




## Policy Paper


# Western Balkans and the Return to Arms: Can the EU stabilize the region?

VOCAL  
EUROPE

\*This commentary was written by **Sasa Kulenovic** | 3 October 2019

 Rue de la Science 14, 1040 Brussels

 [office@vocaleurope.eu](mailto:office@vocaleurope.eu)

 + 32 02 588 00 14

## VOCAL EUROPE

RUE DE LA SCIENCE 14B, 1040 BRUSSELS

TEL: +32 02 588 00 14

VOCALEUROPE.EU



[TWITTER.COM/THEVOCALEUROPE](https://twitter.com/thevocaleurope)



[FACEBOOK.COM/VOCALEUROPE](https://facebook.com/vocaleurope)



[YOUTUBE.COM/VOCALEUROPE](https://youtube.com/vocaleurope)



[INSTAGRAM.COM/VOCALEUROPE](https://instagram.com/vocaleurope)

### Disclaimer and Copyright

This document is prepared for, and addressed to Vocal Europe and its audience. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of its author(s) and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of Vocal Europe. Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged.

## Table of Content

1. Abstract.....	3
2. Background.....	3
2.1 Current political climate in the Western Balkans.....	3
2.2 The parabola of EU's security provider role in the Western Balkans.....	4
2.3 EU and the Western Balkans, between enlargement and resilience building.....	5
3. State of Play.....	6
3.1 What is behind the new military build-up in the Western Balkans?.....	6
3.2 Country by Country analysis.....	7
3.2.1 Albania.....	7
3.2.2 Bosnia and Herzegovina.....	8
3.2.3 Croatia.....	9
3.2.4 Kosovo.....	10
3.2.5 Serbia.....	11
3.2.6 North Macedonia.....	12
3.2.7 Montenegro.....	13
4. Policy recommendations. How the EU can prevent further militarization.....	14
4.1 Embracing the security provider role in the region.....	14
4.2 Supporting EU- led Joint Military Cooperation.....	14
4.3 Creating a Common Regional Defence Market.....	14
4.4 Continuing EU missions in the Western Balkans.....	15
4.5 Better strategic communication for the Western Balkans.....	15
4.6 Supporting European reforms led governments.....	15
5. Conclusions.....	16

## 1. Abstract

After more than 20 years of demilitarization in the Western Balkans, countries in the region are starting to reverse the trend. The European Union should carefully follow these regional developments, address the core issues at stake and promote policies that can foster regional cooperation, lessen mutual distrust and prevent the further militarization of the region.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. *Current political climate in the Western Balkans*

The political climate in the Western Balkans has become more volatile in recent years, characterized by an increase in bilateral tensions and a sharpening nationalist and at times warmongering rhetoric. A growing political polarization has also emerged throughout the region as well as within the single countries, exemplified by the increase in street protests against governing authorities and their misuse of the public good.<sup>1</sup>

Regional instability and growing nationalistic agendas have been accompanied by the onset of a military build-up, ranging from increased military spending and weapons procurement programs to controversial moves that purport to re-establish armed forces in sensitive geopolitical settings.<sup>2</sup> To make matters more worrying, the increase in military capabilities across the region is taking place against a backdrop of proposed land swaps<sup>3</sup>, historical reunification projects and a changing global security environment.<sup>4</sup>

Although almost 20 years have passed since the last war in the Balkans, the region remains characterized by several frozen, unresolved and highly interconnected conflicts. The issue of Serb<sup>5</sup> and Albanian reunification<sup>6</sup> projects is particularly critical as it stands in the background of most current regional developments. As far as the European integration of the region is concerned, although progress has been made, countries do not seem determined to embrace a truly forward-looking political agenda and tackle long standing issues that prevent their development as functional, democratic and inclusive societies.

