following goals:

- To enable participation either directly or through elections;
- To avoid tyranny by autocratic rulers and (in some democratic systems) by the majority;
- To promote open and fair competition for power on the basis of the popular vote;
- To ensure the accountability of governments;
- To provide a forum for rational discussion of political problems and settlement of conflicting social interests.” **(Bastian and Luckham, 2003)**

Diplomatic Engagement

“Diplomatic engagement signifies the formal interaction and communication between states or international entities to address shared interests or resolve disagreements. This involves negotiations, dialogues, and the establishment of treaties or agreements. Its

purpose is to promote cooperation, prevent conflict, and advance mutual objectives. Such interactions are fundamental to international relations and global governance.

Context

Diplomatic engagement is a constant feature in international news, particularly concerning climate change, trade disputes, and geopolitical stability. Multilateral forums serve as crucial platforms for states to pursue collective action on complex global issues. Current discussions often center on the effectiveness of existing diplomatic mechanisms in addressing urgent environmental crises or fostering sustainable development. The success of global policy frameworks relies heavily on consistent and effective diplomatic efforts among nations.” (**News Sustainability Director, n.d.**)

Economic Engagement

Dr. Rich Edwards in his topic analysis of the 2013 topic promoting economic engagement toward Latin America provides an extensive list of definitions for Economic Engagement, which can be found here:

<https://assets.nfhs.org/umbraco/media/869098/topic-lecture-2013.pdf>

“Economic engagement – a policy of deliberately expanding economic ties with an adversary in order to change the behavior of the target state and improve bilateral political relations - is a subject of growing interest in international relations. Most research on economic statecraft emphasizes coercive policies such as economic sanctions. This emphasis on negative forms of economic statecraft is not without justification: the use of economic sanctions is widespread and well documented, and several quantitative studies have shown that adversarial relations between countries tend to correspond to reduced, rather than enhanced, levels of trade (Gowa, 1994; Pollins, 1989). At the same time, however, relatively little is known about how often strategies of economic engagement are deployed: scholars disagree on this point, in part because no database cataloging instances of positive economic statecraft exists (Mastanduno, 2003). Beginning with the classic work of Hirschman (1945), most studies of economic engagement have been limited to the policies of great powers (Mastanduno, 1992; Davis, 1999; Skalmes, 2000; Papayouanou & Kastner, 1999/2000; Copeland, 1999/2000; Abdelal & Kirshner, 1999/2000).” (**Kahler and Kastner, p. 524**)

Efforts

effort

noun

ef·fort 'e-fərt -,fɔrt

Synonyms of *effort*

1

: conscious exertion of power : hard work

a job requiring time and *effort*

2

: a serious attempt : **try**
making an *effort* to reduce costs

3
: something produced by exertion or trying
the novel was her most ambitious *effort*

4
: effective force as distinguished from the possible resistance called into action by such a force

5
: the total work done to achieve a particular end
the war *effort*

(Merriam-Webster “Effort”
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/effort>)

Energy Diversification

“Energy diversification is a method to spread power production across different sources for better energy security.” (Sustainability Dictionary, 2025)

“Energy diversification is a strategy employing varied energy sources to lessen reliance on a single source, bolstering energy security and diminishing potential risks.” (Wisdom Library, 2026)

Energy Security

“The International Energy Agency (IEA) defines energy security as uninterrupted access to energy at affordable prices. It is a vital part of all our lives, ensuring that we can keep the lights on, heat our homes, cook for ourselves, and travel for work and leisure. Energy security means many things, but its established framework rests on three pillars: reliability, resilience and efficiency.

- Energy reliability hinges on the ability of a country’s energy supply to meet the power requirements of all sectors, including especially energy-intensive ones such as transport and heavy industry.
- Energy resilience is a country’s ability to head off and respond to interruptions in energy supply, such as those prompted by conflict or extreme weather events.
- Energy efficiency is all about using as little energy as possible, which can be achieved in several ways, from directly reducing energy use to ensuring that buildings are well-insulated.” (Galey, 2026)

Engagement

“In recent years, diplomatic circles have been relying on the term “engagement” to describe various communication and public diplomacy activities with foreign publics. The term is used almost universally in government, the military, academia, corporations and think tanks to describe a range of practices designed to influence or persuade foreign audiences.” **(Wallin, 2013)**

Independent Media

“Independent Media. In a constitutional democracy, the mass media—newspapers, magazines, websites, and radio and television stations—are for the most part privately owned, independent, and free of government control. They are among the nongovernmental organizations of civil society, and they are free to transmit information and ideas about government and public affairs to the people. Therefore, they can criticize government officials and offer alternative opinions about current events and issues.” **(Annenberg Classroom, n.d.)**

“Independent media is mass media, such as television, newspapers, or Internet-based publications, that is free of influence by government or corporate interests. Independence stands as a cornerstone principle within media policy and the freedom of the press, representing an “essentially contested concept”. The concept is often used to denote, declare, or claim independence from state-control, market forces, or conventions, and media organizations and individuals assert their legitimacy and credibility through it.” **(Indian Voices Newspaper, 2025)**

Measure(s)

Measure (n) Method. a way of achieving something, or a method for dealing with a situation:

take measures What further measures can we take to avoid terrorism?

[+ to infinitive] Emergency measures to help the refugees are badly needed.

These measures were designed to improve car safety.

(Cambridge Dictionary “Measure”

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/measure>)

Sanctions

The Security Council can take action to maintain or restore international peace and security under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter. Sanctions measures, under Article 41, encompass a broad range of enforcement options that do not involve the use of armed force. Since 1966, the Security Council has established 31 sanctions regimes, in Southern Rhodesia, South Africa, the Former Yugoslavia (2), Haiti (2), Angola, Liberia (3), Eritrea/Ethiopia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, Iran, Somalia/Eritrea, ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida, Iraq (2), Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, Lebanon, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Libya (2), the Taliban, Guinea-Bissau, Central African Republic, Yemen, South Sudan and Mali.

Security Council sanctions have taken a number of different forms, in pursuit of a variety of goals. The measures have ranged from comprehensive economic and trade sanctions to more targeted measures such as arms embargoes, travel bans, and financial or commodity restrictions. The Security Council has applied sanctions to support peaceful transitions, deter non-constitutional changes, constrain terrorism, protect human rights and promote non-proliferation. **(United Nations Security Council, n.d.)**

The best-known of the United States government's (USG) targeted sanctions tools to address human rights abuse and corruption is the Global Magnitsky (GloMag) sanctions program. Although inspired by and named for Russian whistleblower Sergei Magnitsky, the program has worldwide applicability. Its flexible criteria and mandate for consultation with civil society have made it an attractive tool for NGOs recommending sanctions. However, the USG often defaults to using country-specific sanctions programs for human rights abuses and corruption instead of GloMag, when such a program exists.

Congress passed the original Magnitsky Act in 2012 in response to the death in custody of Russian tax advisor Sergei Magnitsky, who had uncovered a major tax fraud conspiracy. The Magnitsky Act authorized U.S. sanctions against Russians involved in Magnitsky's brutal detention and the conspiracy he uncovered, as well as people involved in human rights abuses against other activists. The Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act was passed in 2016. The executive branch implemented the law in 2017 by issuing Executive Order (E.O.) 13818, which created a sanctions program covering a broad range of human rights abuses and acts of corruption anywhere in the world. In 2022, the Act was permanently reauthorized. **(Human Rights First, n.d.)**

Security Assistance and Security Cooperation

“C1.1.1. Definition and Purpose. Security cooperation (SC) comprises all activities undertaken by the DoD to encourage and enable international partners to work with the United States to achieve strategic objectives. It includes all DoD interactions with foreign defense and security establishments, including all DoD-administered security assistance (SA) programs, that build defense and security relationships; promote specific U.S. security interests, including all international armaments cooperation activities and SA activities; develop allied and friendly military capabilities for self-defense and multinational operations; and provide U.S. forces with peacetime and contingency access to host nations. It is DoD policy that SC is an important tool of national security and foreign policy and is an integral element of the DoD mission. SC activities shall be planned, programmed, budgeted, and executed with the same high

degree of attention and efficiency as other integral DoD activities. SC requirements shall be combined with other DoD requirements and implemented through standard DoD systems, facilities, and procedures. See DoD Directive 5132.03.

C1.1.2. Distinguishing Between Security Cooperation and Security Assistance Programs.

As the definition of SC above reveals, there are many types of SC activities. For the purposes of this Manual, it is important to be able to distinguish between SC programs and SA programs. Programs of both types are the means by which the United States provides defense articles, military training, and other defense services to our partner nations in support of U.S. national security objectives, including Building Partner Capacity (BPC). They are distinguished by the statutes by which they are authorized and funded.

C1.1.2.1. Security Cooperation Programs. SC program authorizations and appropriations are provided to the Secretary of Defense primarily under the annual National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) and appropriations acts. By statute or Executive Order (EO), they are sometimes required to be exercised in coordination with the Secretary of State. These programs vary greatly in terms of the agency or DoD activity responsible and the manner in which they are planned for and funded. See Chapter 11 and Appendix 8 for more detailed information on individual programs.

C1.1.2.2. Security Assistance Programs. SA is a group of programs, authorized under Title 22 authorities, by which the United States provides defense articles, military education and training, and other defense-related services by grant, loan, credit, cash sales, or lease, in furtherance of national policies and objectives. All SA programs are subject to the continuous supervision and general direction of the Secretary of State to best serve U.S. foreign policy interests; however, programs are variously administered by DoD or Department of State (State). Those SA programs that are administered by DoD are a subset of SC.” (**Defense Security Cooperation Agency, n.d.**)

Western Balkans

The most widely accepted definitions of “Western Balkans” *exclude* Slovenia and Croatia because they have been admitted to the EU. There are some definitions that include these two countries, which could set-up a topicality debate over the scope of the resolution. However, both contemporary US State Department usage and EU usage seem to exclude them. The only solution would be to introduce a laundry list of lengthy country names which could create an intimidatingly long resolution.

“The Western Balkans region comprises six partners: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.” (**Council of the European Union, n.d.**)

“Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia will benefit from a new €6 billion growth plan for the Western Balkans. The plan will bring to the region some of the benefits of EU membership ahead of accession, boost economic growth and accelerate much-needed socio-economic convergence. The growth plan should significantly speed up the enlargement process and the region’s economic growth.” (**European Commission, 2023**)

“Democratic backsliding (Öktem and Akkoyunlu, coupled with growing political and popular opposition to its membership across the EU (Gerhards and Hans), means that Turkish accession is now highly unlikely in anything other than the long term, if ever. Instead, the focus of attention is now firmly fixed on the six countries of the Western Balkans – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia.” **(Ker-Lindsay, et al., 2017)**

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Notable Organizations and Think Tanks

- **New Lines Institute / Western Balkans Center (WBC)** U.S. think tank running a Western Balkans Caucus for Congress and policy reports on Balkans stability.
- **Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA)** Washington think tank focused on Central/Eastern Europe that often publishes analyses on Western Balkan affairs.
- **Atlantic Council** U.S. foreign policy think tank that features experts on Russia/China in the Balkans.
- **German Marshall Fund (GMF)** Transatlantic think tank, including the ReThink.CEE program that publishes Balkan/China analyses.
- **Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)** Influential foreign-policy institute that has previously published backgrounders on Balkan issues.
- **Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS)** U.S. strategic policy research center that occasionally features Balkans security experts.
- **Brookings Institution** Policy think tank that occasionally covers EU/NATO enlargement in the Western Balkans.
- **Office of the High Representative (OHR)** EU missions and international overseers that the U.S. closely coordinates with regarding Dayton enforcement.
- **Transparency International (Balkans chapters)** NGO tracking corruption, presses for sanctions like Magnitsky.
- **Radio Free Europe / Balkan Insight** Media organizations that provide news and commentary on Balkans politics, including U.S. policy.
- **Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN)** Regional NGO doing investigative journalism on corruption and war crimes.

Appendix A - Select Cards Referenced Above

Topic Justification

1. The Western Balkans need support, and the U.S. must reengage with the region — the EU alone is insufficient.

Center for Strategic International Studies '26. "Reimagining U.S. Policy toward the Western Balkans | European Security, Politics, and Economics | CSIS." Csis.Org.

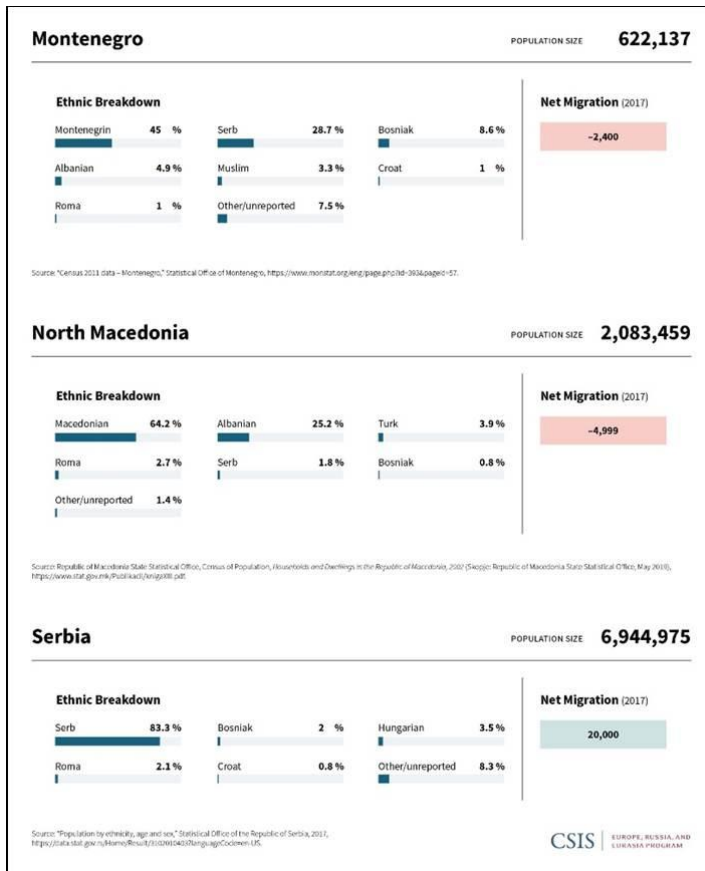
<https://www.csis.org/programs/europe-russia-and-eurasia-program/archives/european-security-politics-and-economics-1>. -SCP

The United States was the driving force behind the international mobilization that brought peace to the Western Balkans in the 1990s, ending bloodshed first in Bosnia and Herzegovina and then in Kosovo. A decade-long, intensive diplomatic and economic investment by the United States supported reconstruction and post-conflict stabilization into the 2000s and was further bolstered by NATO and EU integration. This effort delivered tangible results: Albania and Croatia joined NATO in 2009, while Montenegro and North Macedonia joined the alliance in 2017 and 2020, respectively. Croatia joined the European Union in 2013, the last country to do so for the foreseeable future.



After 2008, the United States disengaged from the Western Balkans in the belief that the region could be left to the European Union to manage and that NATO and EU accession processes would eventually secure the region's peace and prosperity. Instead, the region has undergone a decade of democratic decline, and meaningful reform has been impeded by corruption and patronage networks led by long-standing political figures.

Weak rule of law across the region has reduced economic opportunities, aggravated environmental pollution, and weakened public services, all driving forces for citizen frustration and a rising wave of emigration from the region. With the exception of Croatia, EU membership is no longer a realistic prospect for many in the Western Balkans. Renewed ethno-nationalism and historical revisionism have been deftly used by regional leaders to advocate for ethnic partitions of land and border corrections.



Whereas transatlantic policymakers may once have hoped the gravitational pull of the European Union and NATO, along with ad hoc engagement by the United States, would be sufficient to complete the region's Euro-Atlantic integration, this is no longer the case. The United States and the European Union must now actively compete for influence in the region as China, Russia, Turkey, and the Gulf states offer these countries alternate paths.

However, doing so will require reversing political stagnation and breaking the “stabilocratic” nature of regimes across the region—a status quo that has been perpetuated in part by the top-down approach of U.S. and EU engagement. Confronting stabilitocracy in the Western Balkans: A New Approach for U.S. Assistance outlines a new strategy for U.S. assistance that focuses on two pillars: (1) a bottom-up grassroots approach that places civil society, activism, transparency, and accountability at the center of U.S. efforts, and (2) the development of a transparent economic system that prioritizes young people and diversifies economic opportunities.

In the Western Balkans, memories of war, ethnic cleansing, and massive refugee outflows still leave their scars on the region and its people. While the United States once achieved diplomatic success in the Balkans, its policies and assistance have not evolved, contributing to the region’s stagnation. With renewed purpose and engagement and cooperation with European partners, the United States may once again achieve policy success by recentering values and citizen prosperity.

AFFs

Overview

2. The U.S. should increase its engagement in the Western Balkans to advance a myriad of policy initiatives.

Coffey '25. (Luke Coffey) “Flashpoint: A Path Toward Stability in the Western Balkans.” Hudson Institute. Dec 2, 2025.

<https://www.hudson.org/foreign-policy/flashpoint-path-toward-stability-western-balkans-luke-coffey>.
-SCP

Increased American engagement in the Balkans would help promote numerous U.S. policy goals:

- Advancing Euro-Atlantic integration. After the Cold War, NATO and the EU enlarged rapidly in Eastern Europe—but the Balkans lagged behind. Slovenia and Croatia are the only Balkan countries that are members of both institutions. Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro are in NATO and aspire to EU membership. Bosnia and Herzegovina is an EU candidate and is following a membership action plan (MAP) for accession to NATO. Serbia is a candidate for EU membership only. Meanwhile Kosovo—recognized by most but not all EU members—remains the furthest from joining either. Membership in these international bodies has historically encouraged improvements in governance, rule of law, security, and prosperity. Fully integrating the Balkans into the Euro-Atlantic community will make the Balkans, and by extension Europe, safer and more stable.
- Securing a major transit route for irregular migration. The Balkans are a key corridor for migrants moving from the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East into Europe. Weak governance, entrenched organized crime, and political corruption enable human trafficking that spills into European cities, economies, and politics, shaping debates from Brussels to Westminster. The political aftershocks of the 2015 Syria-related migration crisis are still being felt more than a decade later.