While regional initiatives and fora have proliferated following the end of the Balkan wars, regional cooperation and reconciliation is far from being achieved. On the contrary, governing authorities have systematically capitalized on and fuelled the existing regional acrimonies to feed into the ingroup-outgroup dynamics and consolidate public support around nationalist and ethnocentric agendas. Concurrently, they have procrastinated in the implementation of reforms that could truly benefit their citizens and foster regional stability.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/03/17/protests-serbia-albania-montenegro-continue-demonstrators-take-radical-steps/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://emerging-europe.com/voices/a-new-military-build-up-in-the-balkans/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45423835>

<sup>4</sup> <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R43838.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/08/03/bosnian-serbs-seek-same-un-status-as-kosovo-08-03-2018/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/albania-kosovo-president-rama-serbia/29047539.html>

## *2.2 The parabola of EU's security provider role in the Western Balkans.*

Ever since the beginning of the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s, foreign military and peace keeping operations have been a constant variable in the region. The trend and scope of their presence has been predicated on mutating security concerns and the global agendas of key international actors.

Following the 1995 NATO-led air campaign in Bosnia and the resulting end of hostilities, three separate but interlinked peacekeeping operations were deployed in the region. While in Croatia and North Macedonia, relatively modest UN peacekeeping missions were set up, the largest military operation ever undertaken by NATO was established in Bosnia, with a view to implementing the military aspects of the Dayton Peace Agreement.<sup>7</sup> The NATO mission in Bosnia was successfully completed in 2004 and by the end of its mandate the initial 60,000 troops<sup>8</sup> had been downsized to only 7,000.

NATO played a pivotal role as a security provider in post-war Kosovo and North Macedonia as well. Following NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 which ended the conflict in Kosovo, the NATO-led military mission Kosovo Force was established.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, after the resolution of the conflict in North Macedonia in 2001, three sequenced NATO missions were deployed between 2001 and 2003<sup>10</sup>.

As the security situation in the Western Balkans improved, the time was ripe for a partial guard change in the security sphere. This new development was also influenced by an increasing American disengagement from the Balkans and the willingness of the EU to take a more assertive role, under the impetus of the EU integration perspectives of the region. In 2003, in the year of the Thessaloniki declaration, EUFOR Concordia, the first ever military operation of the EU, took over from NATO's operation Allied Harmony in North Macedonia.<sup>11</sup>

Although the mission lasted only 9 months and was replaced by the two-year EUPOL PROXIMA mission, it defined an important turning point in the EU's foreign policy. In 2004, the EUFOR Althea mission in Bosnia followed suit, and legally succeeded the NATO SFOR mission with the deployment of approximately 7,000 troops to ensure continued compliance with the Dayton Peace Agreements.<sup>12</sup>

More notably, in 2008, following Kosovo's declaration of independence, the EU launched the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX), the largest civilian mission under the Common Security and Defence Policy of the European Union. EULEX's overall mission was to 'assist the Kosovo authorities in establishing sustainable and independent rule of law institutions.'<sup>13</sup> In the following years, the improved security environment led to a further downsizing of the international missions in the Western Balkans. In 2012 EUFOR Althea, while reconfiguring its focus

---

<sup>7</sup> [https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/BA\\_951121\\_DaytonAgreement.pdf](https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/BA_951121_DaytonAgreement.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nato.int/sfor/docu/d981116a.htm>

<sup>9</sup> <https://jfcnaples.nato.int/kfor>

<sup>10</sup> <https://jfcnaples.nato.int/hqskopje/about-skopje/skopje-history/allied-harmony>

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.eeas.europa.eu/archives/csdp/missions-and-operations/concordia/index\\_en.htm](http://www.eeas.europa.eu/archives/csdp/missions-and-operations/concordia/index_en.htm)

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.euforbih.org/eufor/index.php>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.eulex-kosovo.eu/>



to capacity building and training of Bosnia's Armed Forces, also reduced its troop levels to approximately 600.<sup>14</sup>

In the same year, the extension of EULEX's mandate was accompanied by a considerable reduction of the staff and the restructuring of the mission.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the remaining non-EU missions in Kosovo underwent gradual and sequenced reductions in the personnel deployed and a reconfiguration of their key objectives and scope of action. At the moment, when it comes to EU missions in the region, EUFOR Althea has taken the role of a deterrent presence with limited operational roles. Similarly, the mandate of EULEX, although extended till 2020, has drastically limited the mission's executive functions, with the focus being put on monitoring activities.