- Fighting entrenched organized crime and drug trafficking. The region's weak governance also enables drug traffickers. The Balkans serve as a major entry point for cocaine and other narcotics from South America into Europe. The September 2023 Serbian paramilitary attacks in Kosovo showed that areas with poor governance can easily become renewed flashpoints for inter- and intrastate conflicts.
- Combating Russian and Chinese meddling. Moscow uses the Balkans as a conduit for its destabilizing operations against Europe. Russia fuels ethnic discontent, provides political, economic, and diplomatic support to Serbia and secessionists in Republika Srpska, and openly threatens Bosnia and Herzegovina regarding its pursuit of NATO accession. China, meanwhile, is expanding its footprint through questionable infrastructure investments. The region is so important to China that Serbia was one of only three stops during President Xi Jinping's trip to Europe last year.
- Increasing European energy security. The region lacks sufficient infrastructure, reception terminals, and interconnectors to integrate with a regional energy grid without Russian consent. Although much of Europe has made progress, Russia remains a major energy supplier—especially to Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In particular, the Southern Interconnection gas pipeline, which will connect Croatia's Krk liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal to Bosnia and Herzegovina, was stalled due to obstruction by local nationalist leaders until only this week.

Anti-Corruption (Governance)

3. Promoting stabilitocracy entrenches current state failures — U.S.-led reform is needed for substantial change.

Ruy & Conley '21. (Donatienne Ruy, Heather A. Conley) "Confronting stabilitocracy in the Western Balkans: A New Approach for U.S. Assistance." Csis.Org. May 26, 2021.

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/confronting-stabilitocracy-western-balkans-new-approach-us-assistance>. Conley is the former Senior Vice President for Europe, Eurasia, and the Arctic; and director, Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program. Ruy is a fellow in the Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program. -SCP

The twenty-fifth anniversary of the Dayton Peace Accords was a stark reminder of what past U.S. diplomatic and economic assistance in the region could achieve—and an acute acknowledgement of the country's drift since that historic engagement. Despite these reminders, the U.S. agenda is more focused on outside powers' actions in the region than on a coherent U.S. engagement policy.

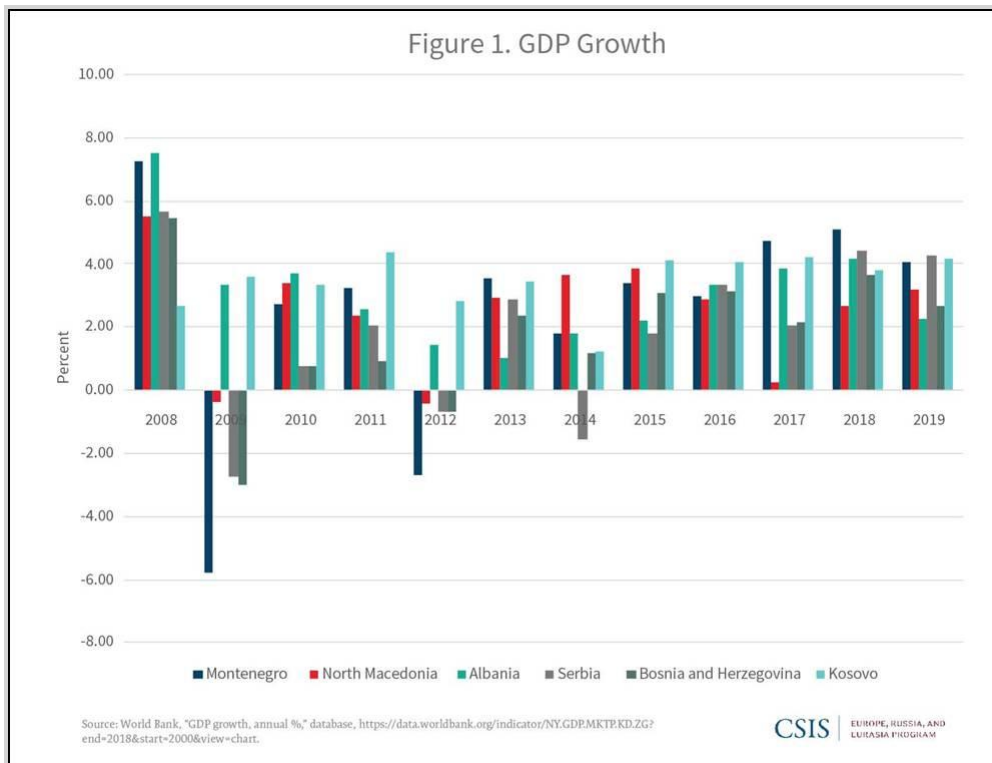
Strategic competition has partly driven Western complacency with leaders in the Balkans who have tightened their patronage networks over two decades. These leaders have learned the "language of the West"—paying lip service to the need for reform—to ensure assistance continues to flow, even when they know such reforms go against their interests (good governance threatens corrupt practices). While Western leaders have acknowledged this credibility gap, they have prioritized the stability that these leaders seemingly provide the West, not to mention rhetorical support against strategic competitors. However, devotion to this "stabilitocracy" is short-term thinking; the region's long-term stagnation will eventually lead to greater instability and create an outsized role for foreign malign influence.

The costs of stabilitocracy are high: powerful leaders with strongman tactics, from Serbia's Aleksandar Vucic to Montenegro's Milo Djukanovic, have overseen years of state capture. While North Macedonia and Kosovo have seen incremental progress, governments in Albania and Serbia have been plagued by opposition boycotts and protests over environmental and democratic standards. For the first time in 30 years, Montenegro has undergone real political change, but the new political leadership is susceptible to Russian malign influence, potentially reinforcing the view that stability is more important than change.

Strategic competition has partly driven Western complacency with leaders in the Balkans who have tightened their patronage networks over two decades.

Patronage networks across the region have become deeply entrenched, and public administrations have been politicized and filled with party loyalists. The work of the late 1990s and early 2000s has been largely dismantled. Through assistance and support, the region needs something akin to institution *rebuilding*—a heavy lift.

These networks have both fed and been fed by the region's lackluster governance: all six countries are now deemed “transitional or hybrid” regimes. Deficient governance structures have impeded significant improvements in living standards despite respectable economic growth. Corruption and emigration have led to increasing societal frustration, compounded by pollution and concerns about rising environmental degradation.



According to Transparency International, corruption has worsened across the Western Balkans over the past decade. In the six countries, anywhere from 30 percent of people (in Bosnia) to 66 percent (in North Macedonia) believe corruption has had a lot of or some negative impact on their lives. Basic services to citizens are unsatisfactory, and administrations lack data and management tools, for example, to get trustworthy data on birth rates or land registry.

4. Nothing has changed despite the Trump admin's rhetoric; the U.S. is still promoting self-interest and stabilitocracy with only minor reforms for organized crime.

Thorpe & Tare '26. (Amanda Thorpe, Ilva Tare) "A Deeper Look at Trump's New Policy toward the Western Balkans." Atlantic Council. June 5, 2026.

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/dispatches/a-deeper-look-at-trumps-new-policy-toward-the-western-balkans/>. Thorpe is a nonresident senior fellow with the Atlantic Council's Europe Center, where she focuses on the Western Balkans and Congressional strategy. Tare is a resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Europe Center and was most recently a broadcaster with EuroNews Group. Since 2022, she has been hosting Balkans Debrief, a popular social media video interview series produced by the Europe Center. The series is widely shared throughout the region and beyond. -SCP

In some areas, the Trump administration is charting a new and different course in the US approach toward the Western Balkans. But is also notable how much of the report calls for continuity in US foreign policy toward the region. For example, it furthers several long-standing US policy positions, including support for Bosnia and Herzegovina's territorial integrity, universal recognition for Kosovo, the stabilizing influence of transparent institutions, and continued US partnership to dismantle transnational criminal networks.

As for what is new in this report—which was required of the administration by Congress in this year's appropriations law—in many ways it just says the quiet parts out loud, acknowledging realities that have been increasingly clear but not formally declared. There has long been friction between maintaining a heavy US (or European) hand in regional affairs versus making clear that Balkan countries are capable and encouraged to capitalize on their own regional power as a major transport corridor, supplier of skilled workers, and abundant source of natural resources.

That said, the report's phrasing that "The United States is ready to support where our involvement is wanted" should encourage US policymaker engagement to reform Bosnia's current illogical constitutional structure, which was crafted thirty years ago with a heavy US hand in Dayton, Ohio. Washington has a special mandate to engage with Bosnian leaders to effect positive constitutional reforms—especially from a security perspective to enable Bosnia's membership in NATO.

The Western Balkans may be witnessing a quiet but historic transformation in US foreign policy.

Buried within the latest State Department report to Congress is a message that, in another era, would have dominated diplomatic headlines: The United States is effectively abandoning its long-standing policy of nation-building and permanent international supervision in the region. In its place emerges a colder, more transactional doctrine focused on strategic stability, energy security, and geopolitical competition with Russia and China. Just as important, it also includes a far more aggressive campaign against organized crime, which has metastasized through the weak institutions of the Balkans for decades.

For those who have followed the region since the wars of the 1990s, the significance of this shift is enormous. For nearly three decades, Western policy toward the Balkans rested on the assumption that the region required permanent external management—political, institutional, and even psychological. Bosnia and Herzegovina became the clearest symbol of that doctrine: an internationally supervised state sustained through a complex architecture of foreign oversight, imposed reforms, and diplomatic interventionism. The new rhetoric coming from Washington suggests that the United States no longer believes such a model is sustainable, effective, or even strategically relevant.

The United States remains deeply embedded in the security architecture of Southeastern Europe through NATO, intelligence cooperation, and strategic infrastructure. Yet the focus is clearly moving toward hard

geopolitical interests: liquefied natural gas terminals, gas interconnectors, transport corridors, cybersecurity, defense capabilities, and limiting Russian and Chinese influence.

5. Magnitsky sanctions should be expanded in their scope, who they target, and their frequency of use.

duRivage '22. (Justin duRivage) "The Financial Weapon: Expanding Magnitsky Sanctions to Attack Corruption." GAB | The Global Anticorruption Blog. May 30, 2022.

<https://globalanticorruptionblog.com/2022/05/30/the-financial-weapon-expanding-magnitsky-sanctions-to-attack-corruption/>. -SCP

Economic sanctions targeted at individual wrongdoers can be a potent weapon in the fight against global corruption. The United States' 2016 Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (GMA) authorizes the President to impose targeted sanctions on corrupt foreign officials and their associates. And the GMA has had successes in deterring corruption: As earlier posts on this blog have highlighted, the GMA has prompted countries to strengthen their anticorruption laws and has prompted businesses to cut ties with corrupt individuals. Yet despite these successes, Magnitsky sanctions remain a relatively underused anticorruption tool. The U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) has only sanctioned around 200 people as part of its Magnitsky programs, and most of these individuals have been sanctioned for human rights abuses rather than corruption per se.

GMA sanctions can and should be scaled up by an order of magnitude, with a greater focus on targeting corrupt actors. The U.S. should be imposing GMA sanctions on several thousand people, not just a couple hundred. As the Biden Administration has recognized, global corruption increasingly threatens national and international security. In light of this, the Administration should use the GMA to impose sanctions on not only the most egregious of kleptocrats but those who engage in more modest—but still significant—forms of corruption.

More aggressive and wide-ranging use of GMA sanctions would make both engaging and enabling corruption far less attractive. Sanctions bar both Americans and American businesses, as well as nearly all foreign parties that transact in dollars, from dealing with individuals subject to GMA sanctions. Businesses or financial institutions that violate sanctions can face multi-billion dollar fines, prosecution, and secondary sanctions. And because the U.S. sanctions apply to indirect transactions, firms must also avoid dollar transactions with third parties, such as suppliers and customers, that have links to sanctioned parties. In short, sanctioning more corrupt individuals would force Western businesses to closely scrutinize their business relationships and cut off sanctioned individuals from the global financial system.

GMA sanctions' efficacy in deterring corruption is limited if only a handful of individuals—generally the "worst of the worst"—are targeted and if violators are not aggressively pursued. For most corrupt individuals and those who do business with them, the risk of being hit with GMA sanctions is likely so low that they do not even consider it. And ultra-rich kleptocrats sanctioned under the current system may be the least susceptible to deterrence and the best-positioned to evade sanctions through the use of complex vehicles like shell companies and offshore trusts. For GMA sanctions to achieve their full potential, they need to be deployed against a much larger set of individuals—senior figures who are involved in serious, destructive, high-level corruption, even if they are not (say) heads of government or ministers, and those sanctions need to be effectively enforced.

6. Magnitsky sanctions should be expanded in their scope, who they target, and their frequency of use.

Ruy & Conley '21. (Donatienne Ruy, Heather A Conley) "Confronting stabilitocracy in the Western Balkans: A New Approach for U.S. Assistance." Csis.Org. May 26, 2021.

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/confronting-stabilitocracy-western-balkans-new-approach-us-assistance>. -SCP

A new framework for U.S. assistance requires two pillars:

1. An enduring bottom-up grassroots approach that places civil society, activism, transparency, and accountability at the center of U.S. efforts. This approach is agnostic to power centers (e.g., presidency, parliament, or parties). [and]
2. The development of a transparent economic ecosystem that focuses on providing economic and social benefits and is based on government transparency and accountability. This ecosystem prioritizes curbing youth emigration, diversifying economic opportunities, and incentivizing a green transition, regional economic integration, and connectivity—all of which are dependent on domestic economic development for success. To be successful, the United States should outline its assistance goals with clear values and a positive vision for the region. In collaboration with like-minded partners, it should clarify the reform narrative for citizens of the six countries and make a clear connection between values, U.S. assistance efforts, and internal reforms that seek to improve their quality of life. This also means asking difficult and even politically destabilizing questions for U.S. relations with some of these countries: Are leaders and their entrenched patronage networks really good partners for the United States if the U.S. priority shifts from stability to transparency, pluralism, and a strong civil society?

Despite the United States' democratic shortcomings and societal polarization, U.S. diplomacy should be confident in its ability to talk about democracy as a journey rather than a destination—not as a lecturer, but as a nation itself constantly struggling to perfect its democracy. U.S. values, interests, and strengths all culminate in the inherent dignity of and respect for the individual, enshrined in a rule of law structure that gives an equal voice to all—without fear or favor.

U.S. diplomacy can also stand on firmer ground when discussing environmental protection. The Biden administration's focus on climate change and a green transition is a good basis to build collaboration and cross-border campaigns around the need for clean air and water, less reliance on polluting industries, and the urgency of climate change. Such campaigns also have the potential for inter-ethnic alliances: in Kosovo, for example, ethnic Albanians and Serbs are joining forces to protect rivers.

The following principles should frame U.S. assistance to the region:

- The dignity of the individual, in fulfilling their potential and in their entitlement to higher quality of life, is central.
- Transparency, accountability, and shared prosperity across the region strengthen pluralism and democratic structures.
- The United States will support voices that take concrete steps (not repeat talking points) to increase transparency, accountability, and shared prosperity, regardless of political affiliation. At the same time, the United States will work quietly with local activists whose activities may be jeopardized by public support.
- Economic benefits should reward those who follow these values through a transparent and accountable system. This system should also target very practical elements such as building data collection and transparent tendering systems that can ground policy decisions. Ideally, these principles should first and foremost align with EU, UK, and Japanese assistance efforts whenever possible, both to avoid duplication and to prevent counterproductive programming. Though the region should

no longer be seen as the sole “responsibility” of the European Union, concerted action will reap the most benefits. Diplomatic missions should align at all political and technical levels through a dedicated mechanism, for example building on existing meetings and contacts between the EU Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

Counter-Russia/China

7. The Western Balkans needs to integrate reliable digital infrastructure to counteract China's Digital Silk Road.

Haxhixhemajli '25. (Arta Haxhixhemajli) “The Western Balkans and China's Digital Silk Road: Keen Strategic Cooperation or Cautious Limited Engagement.” Gmfus. January 16, 2025. <https://www.gmfus.org/news/western-balkans-and-chinas-digital-silk-road-keen-strategic-cooperation-or-cautious-limited>. Arta Haxhixhemajli is a ReThink.CEE Fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States and a researcher in Kosovo and a policy fellow with Young Voice Europe. -SCP

China's engagement in the Western Balkans has multiple impacts for the region's countries in terms of geopolitics, security, human rights and democracy, relations with the EU and the United States. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia have different approaches when it comes to engaging with China, which are strongly related to the crucial issue of membership in the EU and NATO.

China has promoted its Digital Silk Road (DSR) in the six countries, which cooperate with it to varying degrees. This has increased its influence in the region. While the DSR offers technological and economic benefits for the countries in the Western Balkans, it also has serious geopolitical, national security, and foreign-influence implications for them.

Huawei is the main Chinese telecommunications company involved in the Western Balkans, as elsewhere. It is active in the region in the development of digital infrastructure, smart cities, data centers, and 5G networks. However, there are concerns about its ties with the Chinese Communist Party regime.

In recent years, as a result of their domestic politics and geopolitical choices, some of the Western Balkans countries started to take a clearer stance against China's influence and involvement in their digital infrastructure.

When it comes to their relationship with China and Huawei in the development of their digital and telecommunications infrastructure, the six countries have chosen either keen strategic cooperation (Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, though the latter's positioning is complex due to its specific constitutional setup as a state) or cautious limited engagement (Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia). Montenegro is somewhat between the two positions.

All six Western Balkans countries should be more aware of the risks and challenges associated with the development of their digital and telecommunications infrastructure. They should formulate and implement clear strategies so that this development does not harm their citizens' fundamental rights and security, without forgoing the immense economic and connectivity benefits that come from digital technological advances. This is especially the case with regard to the involvement, to whichever extent, of China and Huawei in this domain.

The six countries would gain from introducing measures and policies for building a secure digital future through collaboration and integration with trusted vendors.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and in particular Serbia need to be more cautious about engagement with China in this regard and show greater realization that this can jeopardize their aspirations for joining the EU and (for Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia) NATO. Beijing's influence has not only brought challenges for the three countries. They will not benefit from drawing close to China in the long term either; instead, they are being positioned as pawns for Beijing as it pursues technological supremacy.

8. The Trump administration presents a unique opportunity to encourage energy diversification.

Maliqi '26. (Agon Maliqi) "How Energy Could Redefine the US Role in the Western Balkans." Atlantic Council. June 10, 2026.

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/dispatches/how-energy-could-redefine-the-us-role-in-the-western-balkans/>. Maliqi is a nonresident senior fellow with the Atlantic Council's Europe Center. -SCP

Since the Trump administration took office in January 2025, observers in the Western Balkans and beyond have wondered whether US policy toward the Southeastern European region would change. For decades under both Democratic and Republican administrations, US strategy centered on support for the region's eventual European Union and NATO accession, as well as on investments to strengthen democratic governance, energy independence and regional market integration. Though US engagement has decreased since its 1990s peak—as Washington adopted a complementary role to European leadership (except on security and defense)—this strategic anchor remained consistent.

Trump's second term has upended some of these core principles. There is some policy continuity in the US legislative branch, as codified through a bipartisan Western Balkans Democracy and Prosperity Act, and in the Pentagon, which has not changed US force posture in the region. But the US State Department has taken a different approach in line with broader global shifts. These were clearly articulated in a recent State Department report sent to Congress, which defines the US goal as effectively being "stability ... as a means of pursuing economic cooperation."

As was widely expected, democracy promotion and state-building have been abandoned, as have EU accession and NATO expansion. Operationally, the United States no longer coordinates with Europeans through the QUINT format—the grouping of France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Nor does it intervene actively in managing daily Balkan affairs, moving the United States toward an approach that aims at "empowering local actors to resolve their own challenges."

This quieter US approach to the region, coupled with the fact that the State Department still has no Senate-confirmed ambassadors there, have created the impression of a lack of clear direction or focus to the region. But many indicators point toward considerable US engagement, albeit through a different strategic frame. The central US focus today seems to be on energy and economic infrastructure projects, and with a broader geographical scope. In the administration's thinking, the Western Balkans increasingly appears to be absorbed into the broader area of Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe, with which Trump administration energy officials have touted the "opening of a new era of cooperation."

9. Reliable journalism is failing in the Western Balkans and needs funding.

Sokol '25. (Anida Sokol) "The State of Media in the Western Balkans - IFEX." IFEX. August 18, 2025. <https://ifex.org/the-state-of-media-in-the-western-balkans/>. -SCP

Despite expectations that the journalism profession would continue facing growing challenges, we did not foresee the extent and speed of the collapse of traditional media and journalism in 2025, both globally and regionally.

We might have expected survival – or even slow extinction – of some media under pressure from markets and power structures, but not that hundreds of media workers in the Western Balkans would lose their jobs this year.

First, in January, Donald Trump cut off USAID, which affected media funded through grants and led to layoffs of journalists in the region. Important media and free expression projects were also canceled, including the annual IREX report on the state of media and press freedom worldwide, which Mediacentar had prepared for Bosnia and Herzegovina since 2004.

This was followed by Trump's March decision to significantly reduce support for USAGM, which led to layoffs at *Voice of America*, terminated contracts of *Radio Free Europe* contributors, and cast serious doubt on that outlet's survival. In just six months of his second term, Trump caused immeasurable damage to media freedoms and further emboldened authoritarian politicians to persist in their rhetoric and actions against journalists, including those in the Western Balkans.

Then came the sudden and unexpected closure of *Al Jazeera Balkans* in July, leaving over 200 employees in the region jobless. This closure is particularly alarming considering the outlet's stable funding, high professional standards, and good working conditions – something local media in BiH and the region cannot offer. Although it's clear the outlet's fate depended on the interests of Qatar's government, the loss for the public in the region is enormous due to its high-quality news, documentaries, and programming covering regional and global issues like climate change and the genocide in Gaza.

What is more disturbing than the speed of these decisions, or at least their announcements, is the lack of clear arguments to justify them, such as poor business performance. These moves were the result of aggressive attacks by U.S. President Donald Trump on the media and geopolitical interests of the Qatari government, in which the fate of journalists and the public's right to information are among the least important concerns.

The message from these decisions is clear: journalism and public interest are not priorities for decision-makers or media owners. Political, geopolitical, economic, or private interests of those in power outweigh both democracy and journalism.

Let us not forget that alongside these major external blows to the region's media sector, attacks from local Balkan politicians also intensified in 2025, particularly in Serbia, where Aleksandar Vučić's rhetoric and attacks on journalists continue unabated. Media freedoms in BiH are also in constant decline: Bosnia and Herzegovina ranked 33rd on Reporters Without Borders' Press Freedom Index twenty years ago; this year, it has dropped to 86th – a statistic that clearly shows the downward trajectory of journalism and press freedom in the country.

For journalism to survive in the future, it needs financial resources, but not money that comes with strings attached: banned topics, flattering stories about funders, or interference in editorial policy. High-quality journalism, especially television production, is expensive and requires serious funding to produce quality reports, documentaries, and investigative pieces that take months to complete. On local markets and from local budgets, such funding sources are nonexistent – marketing-based funding usually demands

sensationalism and overproduction, while public budget funding often means favorable reporting on those who control the funds.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's advertising market is not developed enough to support high production values or a large number of media outlets. The total estimated value of the ad market in BiH in 2023, according to Direct Media, was between €41 and €47 million, roughly the same as in 2013. Although it has somewhat recovered from the pandemic, the market remains significantly weaker than it was ten years ago, especially considering the number of media outlets has continued to grow over the past two decades. This is largely due to the rapid rise in online portals, though the number of TV stations has also increased significantly: in 2002 there were 30 stations, while in 2024 there were 111.

A greater number of information sources is good for media pluralism if those media adhere to high standards, original or specialized content, and diversity of opinion. However, in BiH, online outlets and various portals mostly republish others' news or spread propaganda, while commercial TV and radio stations primarily broadcast entertainment content.

The large number of media that mostly repeat the same content or serve political goals actually harms the profession and media pluralism, damages journalism's reputation, and erodes audience trust. Such "media" employ few people, offer poor working conditions and low-quality production, and do not inspire future journalists. There are exceptions, of course, small local newsrooms that are specialized or critically report on decision-makers, but their number in BiH is very small. Journalism needs large professional newsrooms and quality local media to protect the profession's reputation and inspire young people to pursue the calling.

Relying on marketing, except in the case of conscious advertisers, also means hyperproduction, clickable and sensationalist content, and the absence of criticism of advertisers. In recent decades, media have competed with influencers, search engines, and social networks for both audiences and advertising money. Social media play a significant role in reaching the audience and revenue, favoring entertaining and clickable content over public interest journalism. Newsrooms must adapt their formats and content to these algorithms. It goes without saying that the primary interest of private tech companies is commercial, not public, and their future accountability can only be enforced through regulation.

Public budgets also contain funds for media, but this source undermines professional standards even more than others, as it typically comes with dictated editorial lines. While it represents a steady and secure source of funding, the amounts allocated, except in the case of several cantonal TV stations, are only enough to cover basic production costs and keep local outlets obedient. Public support for media in BiH has never taken hold: while there are a few examples of loyal readers and supporters contributing, it is not enough for sustainability.

Bosnia

10. The U.S. only subjects limited amounts of anti-Dayton actors to repercussive sanctions.

U.S. Department of State '25. "Sanctioning Anti-Dayton Actors and Their Financial Enablers in Bosnia and Herzegovina - United States Department of State." United States Department of State. January 17, 2025. <https://2021-2025.state.gov/office-of-the-spokesperson/releases/2025/01/sanctioning-anti-dayton-actors-and-their-financial-enablers-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>. -SCP

The United States today designated eight individuals who organized and executed the commemoration of Republika Srpska (RS) Day on January 8-10, 2024 in support of RS President Milorad Dodik's secessionist agenda. Seven of those sanctioned today also helped plan and organize the 2025 commemoration. RS commemorations have been determined to be unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court. Directed and overseen by Dodik, they are emblematic of Dodik's longstanding efforts to undermine the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement, a cornerstone for regional peace and security. These individuals' actions threaten the territorial integrity, peace, and stability of Bosnia and Herzegovina by undermining the Dayton framework and its core institutions, including the BiH Constitutional Court and the authority of the High Representative.

Today, the United States is also sanctioning five individuals and one entity that form part of the Dodik family's financial patronage network. Dodik has used his official position to accumulate personal wealth through companies linked to himself and his family at the expense of the Bosnian people. Dodik and his family often rely on a network of trusted associates to obfuscate their involvement and circumvent U.S. sanctions.

The Dayton Peace Agreement and the Constitution of BiH are the democratic and multiethnic framework essential to peace and stability in the country. As demonstrated by President Biden's January 8, 2025 E.O. expanding U.S. sanctions authorities in the Western Balkans, the U.S. government will continue to promote accountability for those who seek to erode the rule of law and threaten peace and stability and facilitate efforts to circumvent U.S. sanctions.

11. NATO remains committed to the Dayton Agreement, meaning they could be amenable to increased U.S. intervention in its support.

NATO '25. "NATO Reaffirms Its Steadfast Commitment to Security in Bosnia and Herzegovina and to Safeguarding the Dayton Peace Agreement." North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). April 15, 2025. <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/articles/news/2025/04/15/nato-reaffirms-its-steadfast-commitment-to-security-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina-and-to-safeguarding-the-dayton-peace-agreement>. -SCP

NATO's North Atlantic Council underlined NATO's enduring commitment to stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina, to the country's territorial integrity and sovereignty, in accordance with the Dayton Peace Agreement, and to our enduring cooperation with Bosnia and Herzegovina. During the discussion, it was reiterated that the Alliance remains concerned about recent developments and their adverse implications, including for the country's constitutional order and the functionality of state institutions.

Against this backdrop, the Deputy Secretary General reaffirmed that "the Dayton Peace Agreement must be respected. It is a cornerstone of stability and Bosnia and Herzegovina's state architecture." She also underscored that "NATO remains closely aligned with its international partners," including the EU-led Operation Althea and the High Representative, and that NATO "will not accept any kind of security vacuum in Bosnia and Herzegovina. And we will not allow hard-won peace to be jeopardised."

Deputy Secretary General Shekerinska restated the Alliance's support for Bosnia and Herzegovina's progress "on its European and Euro-Atlantic path" and highlighted that it was important "to build upon this foundation, for the benefit of everyone living there."

12. Bosnia and Herzegovina must choose between strong institutions and stagnation — Western Balkans members urge for compliance to the Dayton Agreement.

United Nations Security Council '26. "Bosnia and Herzegovina Must Choose between Strong Institutions, Stagnation, High Representative Says as Security Council Delegates Urge Respect for Dayton Accord." 2026. UN Meetings Coverage and Press Releases. United Nations. May 12, 2026. <https://press.un.org/en/2026/sc16357.doc.htm>. -SCP

Bosnia and Herzegovina is moving along "a narrowing path" that could lead either towards institutional sustainability and economic revitalization, or stagnation and deconstruction of State institutions, the Security Council heard today from the High Representative of the international community in that country.

Today's briefing by Christian Schmidt, who occupies that Office, is taking place mere days after he announced his resignation. Mr. Schmidt was not appointed by the Council, but by the Steering Board of the Peace Implementation Council, an international body which supports the implementation of the 1995 General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina — also known as the Dayton Agreement.

That Agreement, adopted 30 years ago, ended the armed conflict that took place in Bosnia and Herzegovina between 1992 and 1995, and provided a framework for the country's two entities — the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska, each with its own executive and legislative branches. The two entities are linked by a rotating tripartite inter-ethnic presidency and a legislative branch. Tensions have recently surged in the country.

While the overall security situation is now stable, Mr. Schmidt cautioned: "Stability should not be mistaken for institutional health." Highlighting disagreements over the interpretation and implementation of the Dayton Agreement, disrespect for the ruling of the highest court of the country and deliberate obstructions affecting State institutions, he warned that these may well cause the narrative about Bosnia and Herzegovina's unviability to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The leadership of Republika Srpska continues to question the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, he said, noting also the lack of progress on State property, which has become a major impediment to economic development and infrastructure investment.

He outlined four priorities for the current year: Preservation of the institutional order established under the Dayton Peace Agreement; restoration of institutional functionality; resolution of the issue of apportionment of State property; and the timely introduction of election technologies ahead of the general elections in October 2026.

Even as Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to experience a gradual erosion of institutional cohesion, "there is clear evidence of societal resilience", he observed, warning against the use of nationalism for political gains. The international community must ensure that State institutional structures established under the Dayton Peace Agreement are preserved and strengthened. Domestic ownership "cannot mean institutional neglect", he said.

Denis Bećirović, Chairman of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, also stressed the importance of that Agreement, emphasizing that it "is not a menu from which you choose what you want and what you do not want". It is "scandalous", he said, that Republika Srpska leadership contracted with a lobbying firm to change United States policy towards Bosnia and Herzegovina, secure international support for secession and contest parts of the Dayton Peace Agreement.

Detailing his country's progress towards European and Euro-Atlantic integration, he said its results would have been even better without Republika Srpska's constant obstructions. He urged the Council to extend the mandate for the European Union's Operation Althea in 2026 and underlined the need to "dynamize" his country's path to full membership in both that bloc and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Serbia's delegate called for good-faith implementation of the Dayton Agreement, adding that "it cannot be redefined without the consent of all". He reaffirmed respect for the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and support for its European integration, adding that "as a country located in the heart of the Balkans", Serbia has often chosen restraint in the interest of preserving regional stability.

He called for full respect for the constitutional competences of both entities and the equality of the three constituent peoples, as enshrined in the Dayton Agreement. The domestic dynamics in Bosnia and Herzegovina demonstrate the futility of imposing "politically biased interpretations of the constitutional framework", he said, adding that as long as domestic actors rely on international intervention to resolve political disputes, incentives for compromise tend to diminish.

"Serbia neither interferes — nor seeks to interfere — in the internal affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina," he insisted, taking the floor again at the end of the meeting. Responding, the representative of Bosnia and Herzegovina held up a map of his country produced by Serbia, dividing it along ethnic lines. "We need you to actually stop implementing the slow-motion destruction of the Dayton Peace Accord and the slow-motion secession of the country by implementing the document that you officially adopted," he said.

"Croatia opposes all policies and rhetoric that undermine the Dayton framework, whether through secessionist narratives or attempts at political centralization," said that country's representative. Welcoming the opening of negotiations regarding that country's accession to the European Union, he urged that this momentum be used to advance key reforms, particularly electoral ones.

Greece's representative recalled that, 23 years ago, "the adoption of the Thessaloniki Declaration affirmed the European perspective of the Western Balkans". This commitment was renewed in April with the adoption of the Delphi Declaration on the European Integration of the Western Balkans, she noted, "highlighting that the region remains firmly committed to the irreversible path towards EU accession". The representative of Latvia also reaffirmed Riga's strong support for Bosnia and Herzegovina's European perspective and commended the continued efforts of EUFOR Althea.

The representative of the European Union, speaking in his capacity as observer, noted the March 2024 European Council decision to open accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina, while expressing regret that "the reform dynamic has since stalled". EUFOR Althea continues to play a key role in supporting the authorities in that country to maintain a safe environment, he said, urging all political actors to renew focus on progressing on the European Union path. He also stressed that it is the task of the Steering Board of the Peace Implementation Council to appoint a successor.

13. Bosnia risks losing hundreds of millions if they do not complete reforms necessary for the EU ascension process.

*The Brussels Times '26. "The Brussels Times." Brusselstimes.Com. June 2, 2026.
[https://www.brusselstimes.com/2168138/bosnia-urged-to-act-as-eu-funding-and-stability-hang-in-the-balance.](https://www.brusselstimes.com/2168138/bosnia-urged-to-act-as-eu-funding-and-stability-hang-in-the-balance)
-SCP*

European Council President António Costa told Bosnia and Herzegovina's leaders in Sarajevo that the country is "only a few steps away" from the next phase in opening EU accession negotiations, but must speed up reforms.

Costa, meeting members of the country's tripartite Presidency, said Bosnia and Herzegovina needed to decide whether it would do the work required to "share the same future" in the European Union, the European Council reported on Monday.

He urged the authorities to approve "the two remaining reforms" of the judiciary system and appoint a chief negotiator for EU talks.

Costa also called for the start of implementing the country's Reform Agenda, saying this would unlock funding under the EU's Reform and Growth Facility — an EU funding programme intended to support reforms and economic convergence in the Western Balkans.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has already lost €108 million in funding and a further €373 million is at risk in the coming months, Costa said.

14. The U.S. should renew its engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina to fulfill the Dayton Agreement through reform, security modernization, economic integration, sanctions, and institutional engagement.

Wise & Miller '25. (Doug Wise, Mike Miller) "Renewed US Engagement in Bosnia Can Help Fulfil Promise of Dayton." Balkan Insight. November 18, 2025.

<https://balkaninsight.com/2025/11/18/renewed-us-engagement-in-bosnia-can-help-fulfil-promise-of-dayton/btj/>. Miller, PhD, is a cognitive psychologist and executive with more than 40 years of experience across military, intelligence, academic, and commercial sectors. Wise retired from the CIA in 2016 after nearly 30 years of distinguished service, concluding as Deputy Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency. A former CIA Senior Intelligence Service officer and US Army veteran with extensive service and business interests in the Southern European region, he now advises global executives on risk, leadership, and security strategy. -SCP

Bosnia's political structure continues to strain under the weight of competing loyalties and external pressures. Moscow views the Balkans as a strategic pressure point in southern Europe, supporting separatist ambitions in the predominantly Serb-populated Republika Srpska entity, fuelling disinformation campaigns, and promoting anti-Western narratives.