### ***2.3 EU and the Western Balkans, between enlargement and resilience building***

The European Union's approach towards the Western Balkans has been two-pronged throughout the last two decades. On the one hand, it has revolved around building resilience in its immediate neighbourhood with a view to deterring or managing political, economic, and security crises<sup>16</sup>. On the other hand, it reflects EU's willingness to eventually welcome all Western Balkans countries in the European family and thus virtually complete the European unification project started after the fall of the iron curtain.

From the early 2000s, the European Union expressed its willingness to assume a more proactive and assertive role in the region<sup>17</sup> with a view to becoming the main driver of change under the allure of the EU membership. The launch of the Stability Pact<sup>18</sup> and the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP)<sup>19</sup> in 1999 ushered a new era of EU involvement in the Balkans, whose commitment towards enlargement was further emphasized during the landmark Thessaloniki Summit in 2003.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, following the 2004 and 2007 enlargement cycles and the European sovereign debt crisis, an enlargement fatigue started to prevail, although Croatia became the newest EU member state in 2013.<sup>21</sup>

The launch of the 2014 Berlin process<sup>22</sup>, following EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker's announcement of a 5 years enlargement suspension,<sup>23</sup> represented a meagre attempt to keep Western Balkans countries on the reforming track among symptoms of a worsening enlargement fatigue. Enlargement thus became a distant goal to be pursued at a slower and much safer pace for the EU, while the focus of the EU foreign policy shifted again towards security related issues.

---

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.euforbih.org/eufor/index.php/about-eufor/background>

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-8-2018-001198-ASW\\_EN.html?redirect](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-8-2018-001198-ASW_EN.html?redirect)

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/L-External-publications/2018/2018-AUT-Carapic-Gassmann-Mapping-Assistance-WBalkans.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.esiweb.org/pdf/bridges/bosnia/ZagrebSummit24Nov2000.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/glossary/terms/stability-pact\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/glossary/terms/stability-pact_en)

<sup>19</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/glossary/terms/sap\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/glossary/terms/sap_en)

<sup>20</sup> [https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release PRES-03-163\\_en.htm](https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release PRES-03-163_en.htm)

<sup>21</sup> [https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release IP-13-283\\_en.htm](https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release IP-13-283_en.htm)

<sup>22</sup> <https://berlinprocess.info/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/resources/docs/jean-claude-juncker---political-guidelines.pdf>

The latest 2018 credible enlargement strategy for the Western Balkans,<sup>24</sup> made enlargement even less probable in the short and medium term. Although the EU political commitment to enlargement in the region has been strong and quite vocal at times, ‘resilience thinking has often shaped EU’s engagement and security strategy with respect to the Western Balkans’.<sup>25</sup>

A pattern can be identified in the EU policy evolution in the region. In the immediate aftermath of the Yugoslav wars, humanitarian assistance and stability building were prioritized, while the democracy building aspect of the EU support, remained secondary, despite the introduction of a number of targeted programmes.<sup>26</sup>

Nonetheless, as international stability became more volatile in the presence of raising global challenges such as terrorism, global power shifts and migration crisis, the focus once again shifted towards stability.<sup>27</sup> The Action Plan of the 2018 EU ‘credible enlargement’ strategy reiterated the prominence of such concerns.<sup>28</sup> Emphasis was placed on a stronger cooperation with the region in order to tackle common threats, including terrorism, organized crime, and firearms trafficking.

The strategy also called for an increased engagement of Western Balkan countries in discussions pertaining to the development of the EU’s foreign and security policy.<sup>29</sup> That being said, EU cooperation with Western Balkans countries is currently predicted on preserving its own security while the EU has mainly disregarded the deteriorating state of regional cooperation and the abysmal state of democracy in the region, which can have destabilizing effects in the longer run.