Left unchecked, these dynamics could erode three decades of progress, poison the hope of the Bosnian people, and destabilise the wider region.

That is why continued US engagement remains indispensable. American diplomacy, precisely because it is both principled and pragmatic, provides Bosnia with the external anchor it still needs.

Sustained US attention is not charity; it is strategy. It preserves peace, advances Western influence, and mitigates the risk of renewed instability in the Balkans – a region whose crises have never remained contained within its borders.

A renewed American approach to Bosnia should build on Dayton's enduring strengths while addressing its structural weaknesses. It should be defined by clear outcomes, limited entanglement, and assertive leverage. Five principles can guide this framework:

First, reform with accountability. Condition all diplomatic, economic, and security support on measurable progress toward institutional reform. Tie assistance to benchmarks – judicial independence, electoral modernisation, and digital governance – and apply real consequences for obstruction. Performance, not promises, should define partnership.

Second, security modernisation. Lead a regional security initiative centred on modernising Bosnia's defence institutions and strengthening NATO interoperability. Make Bosnia's path to EU accession visible and credible. This would deter malign influence and reaffirm US leadership in southeastern Europe.

Third, economic integration. Encourage targeted US private-sector investment – particularly in renewable energy, digital infrastructure, and transport corridors. Such engagement would reduce dependency on external actors, expand employment to keep young workers in Bosnia, and demonstrate that rule of law and economic growth are mutually reinforcing.

Fourth, targeted sanctions. Maintain coordinated US-EU sanctions against individuals and entities that undermine Bosnia's sovereignty or the Dayton framework. Sanctions should be precise, enforceable, and tied to a clear diplomatic message: corruption and secessionism carry costs.

And finally, high-level engagement. Institutionalise sustained contact between US and Bosnian leadership through annual strategic dialogues and periodic chiefs-of-state visits. The summer visit by Acting Assistant Secretary Brandon Hanrahan and Deputy Mark Fleming marked a strong start; it should become the model for a consistent engagement rhythm.

This approach is not about reinventing US policy in the Balkans but about rebalancing it – transforming episodic attention into sustained partnership. It aligns with the US foreign-policy tradition of pragmatic idealism: advancing peace through credible strength, rewarding reform through tangible investment.

As Bosnia looks toward its next three decades, the task is not to replace Dayton, but to fulfill it. That fulfillment lies in a deeper culture of legality, the modernisation of institutions, and a renewed civic identity that transcends ethnic lines without denying them. The US and its European allies have a clear role in this process – not as patrons, but as partners in completion.

Kosovo-Serbia

15. Normalization between Kosovo and Serbia is ignored, flawed, structurally positioned to fail, and in dire need of external support.

Pavković et. al. '26. (Miloš Pavković, Fitim Gashi, Iliriana Gjoni, Dimitar Bechev) "Reviving Kosovo-Serbia Normalization Talks." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. June 11, 2026.

<https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/posts/2026/06/reviving-kosovo-serbia-normalization-talks>. Pavković: Chief Strategist, CEP Belgrade. Gashi: Executive Director, Sbunker. Gjoni: Research Analyst, Carnegie Europe. Bechev: Senior Fellow, Carnegie Europe.

a) Serbia declined to sign the Ohrid Agreement;

In the wake of Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the EU—including key member states, such as France and Germany—pushed hard for a settlement in Kosovo. Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia in 2008; while it is recognized by most EU member states, its status continues to be contested by

Serbia, Russia, and five EU members. In February 2023, a high-level meeting hosted by the EEAS in Brussels produced what many hoped would be a genuine breakthrough. Both sides accepted the Agreement on the Path to Normalization and, a month later in the Macedonian city of Ohrid, its Implementation Annex.

However, neither document was formally signed. Kosovo signaled its readiness to sign, while Serbia declined, leaving room for divergent interpretations and evasion. Still, the EU was at its most engaged: The union's then foreign policy chief Josep Borrell personally chaired proceedings, a Joint Monitoring Committee was established, and optimism was briefly in the air.

The momentum did not last. Within weeks, Serbs boycotted local elections in Serb-majority northern Kosovo. Ethnic Albanian mayors were installed in the area with almost no Serb support. Special police units moved in. Clashes with the NATO-led peacekeeping force KFOR followed. Then, in September 2023, came an incident at the Banjska Monastery: A Kosovar police officer and three Serb militants were killed, after which the militants led by the then vice president of the Serb List political party had fled or were arrested. As one expert put it in an interview, "after Banjska, literally everything collapsed."

What followed this initial phase was a prolonged period of stasis. Kosovo closed branches of Serbian banks; disputed the use of the Serbian dinar, instead requiring those in the north to use Kosovo's official currency, the euro; and moved to close Serbia-run parallel institutions in northern Kosovo. The EU criticized these steps as uncoordinated and destabilizing. Serbia actively opposed Kosovo's membership in the Council of Europe, in direct violation of the agreement Belgrade had just accepted. Borrell's attempt to reconvene a high-level meeting collapsed. A donor conference envisioned by the annex was quietly abandoned. By 2025, political deadlock in Pristina, which went without a functioning government for much of the year, paralyzed the dialogue further.

Late 2025 and early 2026 ushered in a third phase, marked by cautious reengagement overseen by a new EU special envoy, Peter Sørensen. Unlike the highly personalized and intensive diplomacy under Sørensen's predecessor, Miroslav Lajčák, the new phase has focused more on restoring procedural channels. Yet, what currently exists is managed stabilization, not genuine progress.

b) AND neither party has fully implemented a single of the 11 articles of the Ohrid Agreement;

For all the progress made since 2023, the fact remains that not a single article of the Ohrid Agreement has been fully implemented by either party.

Serbia's record is the worse of the two: Six of the ten articles applicable to it remain entirely unimplemented. Serbia has refused to treat Kosovo as a sovereign equal, blocked its memberships in international organizations, failed to prosecute those responsible for the Banjska attack, and declined to establish a permanent diplomatic mission in Pristina. The limited steps Belgrade has taken—accepting Kosovar vehicle license plates and identity documents—are best understood as crisis-management outputs rather than genuine compliance.

Kosovo's scorecard is more mixed but contains an equally significant gap. Pristina has met its procedural and formal obligations and cooperated on efforts to locate people missing since the 1998–1999 Kosovo War. But Kosovo has not taken the step the EU has identified as the practical trigger for the whole implementation sequence: sending the draft statute of the planned Association/Community of Serb-Majority Municipalities (ASM) to the country's constitutional court. The issue of protecting the rights of ethnic Serbs in northern Kosovo has been discussed for many years, and an intermunicipal body was proposed in 2013, but no action has followed. Pristina has taken several administrative measures in the north without coordinating with Belgrade, drawing sharp criticism from Brussels and Washington.

c) AND there are five structural reasons there is a lack of progress;

Behind the impasse in normalizing Kosovo-Serbia relations lie five structural challenges. The first and most fundamental is that domestic political incentives in both capitals consistently reward noncompliance: Commitments made in Brussels are abandoned when the two countries' politicians return home.

Second—and closely related—is the collapse of constructive ambiguity. The Ohrid Agreement's deliberate vagueness, once useful, now functions as cover for inaction. According to one interlocutor in Pristina speaking off the record, "the era of constructive ambiguity has exhausted its usefulness."¹

Third, the EU's credibility has suffered. The union lacks enforcement tools, its planned donor conference was canceled, and Hungary vetoed financial penalties for Serbia. Meanwhile, restrictive EU measures applied to Kosovo without comparable consequences for Belgrade have fueled damaging perceptions of asymmetry.

Fourth, the ASM is simultaneously a genuine obligation Kosovo has not met, a precondition Serbia uses to block wider progress, and a subject of disinformation that has poisoned the politics around it. The integration of Kosovo's ethnic Serbs has been treated as a box-checking exercise, which has ignored economic and social realities and produced fragile, reversible outcomes. At the same time, recent transitional arrangements—such as the March 2026 residence-permit framework for Kosovo Serb healthcare workers, teachers, and students linked to Serbia-run institutions—suggest that more gradual and service-oriented approaches are possible.

Finally, U.S. engagement has oscillated between absence and high-profile but unsustainable intervention.

d) AND there is work to do for both the US and EU.

The Kosovo-Serbia normalization process could still be reenergized. The EU must abandon its ambiguity, publish a transparent and enforceable implementation road map, and apply conditionality evenhandedly to both sides. As in the past, international support remains crucial. The United States should nominate ambassadors to both capitals and coordinate with—rather than seek to bypass—the EU.

Meanwhile, Serbia must stop blocking Kosovo's international memberships and ensure real judicial accountability for the Banjska attack. And Kosovo should take genuine steps to implement the ASM in good faith, framing the association as a service-delivery mechanism, and refrain from unilateral measures in the north.

The challenge now for all sides is not to draft new agreements but to build the political will to honor existing ones.

16. The U.S. should encourage Kosovo to return to negotiation over their autonomy with respect to institutional stability and historical integrity.

Foti '26. (Francesco Foti) "Recalibrating Western Policy Toward Serbia and Kosovo- Enlargement, Leverage, and Strategic Drift | Atlas Institute for International Affairs." Atlas Institute for International Affairs. April 2, 2026. <https://atlasinstitute.org/recalibrating-western-policy-toward-serbia-and-kosovo-enlargement-leverage-and-strategic-drift/>. Foti is a policy and security analyst/researcher. Graduated from the University of Westminster (MA) and Catania (BA), he mainly focuses on EU-Russian relations, the post-Soviet space (South-Eastern Europe, Balkans, and South Caucasus) path to Euro-Atlantic Integration. -SCP

Beyond the previously mentioned legal hurdles to an efficacious regional policy, the EU and the US have adopted a liberal post-intervention policy to stabilise the region and normalise relations between Serbia and Kosovo through cooperation at all levels, in the hope of eventually securing Serbia's formal recognition of Kosovo's independence, without, however, presenting it as an explicit condition for European integration.

The EU envisions the full integration of Serbia and other Balkan nations into the Union as a means of limiting Russian and Chinese influence, the last one being the US' biggest concern. In recent years, EU enlargement has progressed more slowly compared with earlier decades, and the process remains slower and more uneven, which fuels euroscepticism and favours China's hold.

The EU requires Serbia and Kosovo to work toward stabilising and normalising relations and to fulfil the numerous bilateral agreements it has brokered. While the Brussels Agreement achieved a modicum of success in terms of mutual concessions, Kosovo has refused to implement certain provisions, such as the establishment of the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities, while Serbia, among others, voted against Kosovo's Council of Europe membership. Recent clashes between the Kosovar authorities and the Serbian minority in the North have seen the former violating the agreed framework governing Serbian institutions.

Serbia, the most important Balkan state, has recently been the subject of the latest EU Commission country report, which states that reforms concerning the rule of law, judicial independence, and public administration remain insufficient. Specifically, the report notes that out of 22 chapters opened, Serbia has only provisionally closed a few. At the same time, the war in Ukraine and broader geopolitical pressures have reshaped EU enlargement policy and introduced new priorities, to the detriment of candidates that have been waiting for years at the EU's doorstep. Serbia's limited alignment with the EU's foreign policy towards Moscow remains a key political obstacle to deeper integration.

In the same vein, the Washington Agreement bypasses the political status question of Kosovo altogether and instead focuses on economic and infrastructural cooperation.

Greater clarity regarding the framework for renewed negotiations on Kosovo, including potential discussions on constitutional arrangements and implementation guarantees within Serbia's constitution, would contribute to a more sustainable regional configuration conducive to stability according to principles of international law. As of today, it is hard to envision a withdrawal of the premature recognition of unilateral secession that hampers the search for a solution to the Kosovo crisis.

17. U.S. key to legitimizing Kosovo for EU ascension and could solve Serbia's dismissal of the EU through a durable, legally binding agreement.

***Maliqi** '25 . (Agon Maliqi) "Trump Should Kickstart Kosovo-Serbia Talks into Making Real Progress." Atlantic Council. August 25, 2025.*

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/trump-should-kickstart-kosovo-serbia-talks-into-making-real-progress/>. Maliqi is a nonresident senior fellow with the Atlantic Council's Europe Center. He is a political and foreign policy analyst from Pristina, Kosovo. -SCP

In January, the EU appointed Danish diplomat Peter Sørensen as its new mediator in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, but he appears to lack the political backing needed for a fresh start. Brussels insists there is no alternative to the 2023 agreements, which it considers legally binding and has embedded into the countries' EU accession frameworks. Yet the past two years have shown that accession—the EU's main point of leverage—no longer carries weight in getting either [Kosovo or Serbia] to comply.

Doubts appear to be growing in Kosovo, which is unrecognized by five EU member states, that the country has a realistic path to EU accession. Given this distrust, Kosovo leaders are unwilling to concede anything to Serbia for what it sees as an unattainable goal. In Serbia, the public and political elites alike appear to be growing increasingly disillusioned with the EU. Belgrade has effectively abandoned the accession process and has become largely unresponsive to EU pressure.

This deadlock may only be broken by an external jolt. Washington still holds decisive leverage over both parties. And the White House may have greater convening power than the EU, as demonstrated by this month's Azerbaijan-Armenia talks. While the second Trump administration hasn't demonstrated an interest in mediating Kosovo-Serbia talks thus far, it has proven unpredictable in its diplomatic initiatives. The Trump administration may, for example, eventually engage on this issue to seek a foreign policy "win" if progress on peace initiatives elsewhere prove elusive.

The challenge, however, is to avoid repeating past mistakes. If the United States renews its engagement on Kosovo-Serbia talks, it must aim for durable solutions rather than quick photo-ops. That requires complementing rather than competing with EU engagements, as well as pushing toward a final, legally binding agreement centered on mutual recognition—one that would allow Kosovo to fully consolidate its statehood and join (at least) Western multilateral institutions. Agreements that settle on anything less have proven to be fragile and unsustainable, merely pushing the can down the road to the next US administration.

18. The U.S. should sign a bilateral security agreement with Kosovo.

*Dolan & Hajrullahu '25. (Chris J. Dolan, Arben Hajrullahu) "Why the US, Under Trump, Should Sign a Security Agreement with Kosovo." Balkan Insight. January 7, 2025.
<https://balkaninsight.com/2025/01/07/why-the-us-under-trump-should-sign-a-security-agreement-with-kosovo/bi/>. -SCP*

The United States and Kosovo should sign a bilateral security agreement to strengthen their current levels of security cooperation, not merely as a symbol of friendship but part of a strategy to expand bilateral relations, elevate Kosovo's statehood, and enhance US leadership in the Western Balkans. And Donald Trump is well-placed to make it happen.

The US has demonstrated its commitment to Kosovo's defence, most recently with congressional authorisation for military training under the 2024 National Defense Authorisation Act and approval of Kosovo's \$75 million purchase of 246 Javelin anti-tank missiles to strengthen deterrence.

A bilateral security agreement would build a security supply chain guaranteeing Kosovo's access to American assets while also strengthening US leadership in the region. It would also help steer Kosovo along its path toward membership of NATO, the world's premier security alliance.

Continued development of the Kosovo Security Forces through regular consultations in military education initiatives, joint exercises, crisis response, and international peacekeeping missions will align Kosovo with NATO operational standards.

[full article blocked by paywall — this is not a reason to reject the plan advocate, the excerpt is sufficient]

Western Alignment

19. Current U.S. approaches to "transactional" foreign policy within the Western Balkans weakens Euro-Atlantic cooperation and threatens to increase autocracy — unpredictable isolationist policy reduces the efficacy and credibility of the EU.

Svilanović '26. (Goran Svilanović) "The Western Balkans Cannot Remain Europe's Strategic Grey Zone." Europeanleadershipnetwork.Org. May 27, 2026. <https://europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/the-western-balkans-cannot-remain-europes-strategic-grey-zone/>. Svilanović is an international consultant at Network of Associations for Local Economic Development, who created the Regional Business Friendly Environment Platform for Western Balkans, aiming to drive economic reforms based on UN sustainable development goals. He was the Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council between 2013 and 2018, following the appointment by the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) Foreign Ministers in Belgrade on 14 June 2012. -SCP

The evolving geopolitical environment in the Western Balkans has also been shaped by shifts in United States policy. The "America First" approach led by President Donald Trump has created perceptions of reduced long-term US strategic engagement in the Balkans and greater uncertainty regarding transatlantic coordination. These days, the US places stronger emphasis on transactional diplomacy rather than on the broader state-building and democratization agenda. Days before the summit, we are witnessing US engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina that does not appear to be fully coordinated with the EU.

Some Western Balkan contingents have already travelled to Washington to discuss government-to-government agreements, while others are preparing to do the same. Local leaders are using this moment to hedge their policies, opting for shortcuts offered by the US administration while setting aside EU-brokered procurement policies. This leaves the door open for similar arrangements with other powers present in the region besides the EU and the US – above all China. If this process continues, it will strengthen autocratic tendencies in the region and further decouple the EU and the Western Balkans, as well as the EU and the US, in the region itself.

The summit in Montenegro will be dominated by the language of security, resilience, and strategic alignment. The official themes already announced include "shared prosperity and stability", regional resilience, connectivity, and alignment with EU policies. The key message from Brussels is that the Western Balkans are expected to align more clearly with the EU's geopolitical orientation.

Simply put, this is not enough. To me, this is the moment when the European Union itself must take greater geopolitical responsibility for integrating the Western Balkans.

In practical terms, this means continuing bipartisan engagement with the US, as long as possible, particularly in telecommunications and the development of AI, while recognising the strengths of the American tech sector. It also means providing unequivocal support for Montenegro's EU membership by signing its accession agreement by 2028, engaging decisively with malign actors in the region, and strongly backing those governments that remain genuinely committed to accession negotiations with the EU.

None of these actions would violate the existing enlargement criteria or process. Yet while pursuing this track, it is equally important to focus on several intermediate steps that could have a transformative effect and restore credibility to the EU accession process.

20. Stronger Euro-Atlantic support for the Western Balkans could transform them into a reliable economic and military asset.

Banc '26. (Erin Banc) "Securing Their Own Path: Defence and Security Strategies of the Western Balkans in an Era of Great Power Competition | Atlas Institute for International Affairs." Atlas Institute for International

Affairs. May 30, 2026.

<https://atlasinstitute.org/securing-their-own-path-defence-and-security-strategies-of-the-western-balkans-in-an-era-of-great-power-competition/>. Banc is a political risk analyst focusing on security, defence, and global geopolitics. She holds two master's degrees in Security and Diplomacy and International Business and is currently preparing to pursue a PhD in the field. Her work explores strategic competition, geopolitical risk, and defence tech innovation, with a particular interest in emerging power dynamics and evolving security environments. -SCP

To translate current momentum into sustainable resilience, both regional and international actors should take deliberate steps. Western Balkan governments could strengthen transparency in defence planning by regularly publishing procurement plans and military exercise schedules, while reinforcing parliamentary oversight of major acquisitions (ISACFund, 2026). They should also expand intra-regional cooperation through joint training programmes, coordinated procurement efforts, and enhanced intelligence sharing, building upon existing trilateral initiatives with a spirit of broader inclusivity (Institut Delors, 2026). Investing in dual-use capabilities such as cyber defence, critical infrastructure protection, and military mobility would serve both national interests and wider European security goals (Clingendael Institute, 2025). Finally, leveraging diaspora expertise and fostering private sector partnerships could help nurture a more robust local defence industry and innovation base (CIDOB, 2025).

For the EU and NATO, adopting differentiated security integration models would be highly effective. This could involve offering faster-tracked access to PESCO projects, European Defence Agency initiatives, and joint procurement programmes for countries demonstrating stronger alignment and reform progress (EEAS, 2025). Pre-accession funding could be linked more directly to dual-use infrastructure projects that simultaneously advance economic development and military mobility (Institut Delors, 2026). Expanding security and defence partnerships with clear milestone-based incentives tied to governance, reconciliation, and transparency would help maintain constructive engagement across the entire region (Atlantic Council, 2026). Encouraging greater Balkan participation in European defence industrial projects would also recognise the region's emerging potential to contribute to European supply chains (CIDOB, 2025).

Broader international partners, including the United States and Turkey, could support minilateral formats that give Balkan countries a stronger voice in discussions and promote transparent, high-standard cooperation (Clingendael Institute, 2025). Coordinated efforts in this direction would help countries diversify partnerships responsibly while avoiding the creation of new dependencies.

Energy Security

21. Serbia is moving to diversify from Russian oil and looks towards alternative energy vendors.

Mcallister & Vasovic '26. (Edward Mcallister, Aleksandar Vasovic) "Serbia Seeks EU Gas Deals as It Reduces Russian Supplies, Says President Vucic." Reuters. February 4, 2026.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/serbia-seeks-eu-gas-deals-it-reduces-russian-supplies-says-president-vucic-2026-02-04/>. -SCP

Serbia is diversifying its energy supply away from Russia and is already in talks to buy natural gas via a European Union purchasing mechanism, President Aleksandar Vucic said on Wednesday in an interview with Reuters.

The Balkan country, which wants to join the EU, is one of Europe's few remaining buyers of Russian natural gas - over 80% of its supplies come from there.

But the EU has pressured Serbia to find alternatives as it tries to reduce cash flows to President Vladimir Putin's Ukraine war chest.

Serbia failed to secure a new long-term contract with Russia's Gazprom last year, and a short-term deal reached in December expires on March 31.

Vucic said he understood EU policy towards Russian energy, saying "we have to adjust our energy policies to certain demands and requests."

"Still we will have big quantities of Russian gas, but we are taking more and more from Europeans," Vucic added in an interview at the presidency in Belgrade, flanked by an EU flag.

He said Serbia was aiming to secure 500 million cubic metres of gas annually, about a fifth of its needs, under the EU's communal gas-buying initiative, which it joined last year.

Serbia is already purchasing gas from Azerbaijan, via Bulgaria, and construction of a gas pipeline to North Macedonia that would give Serbia access to liquefied natural gas from Greece should start this year, he said.

An oil pipeline linking Serbia and neighboring Romania is expected to be completed in 2027.

"This is a big diversification," Vucic said.

22. The EU's restrictions on energy production will have an adverse effect on the Western Balkans; moreover, stronger energy infrastructure can be attained through a re-attainment of public trust in institutions.

*Radovanović et. al. '25. (Mirjana Radovanović, Sanja Filipović, Goran Šimić) "When Energy Resources, Transit Routes, Critical Minerals and the Interests of Great Powers Meet in the Western Balkans: Do Citizens Have a Voice?" Energy Research & Social Science 126 (August 2025): 104153.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2025.104153>. -SCP*

This paper aims to point out the major problems faced by the citizens of the Western Balkans when it comes to future energy policy. The anticipated decarbonization of Europe by 2050 will significantly influence the region that embraces the green agenda. The regions clean transition is hindered by outdated energy infrastructure, a high share of coal in energy consumption, energy-intensive industries, elevated pollution levels, influence from global powers, and tensions both among the countries of the region and within the region itself. Moreover, the post-2022 energy landscape has grown increasingly complex, necessitating adjustments in energy policy for the Western Balkan countries that have yet to be clearly specified under complex conditions. Namely, the European Union is interested in exploitation of natural resources and transit routes, which is happening at the same time as the influence and interests of the great powers are growing in the region – often contradictory. In such a situation, citizens are denied the opportunity to participate in decision-making and become only observers of the events. The study provides an analysis of the energy sectors status in six Western Balkan economies, serving as a foundation for the development of future energy policy while highlighting the

specificities of the clean transition amid intricate geopolitical upheavals that significantly impact the region. After analyzing the geopolitical, infrastructural, socio-economic, and resource inputs (including critical raw materials and rare earth elements), it is evident that a just transition and the involvement of citizens in formulating the energy policy of their own countries is almost impossible. Recommendations have been provided in this regard.

[omitted introduction, methodology, and background]

First and foremost, it is necessary to strengthen citizens' trust in authorities at all levels. While the majority of citizens acknowledge the importance of environmental protection, the methods by which related activities are implemented are often questionable and, in some cases, provoke strong public resistance. Therefore, it is essential to address the issue of a broader governance process, which lacks sufficient transparency and fails to ensure citizen participation in decision-making related to energy policy, changes in the energy sector, investment in renewable energy sources, and the exploitation of mineral resources. All activities resulting from the above have a direct impact on the social position of citizens. Their responses, often expressed through protests, reflect public sentiment and contribute to political and social instability. This, in turn, places additional strain on the countries of the region, which are already burdened by a complex historical legacy. It is far more advisable for policymakers and decision-makers to implement mechanisms that ensure the timely and accurate dissemination of information to all citizens—particularly those who will be most affected by the anticipated changes, especially when these changes concern the protection of life essentials (clean water, air, and land) and the right to work.

The strategies employed by authorities to communicate and engage with citizens must be strengthened. The erosion of public confidence in media institutions, combined with limited access to credible information and the proliferation of misinformation from unverified sources, plays a critical role in shaping a socially detrimental environment marked by deepening polarization and escalating societal tensions. Such societal polarization is undoubtedly a highly detrimental phenomenon, as both governments and citizens should approach the decarbonization process as a shared pathway toward a common goal: a healthy living environment for current and future generations. Therefore, a new communication platform must be established—one grounded in a positive information culture, timeliness, accuracy, a culture of dialogue, and the citizens' right to ask questions and receive answers within the public media space.

Counterplans

EU / Multilateral

23. The EU needs to be an active leader in Western Balkan development to enhance Europe's security against Russia.

Bechev & Iliriana '25. (Dimitar Bechev, Iliriana Gjoni) "How the Western Balkans Can Contribute to European Defense." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. October 28, 2025. <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2025/10/how-the-western-balkans-can-contribute-to-european-defense>. Bechev is a senior fellow at Carnegie Europe, where he focuses on EU enlargement, the Western Balkans, and Eastern Europe. Gjoni is a research analyst at Carnegie Europe, where she focuses on EU enlargement and Western Balkan politics. -SCP

It will come to no one's surprise if next month the international media and pundits ignore the anniversary of the Dayton Peace Accords, which some thirty years ago ended the bloodshed in Bosnia and Herzegovina and reconstituted the country. Like the subsequent NATO intervention in Kosovo, Dayton feels like ancient history, a piece of memory from the halcyon days of U.S. primacy. From a consumer of outside support, the Western Balkans are now looking at becoming a provider of stability. As they queue at the gates of the EU, the six countries of the region increasingly talk about their contribution to European security and defense.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has made collective defense a priority for Europe. But more than three years into the war, it is all about how local stakeholders could chip in the collective effort to contain Russia on NATO and the EU's Eastern flank, strengthen resilience against hybrid threats, and shoulder responsibilities for peacekeeping closer to home. Like neighboring Montenegro, Albania contributes to NATO battlegroups in Latvia and Bulgaria, deploying 500 military personnel in NATO—and EU—missions at any given point. Efforts are ongoing to attract foreign investment into the country's defense industries, modernize the military, increase cooperation with other allies—despite some continued tensions—and develop AI technologies. Tirana also plans to expand dual-use logistics capabilities and construct new storage and training facilities to better support NATO missions. In North Macedonia, the Krivolak range—one of the alliance's top location for exercises—hosted a large-scale drill this summer.

Even Moscow's closest friend, Serbia, is taking advantage of Europe's defense awakening. Last May, the Russian foreign intelligence accused Belgrade of delivering, through intermediaries, ammunition to Kyiv. Though Belgrade has been denying that such deals have been taking place, it is implicitly taking credit for Ukraine. The Western Balkans is home to roughly 200 companies in the defense sector, located primarily in Serbia and Bosnia. As highlighted in a recent report by ELIAMEP, they have capacity to produce ammunition compatible with both NATO standards and former Warsaw Pact specifications, perhaps more effectively even than ventures in the EU. For example, the €1 billion (\$1.2 billion) joint venture between the Bulgarian company VMZ and Germany's Rheinmetall has an annual ammunition production target equal to the claimed production capacity of Bosnia. This could strongly support EU supplies to Ukraine. However, industrial potential is often hamstrung by political paralysis and fragmented governance.

Looking beyond ammunition, the Western Balkans should be able to dip in common European mechanisms, programs, and financial instruments to strengthen the defense industrial sector. The list includes the European Defense Fund, the long-term loans under the Security Action for Europe instrument, and the European Defense Industry Program (EDIP). The EDIP regulation, still to be finalized, sets aside some €1.5 billion (\$1.7 billion) in grants for the period of 2025–2027. Ties with the European Defense Agency (EDA), dealing with research, capabilities development, and industrial cooperation could be reinforced too. In 2014, Serbia became the first non-EU country to establish formal working relations with the agency. Albania and North Macedonia have signed security and defense partnerships with the EU that explicitly mention cooperation with the EDA. Ideally, all six Western Balkan countries should become EDA members, possibly without voting rights until they join the EU. There is a growing appetite among EU member states—including France, Italy, and others—for deepening security cooperation with Western Balkan countries, especially on dual-use infrastructure and defense industries.

There are obstacles too, to be sure.

One is the division of the region between NATO members, potential members such as Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and neutral Serbia. So long as Serbia pursues a multivector foreign and security policy and imports military equipment from Russia and China, cooperation will face obstacles. The transition to Western platforms—such as France's Rafale jets—will take time. Lack of trust between Serbia and its neighbors will put a spanner in the works on defense industrial cooperation or on collectively fighting hybrid threats. The latter require much tighter ties between intelligence, law enforcement, and other government agencies across borders.

An even more formidable hurdle is the security sector across the region. In several countries, the primary role of the military, intelligence, police, and law enforcement sectors is to sustain the power of incumbents and protect clientelist networks, rather than serve the public interest. Transnational organized crime has long cultivated symbiotic relationships with the guardians of the state, whether it is in NATO members and EU hopefuls Albania and Montenegro or in Euroskeptic Serbia. Despite some positive developments, these chronic problems in turn stymie effective integration into EU and NATO mechanisms.

The last issue worth bringing up is the economy. It is difficult to attract strategic international investment into small-size economies, unless they pull together. The Western Balkans have yet to produce a success story involving a big European, Turkish, or U.S. manufacturer setting up shop locally. This could be offset in part by indigenous demand, tied to military modernization. Yet defense spending is still hovering under 2 percent GDP, far below the 3.5 percent benchmark adopted at NATO's Hague summit last June. The Western Balkans' location, far from the borders of Russia, and the lack of memory of control by Moscow impacts security perceptions and defense planning. As a result, the business case for investing into the region might be somewhat weak.

The Western Balkans are on the path to become a net contributor to European security, but much more needs to be done to reach that destination. Western Balkan governments should team up to develop joint projects, attract foreign investment in the defense industrial sector, and benefit from increased spending on security in the EU. The three NATO members—Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro—should lead the way. They should invest in partnerships with EU members to modernize their militaries and security sector, and integrate gradually into the union's new defense initiatives.

NATO

24. NATO is fully committed to regional security in the Western Balkans.

NATO '25. "NATO Reaffirms Its Steadfast Commitment to Security in Bosnia and Herzegovina and to Safeguarding the Dayton Peace Agreement." 2026. North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). 2026. <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/articles/news/2025/04/15/nato-reaffirms-its-steadfast-commitment-to-security-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina-and-to-safeguarding-the-dayton-peace-agreement>. -SCP

Today (15 April 2025), NATO's Deputy Secretary General, Radmila Shekerinska, hosted the Chair and members of the Tripartite Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Željka Cvijanović, Željko Komšić, and Denis Bećirović, at NATO Headquarters. They exchanged views with Allied Permanent Representatives on the latest developments in the country and across the region, and on NATO's partnership with Bosnia and Herzegovina.

NATO's North Atlantic Council underlined NATO's enduring commitment to stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina, to the country's territorial integrity and sovereignty, in accordance with the Dayton Peace Agreement, and to our enduring cooperation with Bosnia and Herzegovina. During the discussion, it was reiterated that the Alliance remains concerned about recent developments and their adverse implications, including for the country's constitutional order and the functionality of state institutions.

Against this backdrop, the Deputy Secretary General reaffirmed that "the Dayton Peace Agreement must be respected. It is a cornerstone of stability and Bosnia and Herzegovina's state architecture." She also underscored that "NATO remains closely aligned with its international partners," including the EU-led Operation

Althea and the High Representative, and that NATO “will not accept any kind of security vacuum in Bosnia and Herzegovina. And we will not allow hard-won peace to be jeopardised.”

Deputy Secretary General Shekerinska restated the Alliance’s support for Bosnia and Herzegovina’s progress “on its European and Euro-Atlantic path” and highlighted that it was important “to build upon this foundation, for the benefit of everyone living there.”

25. European members of NATO along with the EU are best positioned to provide critical support to the Western Balkans.

Zweers et. al. '25. (Wouter Zweers, Jérôme Ryck, Barbora Šliogerytė) “Security and Stability Scenarios for the Western Balkans Are the EU, NATO and the Netherlands Prepared? Clingendael Report.”
https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/Clingendael_Security_and_Stability_Scenarios_for_the_Western_Balkans.pdf. -SCP

It finds that NATO and EU preparedness to defend territorial and physical security in the Balkans is adequate when it comes to potential escalation in North Kosovo or in Bosnia and Herzegovina, provided that both organisations retain sufficient political unity to ensure an effective response. NATO and EU cyber assistance to the Western Balkans are not yet up to the challenges at hand, meaning that collective responses to hybrid threats, including cyber threats, need further development. Further steps are also needed to enhance the effectiveness of the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue. Appropriate mechanisms and agencies for combating cross-border organised crime have been set up and cooperation is expanding, but their effectiveness is closely related to broader Dutch and EU (as well as NATO) efforts to bolster democratic rule of law in the region. The same holds true for irregular migration instruments, for which preventing human rights violations remains a main challenge. Economically, especially the EU has developed promising and comprehensive instruments to encourage stable economic development. Remaining challenges lie in finding pathways to decrease the financing gap and give body to the idea of (sectoral) gradual integration to enable the economic convergence of the region with the rest of the EU. To boost ecological security, commitments made in the region are yet to be implemented, and further technical and financial assistance, e.g. for introducing carbon pricing, will be needed. Lastly, negative trends in international rule of law and stability mostly raise questions about the internal functioning of the EU and NATO, prompting a need for accelerating Dutch and EU-wide debates on EU internal reform (in light of potential enlargement), as well as Dutch and European responses to the potential US dereliction of NATO under the new Trump administration. Importantly, broader European security will strongly depend on the development of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, and as such NATO and EU support for Ukraine, as well as flexibility to adapt to potential diplomatic developments, will remain key.

Based on this analysis, we formulate the following recommendations:

- In light of the potential further course of the United States under the new Trump administration, (European) members of NATO are advised to accelerate discussions and efforts to find political unity and preparedness to act, and to boost strategic autonomy through enhancing operational capacities and defence integration independently from the US. For the EU, this especially requires speeding up efforts to convert battlegroups into an EU Rapid Deployment Capacity that can operate independently from US support.
- NATO and the EU could further boost joint efforts and support to counter hybrid threats related to FIMI and cyberattacks in the Western Balkans. They can do so through furthering joint strategy development on FIMI and cyber issues, by enhancing their own strategic communication, and for the EU and Member States like the Netherlands by continuing (and potentially expanding) support for independent media and boosting Stratcom / EUvsDisinfo activities.