### 3.State of Play

#### 3.1 *What is behind the new military build-up in the Western Balkans*

Although in the last two decades world military expenditure has been constantly on the rise<sup>30</sup> the Western Balkan region has followed a pattern of its own, detached from global tendencies. Following the end of hostilities, demilitarization and falling military expenditures had been the common denominators across the region.

Nevertheless, as of 2017 countries started to reverse this trend by devoting more resources to defence.<sup>31</sup> The turnabout became evident in 2018 as the steep increase in military spending was met

<sup>24</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/L-External-publications/2018/2018-AUT-Carapic-Gassmann-Mapping-Assistance-WBalkans.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> [http://kops.uni-konstanz.de/bitstream/handle/123456789/31950/Grimm\\_2-1rwig648v5gny0.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](http://kops.uni-konstanz.de/bitstream/handle/123456789/31950/Grimm_2-1rwig648v5gny0.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

<sup>27</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eugs\\_review\\_web\\_0.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/annex-communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/annex-communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/annex-communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/annex-communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf)

<sup>30</sup> [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-04/fs\\_1904\\_milex\\_2018.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-04/fs_1904_milex_2018.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Data%20for%20all%20countries%20from%201988%E2%80%932018%20in%20constant%20%282017%29%20USD%20%28pdf%29.pdf>

with pledges by governments to earmark an ever-growing percentage of their GDP to defence budgets in the future.

A set of variables could shed some light on the rationale behind these developments. Firstly, this military build-up is unfolding against a backdrop of international competition in the Western Balkans. While NATO is further expanding its presence in the region with the forthcoming accession of North Macedonia, Russia, who supports a multipolar Western Balkans<sup>32</sup>, has been striving to reinforce its stance in its remaining regional strongholds.

As NATO expands in the region, the commitment of its members to reach the long-standing goal of 2 percent of GDP spending on defence is regarded with mistrust by non-NATO regional countries. This has led to a security dilemma dynamic where countries arm themselves mostly for defensive purposes as they fear external aggressions or believe that military power could be used as a bargaining chip in future negotiations and regional settlements.

Besides the influence of external factors, strengthened armed forces might be instrumental in deterring or quashing internal secessionist movements or turmoil caused by ethnic minorities. Some governments might be also prepared to intervene militarily in neighbouring countries, should their ethnic group come under attack. Power shifts at the global level and the emergence of a multipolar and less multilateral international system, is also encouraging countries to get ready for future international instabilities that might unleash disruptive forces in the region.

Furthermore, the feeling that the EU-centric approach in the region has failed is making countries more prone to take security into their own hands. Although the current militarization of the region is a new trend, we cannot exclude that a deteriorating security environment could trigger a more dangerous regional arms race.

## **3.2 Country by Country analysis**

### **3.2.1 Albania**

Albania spent 180 US\$ mm<sup>33</sup> on defence in 2018, which represents the highest defence budget in 6 years. Although this increase reversed a trend that since 2008 has led to a considerable fall in military spending, Albania's defence budget remains quite modest. The country is mainly a security consumer under NATO's security umbrella and with 1.17 % of GDP devoted to defence in 2018, it is still far from the two percent spending goal.

Furthermore, in 2017 Albania spent only 5% of its military budget on military equipment while devoting the lion's share of its military budget to personnel, infrastructure, operations and similar.<sup>34</sup> The 2018 increase remains however meaningful in light of the rising regional tensions and a more

<sup>32</sup> [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%20%20Russia%20Balkans\\_0.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%20%20Russia%20Balkans_0.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> All military spending numbers in this policy papers are in constant 2017 US\$.