- The EU would do well to critically assess and work on internal differences that have hampered the effectiveness of the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue, in line with recommendations from earlier research.⁷³ To counter ethnic tensions, further programmes to boost societal reconciliation could be considered, but their effectiveness will depend on a clear political stance regarding ethno-nationalist politics in the region.
- As a lack of political unity in the European Union is likely to continue hampering an effective and unitary political EU approach towards the region, Member States that are serious about upholding the EU's transformative objectives could create a more active coalition of the willing to coordinate their messaging towards the candidates and assist reform-oriented political forces in the region.
- The EU and its Member States could further pressure and assist the Western Balkan countries to start implementing their climate and energy commitments as part of the Energy Community and Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. They can do so, amongst other things, by providing technical and financial assistance to introduce national carbon pricing mechanisms in light of the forthcoming EU CBAM regulation that the WB countries will face.
- To boost economic security, the EU and its Member States are advised to give more body to the concept of accelerated sectoral integration as enshrined in the EU's Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, and to consider more progressive financing to spur economic convergence and integration with the EU, e.g. through the frontloading of EU Cohesion Funds.
- To ensure that the EU functions effectively, Dutch and EU-wide debates on EU internal reform (in light of potential enlargement) could be accelerated. Such internal reform discussions should include efforts to strengthen EU internal rule of law instruments, to create a more future-proof institutional set-up, to enhance the effectiveness of decision-making processes (e.g. in EU foreign policy), and to prepare EU policies like the Cohesion Policy and the Common Agricultural Policy, as well as the EU budget, for potential future enlargement.
- As sustainable democratic development is crucial for securing a more stable and secure future for the Western Balkans, the EU is advised to pursue, in line with recommendations from earlier research⁷⁴, a sincere transformative enlargement strategy focused on longer-term transformation, thereby clearly supporting democratic actors within the region while speaking out against those undermining democratic stability.

OHR

26. Do the plan under the supervision of the Office of the High Representative.

Office of the High Representative '25. "General Information – Office of the High Representative." *Ohr.Int.* 2025. <https://www.ohr.int/about-ohr/general-information/>. -SCP

The Office of the High Representative (OHR) is an ad hoc international institution responsible for overseeing implementation of civilian aspects of the Peace Agreement ending the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The position of High Representative was created under the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, usually referred to as the Dayton Peace Agreement, that was negotiated in Dayton, Ohio, and signed in Paris on 14 December 1995. The High Representative is working with the people and institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the international community to ensure that Bosnia and Herzegovina evolves into a peaceful and viable democracy on course for integration in Euro-Atlantic institutions.

The OHR is working towards the point where Bosnia and Herzegovina is able to take full responsibility for its own affairs. The Steering Board of the Peace Implementation Council, the international body guiding the peace process, concluded at its July 2011 meeting, that it "look[ed] forward to close cooperation and coordination

between the enhanced EU presence, the High Representative in BiH, and other international community actors in line with their respective existing roles.”

In order to support Bosnia and Herzegovina, the European Union has increased its commitment to the country.

International Institutions Cooperation

27. Unilateralism is ineffective in the current global context and the U.S. should embrace international institutions and multilateralism.

Bass '09. (James E. Bass) “Unilateral vs. Multilateral Engagement: A Scenario-Based Approach to Guiding America’s Future Foreign Policy.” April 2009. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA539615.pdf>. -SCP

The United States in recent years has demonstrated a preference for unilateral engagement that has undermined its long-term interests. Specifically, since the 9/11 terror attacks, the US has employed its unchallenged power and the freedom of action afforded by a unilateral engagement policy to attain national interests rather than constrain its actions to the rules and impediments of multilateral cooperation. This strategy has evoked hostility toward the US and eroded the US's international legitimacy. The situation suggests that unilateral engagement is inadequate in the new foreign policy context and that an alternative policy must be employed by future US leaders to secure America's future. As President Obama's administration takes office America carries the cost of preceding unilateral foreign policy. The time is right to reexamine America's foreign policy strategy to chart a course of action that will best assure the future interests of the US and its allies. This research argues that a multilateral engagement foreign policy will ensure national security is protected and America's global leadership maintained regardless of future changes in the international system. Analysis of alternative futures by means of the scenario-planning process suggests multilateral engagement provides an attractive course for securing national security and maintaining America's global leadership.

Indeed, the policy decisions of America's future leaders will have a major impact on national security and the status of American hegemony. This fact alone demands policymakers develop a national strategy that will lead America down the path to a secure future. Employing the scenario-planning approach to identify potential US multilateral engagement solutions across an array of alternative futures uncovers the positive benefits of multilateral engagement. Critics may argue, however, that the anarchic international environment calls for America to act alone to provide its own security and ensure its own interests no matter what future should emerge. Unfortunately, US unilateral action has eroded America's legitimacy and evoked international hostility.⁴ The current situation suggests that unilateral engagement is inadequate in the new foreign policy context and that an alternative policy should be employed by future US leaders to secure America's future.

[omitted background paragraphs]

Proponents of unilateralism note a number of problems with multilateral cooperation. First, multilateral arrangements limit the power that the US derives from its hegemonic status by restricting the range of options available to act on issues of national interest. The argument follows that a unilateral engagement policy affords the US full sovereignty and the freedom to pursue courses of action devoid of outside interference. Second, multilateral institutions subject the US to “free-riding” and “buck passing.”²⁸ In the first instance, the US is subject to the costs of participation as an endowed contributor, while free-riding members benefit from the resources supplied by the US, incurring no costs of membership. In the second case, inefficiencies in the institution develop when responsibilities are not clearly delegated. Often a key contributor in multilateral

institutions, the US bears the burden of responsibility because lesser members neglect to assume a contributing role. Third, practicing multilateralism usually requires consent of all members when engaging institutional issues. This course of action not only prevents members from acting swiftly, it also results in watered down policy that limits goals and restricts means for implementation. Lastly, opponents of multilateralism suggest that involvement in international institutions weakens US sovereignty by subjugating it to institutional governance.²⁹ Unilateralists fear this arrangement could mandate US engagement on issues which the US has no interest.

In contrast, proponents of multilateralism contend that unilateral action undermines America's long-term interests and carries with it a number of negative international consequences. While the US may covet the freedom of action permitted by unilateralism, its limitations must not be ignored. As previously alluded, a unilateral US foreign engagement policy will face difficulty dealing with the array of international problems surfacing in the global environment. Multilateralism increases the options available to the US for dealing with these global challenges.³⁰ Indeed, international institutions "can provide mechanisms to consult, resolve differences, solve problems, share burdens and risks, coordinate action, and monitor and enforce commitments."³¹ America could gain from its current hegemonic status by creating and participating in international institutions that benefit both the US and the rest of the world.

According to Joseph Nye, the US benefits from the growth of worldwide networks of interdependence because "globalization takes place in their language." Embracing worldwide networks and international institutions provides an important source of "soft power" for the US enabling it to set the global political agenda.³² In the age of globalization and information, hard power instruments such as military dominance is often an inadequate or inefficient means to attain goals. While military power remains important, soft power instruments will continue to wield heavier influence as globalization evolves. Unilateral employment of hard power instruments projects arrogance and a disregard for interests of international actors that weakens America's soft power.³³ As a result, various countries, including allies, often view US unilateralism with impudence. When the US engages in arrogant unilateralism both state and non-state actors are motivated to take actions that balance American power.³⁴ Multilateralism eliminates this resistance because acting within the rules and norms of institutions generates international legitimacy. In addition, the legitimacy derived from the institutional framework can benefit the US by compelling international actors to operate within rules and norms that promote US interests.³⁵

Disads

Russia Escalation

28. Ukraine has made Putin vulnerable, increased external pressure on Russian influence will cause lash out.

Tisdall '26. (Simon Tisdall) "Russia Is Losing the War in Ukraine, and Putin Is Desperate. But That's When He's at His Most Dangerous." The Guardian. The Guardian. June 2, 2026.
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2026/jun/14/vladimir-putin-ukraine-war-borders-russian-president>.
-SCP

Just about everyone reckons Vladimir Putin is in deep trouble in Ukraine. Everyone – meaning Volodymyr Zelenskyy, his European backers and western military analysts and commentators – seems to believe Russia's dictator is heading for humiliation. They could all be wrong, of course. But what if they're right? How might a desperate, cornered Putin, fearful for his policy and person, react to the prospect of defeat? On past form, he will escalate, not capitulate. His options range from trolling YouTube to waging nuclear war.

For Ukraine, the latest news is mostly good. Using sophisticated Ukrainian-made drones and missiles, it has forced the invaders on to the back foot. Russia's tally of dead and wounded is said to be running to 30,000 each month. Its advance has stalled – and in some places has been reversed. Ukrainian airstrikes deep into Russian territory are bringing the war home to a misled, disillusioned public. St Petersburg burns. Fuel shortages cause panic buying. Prices and taxes are rising. Putin's 2022 "special military operation", which was supposed to bring swift victory, has now lasted longer than the first world war.

Ukrainians still suffer daily, ever more indiscriminate air attacks. But speaking to the Guardian last week, Zelenskyy sounded optimistic that the nightmare may be near an end. His view is backed, up to a point, by western experts. Jack Watling, a land warfare specialist at the Royal United Services Institute, wrote this month that Russia's battlefield combat power is faltering and a ceasefire may be within reach. "Putin's savagery is exceeded only by its futility. Slowly but surely, he is losing his war," wrote the US commentator Seth Stodder.

All well and good. But three awkward questions arise. First, does Putin actually realise he's losing? Russia's leader is a conservative, old-school thug. He thinks Russia is still a superpower, not what he's made it: a despised rogue state and Chinese client. Out-of-touch Putin doesn't use a smartphone or the internet. He's said to rely on inner circle apparatchiks, loyalist generals, spies and state media, who tell him what he wants to hear. If so, he'll just keep going regardless.

Yet this assessment raises a second, alarming question: what will Putin do if and when his Kremlin bubble bursts and it suddenly dawns on him that a devastating strategic and personal defeat looms? Don't expect him to sue for peace. Only last week he contemptuously dismissed Zelenskyy's offer of ceasefire talks, stubbornly reiterating his war aims wishlist.

Putin's more probable reaction would be to double down by expanding the active war zone beyond Ukraine, potentially drawing European Nato member states into the open-ended, direct confrontation they have avoided until now. In many respects, this is already happening. Hence a chorus of urgent warnings from European security, intelligence and military chiefs about how Russian sabotage, subversion and coercion are accelerating, the more it struggles in Ukraine.

29. The Western Balkans represent a specific target of hybrid warfare for Russia because of their strategic importance to the West.

Bojicic-Dzelilovic '26. (Vesna Bojicic-Dzelilovic) "Western Balkans as the Frontline of Russian Hybrid Warfare." Global Policy, March 18, 2026. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.70148>. -SCP

The WB state weakness, characterised by dysfunctional governance, stems from its recent history of unfinished nation-state formation. As a result, two countries in particular, namely Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, are especially vulnerable to geopolitical interference. The international community, both multilaterally and bilaterally, has been instrumental in ending the wars and overseeing peacebuilding in the region with the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA), which ended the 1992–1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, providing an anchor for the regional post-war reconstruction and recovery with international support. Serbia and Croatia, acting as patron states for two of the three main ethnic groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina that fought in the

war—Bosnian Serbs and the Bosnian Croats, respectively—cosigned the DPA and were granted a special relationship status with Bosnia and Herzegovina. As a result, the domestic politics of these three countries became formally intertwined, having been informally connected throughout the war. Ironically, this arrangement, which aimed to stabilise the region, along with other elements of the post-war stabilisation architecture in the WB, is a part of the broader infrastructure Russia employs to conduct HW activities with regional implications, fomenting insecurity and recurrent crises. The Office of the High Representative (OHR), tasked with implementing the civilian aspects of the DPA as the highest executive authority, reports to the Peace Implementation Council (PIC),⁶ which is responsible for directing the peace process, and includes Russia as a member. Until Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008, Russia had joined other PIC members in supporting the implementation of the DPA. But after Serbia refused to recognise Kosovo's independence, Russia has sided with Serbia in supporting the Bosnian Serbs' position on the DPA. This strategic shift was driven by Russia's concern about the possible implications of Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence for its own breakaway regions. Since 2017, Russia has used its leverage within the PIC (and other international fora, notably the UN Security Council, exercising veto powers on many issues related to the WB) to lobby for Serbia's position⁷ (DFC 2023, 19) on not only Kosovo but also broader WB political developments (especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro). Serbia, also acting in its self-interest, and despite pursuing EU accession, strives to maintain strong relations with Russia. Serbia and Russia have signed agreements on military technical cooperation, trade, energy and foreign policy coordination and on increased Russian investments, including in critical infrastructure (energy, finance and communications), while simultaneously expanding cultural, religious and educational cooperation (Secieru 2020; Cruz 2021). The government of Republika Srpska (RS), one of Bosnia and Herzegovina's decentralised entities with a Serb majority, has, on the other hand, also pursued closer relations with Russia. It has received financial support from Russia alongside funding for the election campaign of its long-standing president Milorad Dodik (Salvo and De Leon 2018; VOA 2022), and significant investment in the oil and banking sectors (Stronski and Himes 2019). The EU, for its part, has remained committed to the complex and lengthy process of Western Balkan enlargement as the primary channel for projecting its influence and creating a counterbalance to Russia's growing presence.

Because integration into the EU provides an overarching framework for the WB stability, the EU's internal security is closely connected to that of the WB (Pawlak 2016; EU 2016). Initially, the military aspects of the DPA were entrusted to the NATO-led armed force, which was succeeded by the European Union Force (EUFOR Operation Althea), still deployed in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The NATO-led force continues to provide security in Kosovo. Croatia is a member of the EU, and the remaining WB countries are at an advanced stage in the EU accession process. Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Albania are NATO members, with the remaining three countries participating in NATO's Partnership for Peace Agreement (Serbia retains its military neutrality and is not seeking to join NATO).

In summary, in both the civilian and military realms, the role of external actors is inextricably linked to the domestic processes shaping the security environment for HW activities involving Russia. The international peacebuilding framework established over the past three and a half decades has formed a complex network of interests and actors that shape security and democratic processes in the region. Compared with existing domestic vulnerabilities, this landscape provides fertile ground for HW that Russia has sought to exploit and a complex framework for developing the targeted countries' effective responses through strengthened societal resilience.

The primary areas of societal vulnerability in the WB that Russia seeks to exploit involve governance shortcomings, contested statehood and economic underdevelopment. These interrelated vulnerabilities both sustain and are perpetuated by societal polarisation along ethnic and religious lines, sparked by armed conflicts of the 1990s. In this context, Russia utilises pro-Russian constituencies within political elites and local populations, conducting HW mainly through indirect engagement and proxy actors, choosing its HW tools accordingly. HW activities operate through networks of complex overlapping connections that cross institutional

and geographical boundaries, linking various actors and institutions, thereby enabling the mobilisation and coordination of complementary resources across different societal spheres, both locally and transnationally.

Diplo Backlash

30. Sanctions are ineffective in the Western Balkans and can allow elites to frame themselves as resistors to foreign collusion.

*Djordjevic & Scaturro '25. (Sasa Djordjevic, Ruggero Scaturro) "Beyond the Blacklist: How Effective Are Sanctions in the Western Balkans." Global Initiative. Oct 28, 2025.
<https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/sanctions-in-the-western-balkans/>. -SCP*

Case studies provide detailed evidence of how sanctions are bypassed. They describe strategies such as transferring assets to proxies, establishing new legal entities, participating in procurement schemes through rebranded companies, leveraging informal or state-tolerated markets, asset transfers to relatives and proxies, lobbying foreign governments to overturn designations, reframing sanctions as foreign interference to bolster domestic legitimacy, and initiating legal reforms that shield them from accountability. These maneuvers highlight the political and economic interests at stake and demonstrate how sanctions can be reshaped and weakened through existing networks and systemic vulnerabilities.

Sanctions by countries like the US and the UK often have limited reach, both geographically and legally. While they can harm the reputation of targeted individuals and companies worldwide, they may also disrupt business operations, especially if local firms have financial ties to US- or UK-based entities – those partners might sever connections to avoid secondary risks. But the legal impact usually stays within the borders of the issuing country. The effectiveness of these sanctions mainly depends on whether local law enforcement or regulators, where the targeted entities operate, investigate for organized crime or corruption suspicions.

The report explores how sanctions evasion in the Western Balkans is deeply embedded in governance structures, economic interdependencies and geopolitical positioning. By examining the mechanisms through which evasion occurs, the analysis underscores that the region is not just a site of sanctions alignment but also a terrain where evasion strategies can thrive. Addressing these dynamics requires more than formal legal instruments: it demands an understanding of how sanctions intersect with power, networks and institutional weakness.

EU Backlash

31. U.S. policy in the Western Balkans absent the EU encourages anti-Europe sentiment and undermines the EU's goals of ascension — that codifies Russian and Chinese influence in the region.

Aris '26. (Ben Aris) "US Could Join Rival Powers Undermining EU in Western Balkans, Analyst Warns." Intellinews.Com. January 7, 2026.

Under President Donald Trump, the United States could join rival powers such as China and Russia in undermining the European Union's leverage in the Western Balkans and other regions in its near neighbourhood, warns a paper published by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR).

America's 2025 National Security Strategy (NSS), it said, combines "a bitter and hostile critique of the EU and its policies" with backing for what the administration calls "healthy nations" – including volatile Western Balkan states – to strike their own deals with Brussels, says the paper. 'The next 'big bang': How the EU can fast-track enlargement amid geopolitical tensions', by visiting fellow Vladimir Shopov.

"By cultivating resistance towards the EU in this region, America would only deepen these states' reluctance to align with EU laws and practices," the paper said.

It cited Montenegro's decision to sign international agreements allowing non-competitive public procurement despite closing the relevant EU accession chapter, and Serbia's free-trade deal with China in defiance of EU objections, as examples of how candidates are already hedging their bets.

"During previous enlargement events, the US implemented support programmes which complemented EU accession," the paper noted, "but this is unlikely to continue under the current US administration."

This comes in the context of a union that is already being pushed by war, great-power rivalry and economic coercion into a more overtly geopolitical posture that is transforming everything from defence policy to the way new members are admitted.

What began under European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in 2019 as a broad ambition for a more "geopolitical commission" has turned into a far more concrete reorientation, the think-tank said, driven above all by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and growing pressure from the United States and China.

"When Ursula von der Leyen talked of a 'geopolitical commission' in 2019, her intent was closer to direction of policy travel rather than an urgent and detailed plan aimed at creating a security union with complete defence capabilities," the paper said. "But geopolitical imperatives are now driving the EU's development, including in defence and securing economic leverage."

The EU's 2020 Security Union strategy, initially designed to complement Nato, has since evolved into what the bloc calls a "2030 defence readiness" agenda, blending internal security with military preparedness. In parallel, Brussels has rolled out an economic security strategy aimed at reducing vulnerabilities and shielding the bloc from external pressure, including through tools such as the EU's anti-coercion instrument.

"Nowhere is the EU's changing approach to geopolitics clearer than in enlargement," the paper said, warning that the bloc risks diluting its long-standing rules for admitting new members as it rushes to lock in influence in its eastern neighbourhood.

32. U.S. unilateral intervention in the Western Balkans weakens EU leverage and emboldens authoritarianism and war.

Bassuener '25. (Kurt Bassuener) "U.S. Lifts Sanctions on Putin-Backed Bosnian Serb Leader." Just Security. October 30, 2025. <https://www.justsecurity.org/123657/u-s-sanctions-bosnia-russia/>. -SCP

Dodik has long advocated that sanctions against himself, his family, political allies and associates be lifted – and recently evinced confidence that they would be. He said earlier this month that High Representative Schmidt's departure and the end of the Bonn Powers would be achieved "in the coming year." This variant of an "offshoring" option for the Office of the High Representative has been discussed for almost 20 years, and may be floated at the U.N. Security Council meeting. If successful, it would disconnect Dayton's civilian enforcement mechanism and place it in the EU capital Brussels. The EU itself is, institutionally, at best ambivalent about the OHR's continuation, with some officials asserting that it is an impediment to enlargement. (The EU has seriously compromised its standards for EU accession in hopes of a "win" should Bosnia and Herzegovina meet the lower bar and be admitted.)

In addition to paid professional representation in the United States, Dodik's campaign to carve up Bosnia has had fresh support this year from a Heritage Foundation participant in Project 2025 and BiH Croat diaspora member, Max Primorac, who recently railed against "multiculturalism" that he said "sought to denigrate the Judeo-Christian foundations of the American project." In a July 2025 paper, he asserts that sovereignty is invested in Bosnia's three "constituent peoples" (referring to the country's three ethnic groups that make up the majority but also excludes those who don't identify with those groups) and that that identity has been "usurped" by "international diplomats." Primorac calls for three self-governing federal units in a confederal system like Belgium or Switzerland (though without mentioning their binding courts). Covic had earlier called for a third entity, but has generally not broadcast it.

Primorac, Blagojevich, and other registered RS lobbyists clearly have a sense that this is their moment to push long-standing nationalist agendas. One FARA registrant enumerates that it aims to "encourage the State Department to re-evaluate the outmoded policies which undermine leaders like RS President Dodik, who align with the present administration's worldview," and end an alleged "persecution of those in the Republic of Srpska via a deep systemic effort to suppress national identities and erode Judeo-Christian values...(and) recognize attempts to homogenize diverse nations under unelected bureaucratic control, threatening the very cultural and religious foundations that bind allies like the United States, Israel, and the Republic of Srpska."

Should the lifting of U.S. sanctions presage a wholesale policy shift as advocated above, it would constitute a centrifugal threat to State survival and the attendant risk of leader-inspired violence (since the 1990s war in Bosnia was started by Serb resistance to the breakup for the former Yugoslavia). It also signifies an ethnocentric nationalism that is out of step with the EU's still-prevailing articulation of its proclaimed values of individual civic equality in democracies under rule of law, and its expressed goal of bringing Bosnia into the Union. Additionally, there are a host of practical problems to the pursuit of a separatist or division agenda, in terms of geographic contiguity, for example. However, such far-right ideas are precisely the direction of travel that some in the Trump administration advocate for the EU.

Great-Power Competition

33. The U.S. and EU should not advance great-power competition against Russia and China because it will result in regional instability.

Grgić '21. (Gorana Grgić) "Why the West Won't Do More in the Balkans." War on the Rocks. December 3, 2021. <https://warontherocks.com/why-the-west-wont-do-more-in-the-balkans/>. -SCP

Whenever political instability looms in the Balkans, the habitual response is to call for more E.U. and U.S. engagement. Like many *War on the Rocks* authors before me, I too have been guilty of penning pieces that presented Western attention as the best hope for charting a productive way forward in the region.

Sadly, the time has come to confront the fact that calls for the European Union and United States to reinvest in peacekeeping and engage in brokering major political reforms in the Balkans are likely to be futile. The cottage industry of “asking the West to do more” needs to face two inconvenient truths. First, the Balkans are far from the top of the priority list for the European Union and United States, which makes the potential resources they could dedicate scarcer. Second, competitors for regional influence, such as Russia and China, are more active and assertive than before, making it harder for the European Union and United States to act. This means that sustained engagement is most likely to occur when crises are framed through the prism of great-power competition, which is now the dominant security paradigm in both Washington and Brussels.

The path forward leaves little space for optimism regarding the potential for major breakthroughs. As the region marks three decades since the outbreak of the wars that followed the collapse of Yugoslavia, the time is more than ripe to reckon with the limits of foreign interventions and state-building efforts. Where there are openings for deals to be struck, it is imperative that both the European Union and the United States understand the consequences of lofty rhetoric combined with underwhelming actions. Even more importantly, the West should be aware of the perils of engaging with the region in a manner motivated solely by major power rivalry. As can already be seen, this approach risks undermining democratic progress and, ultimately, Western interests in the region.

[omitted background]

As a result, with each new crisis, it becomes clearer that the United States and European Union’s fixation with engagement is increasingly out of touch with the changing nature of interstate relations. Rival states are now competing for influence in the region just as domestic constraints on both sides of the Atlantic are undermining prospects for a more ambitious regional policy. Neither of these two trends is likely to change in the near to medium term, meaning the West is unlikely to devote long-term attention or substantial resources to the region moving forward.

While the European Union has even more at stake in the Balkans, it faces an even greater credibility deficit than the United States. The prospect of an unstable Balkans has direct spillover effects for the bordering states, all of which are E.U. member states. Yet even in its rhetoric, the European Union has little left to offer the region. It talks the talk of engagement and keeps on dangling the membership carrot over the so-called Western Balkans Six (WB6): Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. However, it has not been able to deliver on its promises due to contentious intra-E.U. politics, enlargement fatigue, and a whole suite of other, more pressing issues on the agenda that have chewed up the European Union’s bandwidth. In October, the Slovenian presidency of the Council of the European Union organized the European Union-Western Balkans Summit, which was expected to give a jolt to the accession process. Despite the European Union’s “unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans,” all references to dates and timelines were dropped from the ensuing joint declaration.

The European Union’s meager military power makes it much harder for it to deter those intent on destabilizing the region or act whenever security begins to deteriorate. But greater military assets have not made the United States more effective. Regional strongmen are certainly more inclined to listen when Washington speaks. Thus, it is not surprising U.S. President Joe Biden’s election elicited reactions that ranged from warm welcomes to habitual hostility, depending on where one stands on U.S. interventions in the 1990s. Those in the region who were cheering for the United States “being back” hoped the Biden administration would help break the political impasse in their countries. Meanwhile, those who opposed those interventions believe that Biden represents the continued assertion of U.S. might. Yet, so far, despite pockets of interest in the Balkans in both the legislative and executive branches, the United States has not prioritized the region. And there is little

evidence it will do so with enough commitment to break the prevailing political deadlocks or prevent the escalation of crises.

Those who are calling for the European Union and United States “to do something” to prevent the Balkan’s descent into violence have put forward a number of proposals ranging from more diplomatic engagement and fast-tracked E.U. and NATO membership all the way to deploying troops. Their best-case scenario is premised on the belief that E.U.-U.S. coordination can halt negative security trends and restart positive democratic developments.

In theory, these are all sound propositions. However, the reality leaves little grounds for optimism. The worst-case scenario is probably one in which we see more muddling through, as it is hard to imagine a complete disinvestment from the region by either of these parties. Regrettably, doing more of the same is only likely to add to the deterioration of security, as conditions on the ground might indeed become ripe for violent exchanges. Namely, by continuing to promise membership while at the same time moving goalposts for accession and legitimizing the leaders contributing to instability, the European Union is compounding the problems the region is facing. Washington’s selective attention has also proved counterproductive, as past U.S. administrations swung from advocating constitutional reforms that would create more centralized states to supporting partition and “peaceful ethnic cleansing.”

[omitted four paragraphs]

Overall, the Balkans suffer from what could be best described as the paradox of insufficient instability. Their citizens are hostage to systemic corruption and nationalist politics that have arrested economic development, halted democratic consolidation, and contributed to the negative security conditions. Yet, the region is also not unstable enough to warrant renewed and sustained involvement from the European Union and United States to address these matters. The attention they were granted was a product of a different era when externally assisted nation-building was thought to be positive both in theory and practice. Regrettably, those efforts have left a lot to be desired.

The best those in Washington and the European capitals can do now is to be wary of the promises they make, as well as the consequences of the bargains they strike. Given the changed security paradigm and the management of relations with revisionist powers, it is critical the European Union and United States do not take the bait of engaging in a bidding war with their strategic competitors to win over regional states. Prioritizing stability and accommodating illiberal leaders for fear of pushing them into the competitors’ fold is, in the long run, damaging to democratic rule and the West’s reputation. Ultimately, this is yet another reminder than any positive and durable political change will have to come from within the region. Sadly, such hope is dim.

34. U.S.-led great power competition in the Western Balkans intensifies geopolitical polarization and encourages local “window-shopping” which further destabilizes countries from within.

*Western Balkans Center, '26. “Protests Shake Western Balkans As Great Power Competition Takes Hold | Western Balkans Center.” Westernbalkanscenter.Org. June 2, 2026.
<https://westernbalkanscenter.org/article/protests-shake-western-balkans-as-great-power-competition-takes-hold>. -SCP*

Great-power competition remains a largely influential factor in Western Balkans dynamics.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić continues to navigate domestic turmoil radiating from sustained antigovernment protests by attempting to consolidate international support from actors like China.

Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to face challenges in building a cohesive nation following Christian Schmidt's resignation as high representative, as former Republika Srpska (RS) President Milorad Dodik moves closer to Russia.

In Albania, a U.S.-linked development project faced opposition, leading to clashes between protesters and police.

[omitted contextual country-specific background]

As Western Balkan nations navigate infrastructural development to strengthen domestic institutions, it is often at the expense of alignment with traditional liberal international forums. Consequentially, great-power competition is becoming increasingly entrenched in regional affairs. Paired with heightened domestic pushback, these factors risk stalling EU accession pathways and sustaining regional turmoil.

The weakening Euro-Atlantic partnership, visible in Washington's passive dealignment from the EU's accession goals, leaves more room for the United States to seek to increase its influence by capitalizing on bilateral economic engagement. That said, protests in Albania surrounding a U.S.-linked development project, as well as those ignited in Serbia by the Chinese investment-linked Novi Sad tragedy, should serve as a warning that international investment can become weaponized locally to spur and sustain conflict that may inadvertently lead to authoritarian upgrading and democratic backsliding.

Aid Not Working/Corruption Absorption

35. Aid is ineffective because corrupt institutions lead to absorption and poor public perception which thumps solvency.

PC = perceived corruption

EP = economic perceptions

Gara & Buçaj '25. (Atdhetar Gara, Enver Buçaj) "Corruption and Economic Growth in the Western Balkans: A Legal and Economic Perspective from the Balkan Public Barometer." European Journal of Sustainable Development Research 2025 (4): 2542–4742. <https://doi.org/10.29333/ejosdr/16640>. -SCP

This investigation considers the intricate relationship between corruption, governance, and economic growth in the Western Balkans. The study connects legal and economic aspects in order to evaluate their ramifications towards development. Through a review of other literature and regression analyses, the study tests two hypotheses: H1. Perceived corruption (PC) is negatively related to economic perceptions (EP) and H2. The strength of the trust in legal framework moderates the relationship of PC and EP. Results of analysis confirm H1, indicating a statistically significant negative coefficient for PC (-0.063, $p < 0.01$), and a positive effect of institutional trust on EP (0.315, $p < 0.01$). Thus, the results show that PC has a negative impact on EP, while governance helps lessen the effects of PC. H2 also finds support as there is a negative interaction effects (-0.013, $p < 0.01$) found suggesting that weaker legal frameworks have an enhancing effect on the economic toll of corruption, while stronger legal frameworks lessen the toll of corruption. Given previous studies that have considered corruption as a barrier to growth, the results of the study bolster the need for strong institutions and legal reforms, specifically as it pertains to European Union enlargement area. The study recommends that in order to

address corruption in the Western Balkans, there needs to be an emphasis on both reducing corrupt acts and strengthening governance and legal framework, in turn supporting long-term and sustainable economic development.

36. The absorption capacity of Western Balkan nations is too limited to effectively translate aid and leads to increased state capture.

Qorraj et. al. ,24. (Gazmend Qorraj, Arben Hajrullahu, Driton Qehaja) "Absorption Capacity and the European Integration of the Western Balkans." August 2024. Regional Science Policy & Practice 16 (8): 100043. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rspp.2024.100043>.

Compared to other post-1989 EU enlargements, the European integration process of the WB countries in the third decade of the 21 st century is stalled. Political disputes and divisions in the region and within the EU have resulted in a lack of meaningful and long-term cooperation, which is essential for successful integration into the EU.

However, similar to the Stability Pact for South-eastern Europe, the Berlin Process is a vital cooperation initiative that enables WB countries to advance toward the EU. Initially, REA and then CRM were assumed as a replacement for CEFTA in the WB region. Opponents of the CRM consider that this initiative is created due to the EU's delays and lack of absorption capability, postponing further the EU enlargement towards the WB countries.

On the contrary, those who consider that the WB countries face the challenges of absorption capacity accept the idea that the region should continue with reforms. That is, to implement the action plan of REA and CRM, enhance the region's economic competition abilities, and create convergence and growth.

In this regard, according to the results obtained from the performed analysis in three Western Balkan countries, the EU enlargement delay in the Western Balkans is due to both EU and WB absorption capacities. EU absorption capacities to cope with internal challenges, institutional setting, and other challenges while Western Balkans limited absorption capacity is reflected by a lack of fulfilling the EU standards followed by difficulties in benefiting from the EU assistance due to weak institutions and lack of political will.

In addition, analyzing the main findings for the three countries of the region, it could be reported that the three countries experienced common challenges but also individual challenges in their path toward the EU integration process.

The common challenges such as lack of absorption capacities, the political instability of the region, weakness of local institutions, challenges with public administration, etc. In addition, the countries also faced specific challenges such as political disputes with their neighbours, namely Kosovo in relation with Serbia, North Macedonia in relation with Bulgaria, besides Albania which currently didn't report any political dispute with neighboring countries.

Furthermore, according to the analysis, all three countries expect a positive change and reform of the EU institutions in order to enable them a concrete plan and detailed agenda for EU membership. In addition, also other external factors which delayed the enlargement process for the Western Balkans are considered economic crises, BREXIT, and the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which have created also political instability in the EU.

Finally, the Western Balkan countries not only due to the enlargement process but in order to cope with competitive pressures within the EU, need to increase absorption capacities to utilize opportunities coming from the EU enlargement with a particular focus on the EU market, investments, and funds regarding educational and research programs.

Nationalist Backlash

37. American policy projection onto the Western Balkans will enable state actors to further radicalize.

Kabashi & Gjergjaj '26. (Bekim Kabashi, Mentor Gjergjaj) "U.S. Lifts Sanctions on Putin-Backed Bosnian Serb Leader." reporteri.net. June 14, 2026. <https://www.justsecurity.org/123657/u-s-sanctions-bosnia-russia/>. -SCP

The new American policy demands more from the Western Balkans and promises less from itself. It shifts the focus to economic cooperation, and relegates the traditional political and security role to the background.

In a region with fragile institutions and open tensions, this approach is not without risk.

American Enterprise Institute Fellow Heather Conley singles out Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo as the most vulnerable countries – the former due to its fragmented state structure and ethnic divisions, the latter due to ongoing disputes with Serbia and dependence on the international community for security.

She says that the shift towards "local ownership", without clear leadership and a detailed strategy, could deepen existing blockades and strengthen nationalist and corrupt actors, although she considers the new approach necessary.

"I think solutions have to come from and be supported by the countries themselves, because that's the best way to move forward. The efforts of external transatlantic forces to impose solutions have not been successful, despite being tried on both sides. Kosovo and Serbia, for example, have used the agreements to increase nationalism on both sides," Conley tells the Expose program. Radio Free Europe.

The US State Department published a new report on US policy in the Western Balkans in late May, in response to a request from the US Congress.

The document emphasizes that the era of American-led state-building is over and that US engagement will focus more on stability and mutually beneficial partnerships, rather than on direct intervention to rebuild or "rescue" the region.

K's

Paternalism

38. International trusteeship in Bosnia hollows out local democracy by replacing self-government with external supervision.