<sup>34</sup> <https://breakingdefense.com/2018/07/cant-spend-wont-spend-4-lessons-from-natos-bottom-lines/>



assertive Albanian regional policy.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Albania is set to host the first NATO air base in the region, thus providing the alliance with a pivotal strategic site.<sup>36</sup>

In August 2018, NATO announced that, in the first phase of this project, it would invest around 50 million euros in the modernization of the old air base in Kucova. The facility is expected to provide fuel, logistics and policing support, as well as training for the transatlantic alliance.<sup>37</sup> Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama has also announced further cooperation with the USA for the modernization of its air force.<sup>38</sup>

In April 2019, Albania's Defence Minister, Olta Xhacka, revealed that the country will receive three second-hand Sikorsky UH-60 Black Hawk medium-lift utility helicopters from the United States.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, after years of shrinking military budgets a change in direction is indisputable.

In November 2018 Albania's Defence Minister presented the National Security Committee with the 2019 military draft budget, expected to further increase and amount to 1.25% of Albania's GDP.<sup>40</sup> The strategic focus of the new budget includes the modernization of the Armed Forces, the implementation of the Integrated Airspace Surveillance System and investments in the modernization of the Kuçova Base, among other things.<sup>41</sup>

### 3.2.2 Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia remains one of the most sensitive and unstable countries in the Western Balkans and has been the scene of some of the most worrisome developments in terms of militarization trends. Following the end of the civil war in the 1990s, the country has undergone a demilitarization process aimed at ensuring the implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreements.

The turnabout in 2017 and 2018 led to the highest defence spending in more than a decade.<sup>42</sup> According to SIPRI data Bosnia experienced the fourth biggest relative increase in military expenditure in the world from 2017–18.<sup>43</sup> While rearmament has been witnessed in both Bosnia's entities, more intense activities have been reported in the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>35</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/07/12/tirana-govt-funds-ethnic-albanian-council-in-montenegro/>;

<https://balkaninsight.com/2019/07/03/kosovo-and-albania-agree-to-run-joint-foreign-policy/>

<sup>36</sup> <https://ac.nato.int/archive/2019/nato-supports-albania-with-investment-in-air-base-upgrade>

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.mod.gov.al/eng/index.php/newsroom/925-prime-minister-rama-announced-nato-investment-in-kucova-air-base>

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.mod.gov.al/eng/index.php/newsroom/925-prime-minister-rama-announced-nato-investment-in-kucova-air-base>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.janes.com/article/87929/albania-to-receive-surplus-us-black-hawks>

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.mod.gov.al/eng/index.php/newsroom/970-minister-xhacka-presents-to-the-national-security-committee-the-draft-budget-for-2019-priority-the-modernization-training-and-investments>

<sup>41</sup> <http://www.mod.gov.al/eng/index.php/newsroom/970-minister-xhacka-presents-to-the-national-security-committee-the-draft-budget-for-2019-priority-the-modernization-training-and-investments>

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Data%20for%20all%20countries%20from%201988%E2%80%932018%20in%20constant%20%282017%29%20USD%20%28pdf%29.pdf>

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Data%20for%20all%20countries%20from%201988%E2%80%932018%20in%20constant%20%282017%29%20USD%20%28pdf%29.pdf>

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.janes.com/article/83567/bosnian-elections-threaten-civil-unrest-localised-military-intervention-after-close-disputed-poll-but-full-scale-conflict-unlikely>

From a political standpoint, the country has entered another period of political stalemate<sup>45</sup> following the elections in October 2018<sup>46</sup>. The main point of contention regards the disagreement over a possible NATO membership. While the Bosniak and Croat members of the tripartite Presidency are in favour of starting a NATO Membership Action Plan, their Serbian counterpart, has vowed to staunchly oppose any move that could bring the country closer to NATO.<sup>47</sup>

The Serbian member of the Presidency Milorad Dodik has also threatened to leave the Joint Armed Forces Agreement if Bosnia fails to create a new executive.<sup>48</sup> The Joint Armed Forces were established in 2006 and replaced the entity armies from the Bosnian war.<sup>49</sup>

Any move to back out of the agreement would represent an ominous sign, although it would not come as a total surprise given the ongoing plans in Republika Srpska to militarize its police forces. Local police and security officials have received military-style training from Russia and acquired military equipment.<sup>50</sup> The Serb-dominated entity has increased spending on military-style weapons and purchased over 4,000 automatic rifles since 2016 and at least 2,500 assault rifles for the local police.<sup>51</sup>