Chandler '06. (David Chandler) "State-Building in Bosnia: The Limits of 'Informal Trusteeship.'" International Journal of Peace Studies 11 (1). https://www3.gmu.edu/programs/icar/ijps/vol11_1/11n1Chandler.pdf. -SCP

There is a consensus about Dayton – that is repeated so often it is virtually a mantra of international officials – that the 1995 peace agreement was a treaty 'designed to end a war, not to build a state' (for example, Ashdown, 2004; Denitch, 1996). Commentators regularly argue that Dayton was negotiated by the nationalist parties, whose leaders caused the war in the first place, and that it therefore secured the power of these ethnically-based political parties (for example, Kaldor, 1997: 28-30). Essentially, therefore, the political process since Dayton has been seen as 'the continuation of war by other means', in an inversion of Clausewitz's doctrine (Ashdown, 2004). The domestic political process in Bosnia is seen as illegitimate and fundamentally flawed. It is alleged that the numerous annexes and small print of the Dayton agreement have tied the hands of the international community and created a complex set of political institutions which stymie the building of a strong centralised state and continue to enable ethnically-based political parties to dominate the policy-making process. Dayton and, by implication, the Bosnian voters and their representatives, in this reading, bear the responsibility for the weakness and lack of legitimacy of central state institutions and the failure of the statebuilding aspirations of Bosnia's international benefactors.

This article seeks to establish that this consensus is based on a myth and that the Dayton agreement has, in fact, created an 'informal trusteeship' which has made opaque the relations of authority and accountability. The framework created at Dayton was an extremely flexible one, which has enabled international actors, unaccountable to the people of Bosnia, to shape and reshape the agenda of post-war transition. The Bosnian experience, the ambiguity of the Dayton framework and the confusing 'dual regime' of elected governments and external overseers is highly relevant to current discussions of post-conflict state-building. There are increasingly vocal calls among academics and policy-advisors for the extension of similar forms of external management where, it is asserted, post-conflict state-building 'cannot be adequately addressed within the confines of conventional sovereignty' (Krasner, 2004: 1). For example, Robert Keohane (2002; 2003) suggests that 'regaining sovereignty need not be [the] long-term objective' for external state-builders; Stephen Krasner (2005) argues for experiments in 'shared sovereignty'; James Fearon and David Laitin (2004) have called for the establishment of 'neotrusteeships'; and the International Commission on the Balkans report, led by former Italian Prime Minister Giuliano Amato, has suggested new forms of 'guided sovereignty' for Yugoslav successor states such as Kosovo (ICB, 2005).

The study of Bosnia's experience of 'informal trusteeship' or 'shared sovereignty' – where international legal sovereignty exists without the rights of traditional or 'unconditional' sovereignty (see Krasner, 1999) – demonstrates some of the limitations of this approach to international state-building. Without the traditional rights of sovereignty there has been little need to politically engage Bosnian citizens in the post-conflict process of transition. The main transition which has taken place has been from the ad hoc policy-ownership of self-selected members of the Peace Implementation Council (PIC) to direct regulatory control under the aegis of the European Union (EU). This transition has taken place through informal and unaccountable mechanisms of external regulation, and has been imposed 'from above' without any debate or genuine involvement of the people or elected representatives of Bosnia.

The relations of 'informal trusteeship' have resulted in a situation where there is little accountability for the policy results of external rule. Formally, Bosnia is an independent state and not an international protectorate. The ambiguity between the formal international legal status of Bosnia and its de facto status, under international administration, has resulted in a discourse which pins the blame for the lack of postconflict transition on Bosnian institutions, established under the Dayton settlement, and Bosnian voters and

representatives. Focusing on the 'informal' relations of power and political influence allows a different picture to be drawn, which questions the common assumption that Bosnian political institutions have too much power and influence and the conclusion that international administrative authority needs to be further strengthened. In fact, it is suggested here that the flexibility of external mechanisms of regulation has been a central factor in 'sucking-out' the capacity of Bosnia's political institutions and undermining the legitimacy of the Bosnian state (see further, Fukuyama, 2004: 139ff; Ignatieff, 2003: 98-101).

The following section briefly considers the growing shift towards 'informal trusteeship' mechanisms of regulation in both post-conflict policy discussions and in international practice. There then follows an analysis of the origins of the Dayton agreement, after which the post-Dayton developments are briefly analysed in two stages. The first period is from 1995 to 1999, during which time the powers of the PIC High Representative were extended, but with little clear policy direction or end point for the ad hoc international administration. The second period, from 2000 to 2005, saw a gradual transformation of external regulative mechanisms under the leadership of the European Union, which laid a comprehensive framework for European 'ownership' of the post-Dayton process. Throughout both these periods, Bosnian input or ownership of the policy-making process has been little more than rhetorical. Dayton has provided the framework in which the external process of managing the post-Dayton peace has been transformed beyond recognition, while the population of Bosnia and their elected representatives have been marginalized from the political process and the elected bodies bypassed by the creation of new ad hoc mechanisms of direct and indirect EU interference.

Orientalism

39. Western policy discourse reproduces "Balkanism" by framing the region as unstable, backward, and in need of outside management.

Todorova '97. (Maria Todorova) "Imagining the Balkans Introduction Balkanism and Orientalism: Are They Different Categories?." New York Oxford. May 22, 1997. <https://www2.tf.jcu.cz/~klapetek/todorova.pdf>. -SCP

A specter is haunting Western culture -- the specter of the Balkans. All the powers have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this specter: politicians and journalists, conservative academics and radical intellectuals, moralists of all kind, gender, and fashion. Where is the adversarial group that has not been decried as "Balkan" and "balkanizing" by its opponents? Where the accused have not hurled back the branding reproach of "balkanism"?

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Europe had added to its repertoire of Schimpfwörter, or disparagements, a new one that, although recently coined, turned out to be more persistent over time than others with centuries-old tradition. "Balkanization" not only had come to denote the parcelization of large and viable political units but also had become a synonym for a reversion to the tribal, the backward, the primitive, the barbarian. In its latest hypostasis, particularly in American academe, it has been completely decontextualized and paradigmatically related to a variety of problems. That the Balkans have been described as the "other" of Europe does not need special proof. What has been emphasized about the Balkans is that its inhabitants do not care to conform to the standards of behavior devised as normative by and for the civilized world. As with any generalization, this one is based on reductionism, but the reductionism and stereotyping of the Balkans has been of such degree and intensity that the discourse merits and requires special analysis.

The "civilized world" (the term is introduced not ironically but as a self-proclaimed label) was first seriously upset with the Balkans at the time of the Balkan wars (1912-1913). News of the barbarities committed in this distant European Mediterranean peninsula came flooding in and challenged the peace movements that not only were gaining strength in Europe but were beginning to be institutionalized. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, founded in 1910, established an international commission "to inquire into the causes and conduct of the Balkan wars." The report of the commission, which consisted of well-known public figures from France, the United States, Great Britain, Russia, Germany, and Austria-Hungary, was published in 1914. This is a magnum opus that looked into the historical roots of the Balkan conflict, presenting the points of view and aspirations of the belligerents, as well as the economic, social, and moral consequences of the wars, and their relation to international law. The report included an introduction by Baron d'Estournelle de Constant reiterating the main principles of the peace movement: "Let us repeat, for the benefit of those who accuse us of 'bleating for peace at any price,' what we have always maintained: War rather than slavery; Arbitration rather than war; Conciliation rather than arbitration."

De Constant differentiated between the first and the second Balkan wars: the first was defensive and a war of independence. "the supreme protest against violence, and generally the protest of the weak against the strong . . . and for this reason it was glorious and popular throughout the civilized world." The second was a predatory war in which "both victor and vanquished lose morally and materially." Still, for all their differences, both Balkan wars "finally sacrificed treasures of riches, lives, and heroism. We cannot authenticate these sacrifices without protesting, without denouncing their cost and their danger for the future." While not optimistic about the immediate political future of the region, the commission concluded: "What then is the duty of the civilized world in the Balkans? . . . It is clear in the first place that they should cease to exploit these nations for gain. They should encourage them to make arbitration treaties and insist upon their keeping them. They should set a good example by seeking a judicial settlement of all international disputes." De Constant reiterated:

"The real culprits in this long list of executions, assassinations, drownings, burnings, massacres and atrocities furnished by our report, are not, we repeat, the Balkan peoples. Here pity must conquer indignation. Do not let us condemn the victims . . . The real culprits are those who by interest or inclination, declaring that war is inevitable, end by making it so, asserting that they are powerless to prevent it."

Stabilitocracy

40. Western engagement props up stabilitocratic regimes and trade democratic accountability for the appearance of regional stability which allows authoritarianism and malicious actors to persist in the Western Balkans.

Kapidžić et. al. '24. (Damir Kapidžić, Diana Mishkova, Enri Hide, Kristaq Xharo, Luka Filipović, Muamer Hirkić, Sead Turčalo, Valida Repovac-Nikšić, Vladimir Petrović) "External Engagement in the Western Balkans." 2024. Re-Engage | A Horizon Europe Project. December 30, 2024.
<https://re-engaging.eu/external-engagement-in-the-western-balkans/>. Kapidžić is a full professor at the Department of Political Science, faculty of Political Sciences, University of Sarajevo. Mishkova is the director of the Centre for Advanced Study in Sofia and Foreign Corresponding Member of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. Hide is a research associate professor at the European University of Tirana and Executive Director of the Regional Center for Democracy and Security in Albania. Xharo is a lecturer in International Relations at the European University of Tirana. Filipović is a research associate at the Institute for Contemporary History in Belgrade, Serbia. Hirkić is a senior research associate, Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Sarajevo. Turčalo is a full professor at the Department of Peace and Security Studies, Faculty of Political Sciences,

University of Sarajevo. Repovac-Nikšić is a full professor at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Sarajevo. Petrović is a research professor at the University of Amsterdam's NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies and Head of the Innovation Center at the Institute for Contemporary History, Belgrade. -SCP

As illiberal forms of democracy are being internalized across the globe, including by some EU countries and the US, the ability of such authoritarian yet internationally prominent states like Russia, China, and Turkey to act as role models and hold sway over proteges in the Western Balkans can hardly be seen as an aberration. Russia's exertions, in that, has been mostly disruptive and polarizing, seeking to generate friction, fragmentation, instability, and doubts about the gains to be reaped from joining the EU and NATO. To these ends it clings to a stick-and-carrot energy politics and autocratic leaders such as Presidents Vucić and Dodik as well as populist, extreme right, and nationalist groups. Turkey counts primarily on soft power and identity re-engineering to contest democratic principles, yet the admiration for Erdogan's all-powerful leadership is restricted to regions with Muslim population because of its significant reliance on Islamic values. China's "one-party system" is not a luring model for the post-communist societies of the Western Balkans. However, the economic strength and rise of China are appealing to leaderships of those countries as they see the Chinese economic model as not just a source of relatively strings-free investment compared to the EU's, but as an easy way to maintain their ecosystems of power. So, while one would not expect any Western Balkan country taking on the Chinese political model (nor does China show ambition of exporting its model), observable in the client countries are the adoption of elements of the concentrated power, media control and ideological control of the institutions as well as the corruption of the democratic processes (Andjelic 2020).

Such correlation between foreign illiberal systems and the local hybrid regimes appears to be a foregone conclusion. Where the foreign actors' interests play into social and political conflicts, ethnic or religious divisions, or the hybridity of the regimes the interests and sentiments of local ruling elites often act as natural force multipliers (Bassuener 2019). But there is also a geopolitical aspect to this correlation. As the new international system is gradually taking shape, the two, or even three, potential poles of a multipolar world advance different forms of political governance. The patronage that the Western Balkan countries are seeking in one or more of the global poles of the international system entails at least partial application of respective forms of governance, the result being reinforcement of the existing 'mixed' political regimes. One can thus speak of certain homology between the disparate political role models, which undergird the international power competition in the Western Balkans, and the hybrid nature of the local political regimes.

The EU has been found fault with encouraging stabilitocracy in the Western Balkans, that is, for having stepped back from the earlier vision of EU integration based on formal equality and democracy towards prioritizing geopolitical considerations over democratic governance. This means that the hybrid regimes in the region receive support from EU member states for the sake of the promise of (supposed) stability, thus securing external legitimacy for these regimes. However, it has been argued that the lack of democracy in the region is a main source of instability itself, as "semi-authoritarian stabilitocracies are both willing to cause and manage instability with its neighbours or towards the internal other – the opposition or minorities – for the sake of securing continued rule. Thus, stabilitocracies are causing instability, and the only stability they provide is its promise towards external actors" (Bieber 2017). To this one can add the tendency of the hybrid regimes to trade off the EU's lenience on matters of democracy for promised restraint from aligning with competing foreign actors. The agency of the Western Balkan countries in the EU accession negotiations is thus asserted, however, to the detriment of the credibility and legitimacy of the enlargement policy. To reconfirm the latter, EU needs to hold fast to treating stability (or security) and democracy as two sides of the same coin.

Securitization

41. Framing the Western Balkans as a security problem militarizes politics and suppresses democratic solutions.

Tomic '17. (Djordje N. Tomic) "Western Balkan Security and the European Union: Taming Western Balkan Security and the European Union: Taming Securitization on the Fringe of Europe Securitization on the Fringe of Europe Djordje N. Tomic." The Journal of International Relations, Peace and Development Studies. 2017. <https://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1031&context=agsjournal>. -SCP

The paper investigates the patterns of securitization within and from the perspective of the Western Balkan countries, in the light of the external influences on the regional security. The ongoing migrant/refugee crisis, particularly at its peak during 2015 and 2016, is analyzed as an indicative case of the multilevel context for the dominant political discourse in the region. The countries most directly involved in the 'Balkan route' provided responses that differed in the extent of (de)securitization. The governments were exposed to incentives and pressures from different levels. Within this analytical framework, the argument proceeds in three stages. First, security studies and the securitization theory are assessed in the light of their embeddedness in the Western context and applicability in different political and social environments. Second, the attempt is made to classify the specificities of the Western Balkan region with reference to the concept of securitization – cultural, (geo)political and economic context, as well as the underlying socio-political processes that carry the transformation of the region's societies. The third part brings the overview of the context in which the migrant/refugee crisis has reached its peak, in 2015 and 2016. The crisis' uniqueness and historically unprecedented nature pushed the challenge beyond the traditionally expected regional threats, such as the inter-ethnic conflict, power projections, or imminent economic crises. This, in turn, opened new possibilities for the external impact. Accordingly, the key argument is that the Western Balkan governments' discourse and the approach to security were convergent with the stances taken by the EU, which eventually provided crucial incentives for political cooperation. The article concludes by proposing four sets of research caveats for the securitization studies in the Western Balkans – pertaining respectively to the region's socio-political, geopolitical and the international-political characteristics.

[omitted background]

The argument presented here is an attempt to point to the specific challenges of applying securitization theory to the case of international migration in the Western Balkans. The conclusions can be formulated within four main theses.

First, the internal conditions of transformation, transition and institution-building do not favor the application of standard liberal-democratic norms of "usual" political measures while assessing securitization. The "normal" in this case needs to be re-conceptualized, especially bearing in mind that these political measures are constantly evolving, and institutions, democracy and overall political "normality" are still in the process of construction in the Western Balkans, notwithstanding the EU membership.

Second, the geographic position affects discourses. Securitizing agents tend to include geopolitical premises in their attempts to justify securitization and this territorial dimension is being used to sustain the notion of the specific historical-geopolitical role in order to gain consent for harder security measures. The self-identification of the Western Balkans as a sentinel between two worlds is a useful asset for the securitizing speech concerning the ("so-called") threat posed by the "migration crisis", in which the East-West problematic is strikingly on display. In the West, securitization of migration rests on the idea of two essentially different spaces, socially and geographically. This dyad is composed of rather simplified visions: "our territory"

(geographic aspect) and “us” (the socialpolitical aspect) opposed to “theirs” and “them”- the realization of “other”. This is the rough sketch of the basic securitizing ontology from the perspective of the Western core. Studies of migration as a security threat show this clear-cut vision, as well as the numerous ways in which individuals can take advantage of this basic setting through powerful speech acts. In the Balkans, the ontology is mainly built on the crossroads-bridge perception, with two external dimensions to consider, two forms of “otherness”. Therefore, in this particular case, a specific political geography is constructed from the standpoint of a middle land. This opens a more complex multilevel view of the problem of securitizing migration in the semi-periphery, as the perspective of territories of transit is simultaneously oriented towards the two extremities of global migration flows – zones of conflict and the ‘promised land’ of the West.

This leads to the third thesis, which is that both the political relations among the states in the region and between them and the more powerful external actors must be taken into account when assessing securitization. At the regional international (and transnational) level, cultural interconnections and essentially instantaneous cross-border communication make it difficult to isolate exclusive audiences, and it is very likely that messages originating in one country will instantly produce effects in other countries in the region as well.

Building on the previous theses, the final caveat concerns the very idea of security that different actors have. The Balkan route case has shown a confirmation of the EU’s approach to security primarily as stability in the Balkans. The messages and measures of the domestic, regional leaders eventually converged with those of the EU and its most prominent actors. A deeper and wider idea of security encompassing the rule of law, strong democratic institutions, development, environmental protection, etc. was marginalized by the primary concern of choosing a balance through border control and the regulation of migration flows. It is striking that, regardless of the stark differences and disputes among the EU Member States’ governments, the Western Balkan leaders’ perceptions on security appear to have converged with the EU’s key concept of stability.

The question of leadership and initiative among EU Member States is particularly relevant for the last thesis, and deserves further investigation. As shown above, Western Balkan leaders use Germany’s demands as political tools and can help tackle the issue of leadership among governments in matters of migration.

More generally, the region is dominated by a structured, normalized and strategic relation to the European Union. The influence of European governments and the EU institutions over Western Balkans countries appears to be very high in security issues, and this relation can be additionally understood and analyzed from the perspective of securitization. Furthermore, the region is split between members and candidates of the EU or, even more challenging, between members, candidates and (reluctant) partners of NATO. Studying securitization longitudinally and comparing the cases before and after the Albanian and Croatian accession to NATO in 2009 would be of additional value for the understanding of this multilevel security theater. The consequent research-related caveat is to avoid the analysis of isolated, individual states, or even the entire region, without taking into account the influential external actors.