Furthermore, in September 2019 the Serbian dominated entity established a ‘gendarmerie’ described as a ‘highly operational organisational unit of the Serbian police of a military-police type that performs both, civilian and military duties’.<sup>52</sup> The fear is that one day the gendarmerie might become Republika Srpska’s infantry.<sup>53</sup> Russia has played a significant role in Republika Srpska’s militarization and endeavours to expand its political clout by penetrating the country with its network of informal shadow infrastructures.<sup>54</sup>

### 3.2.3 Croatia

As other countries in the region, following the end the Yugoslav wars, Croatia embarked on a demilitarization process. The trend of falling military spending started to change after NATO’s accession in 2009. In 2014, as part of its NATO membership obligations, Croatia committed to raise its defence spending.<sup>55</sup> After initial difficulties, in 2017 Croatia started devoting more resources to defence and increased the defence budget to 1,31 % of GDP in 2018.<sup>56</sup>

In February 2019, Prime Minister Andrej Plenković confirmed further increases in Croatia’s military budget noting that such moves were beneficial both for the country’s own security and its NATO obligations.<sup>57</sup> Throughout 2019, Croatia has also been determined to launch a new fighter jets

<sup>45</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/08/23/with-neither-side-blinking-bosnian-stalemate-to-continue/>

<sup>46</sup> <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/10/16/elections-bosnia-herzegovina-won-means-future/>

<sup>47</sup> <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/06/03/disagreements-nato-blocking-formation-bihs-government/>

<sup>48</sup> <https://balkan.eu.com/dodik-threats-with-certain-actions-if-agreement-fail>

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/2015/Also-in-2015/dayton-20-years-bosnia-serbia/EN/index.htm>

<sup>50</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/08/putin-is-building-a-bosnian-paramilitary-force/>

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.newsweek.com/another-war-bosnia-russia-backs-separatist-politicians-military-buildup-europe-846949>

<sup>52</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/06/25/bosnian-serbs-accused-of-planning-military-style-police-force/>

<sup>53</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/06/25/bosnian-serbs-accused-of-planning-military-style-police-force/>

<sup>54</sup> [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%208%20Russia%20Balkans\\_0.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%208%20Russia%20Balkans_0.pdf)

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/interviews/36603-igor-tabak>

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/interviews/36603-igor-tabak>

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/politics/34171-croatian-military-budget>

procurement process, after a failed deal with Israel on the acquisition of F-16 jets.<sup>58</sup> In July 2019, the Croatian parliament's defence committee reached an agreement and created a 16-member interdepartmental committee charged with launching and running the procurement of multirole fighter aircrafts for the Croatian Air Force.<sup>59</sup> As for other NATO members in the region, the recent increase is mainly related to the pressure to reach the long-standing goal of 2 percent of GDP.

However, persistent regional instability and global multipolarity play a role as well. Croatia's security concerns in the region mostly regard its porous border with Bosnia, due to the migration crisis and the perception of Bosnia being a potential haven for Islamic radical groups<sup>60</sup>. On the other hand, its regional contraposition to Serbia remains a concern, although the confrontation is contained to the political level.

That said, the perception of an insecure regional environment persists and has made the idea of a return to compulsory military service popular in certain societal and political circles in Croatia.<sup>61</sup> Regional threats have been recently discussed between the Ministers of Defence of Croatia and Albania, and a memorandum of understanding which is expected to provide fresh impetus to defence cooperation between the two countries was signed.<sup>62</sup>

### 3.2.4 Kosovo

Ever since its unilateral declaration of independence from Serbia in 2008, Kosovo has increased its spending on security on a yearly basis, which in 2018 amounted to 63.3 US\$ m, signalling Kosovo's determination to take security into its own hands.<sup>63</sup> In the aftermath of the Kosovo war in 1999, the Kosovo Liberation Army was dismantled and security was overtaken by the NATO led mission Kosovo Force (or KFOR).

Following the declaration of independence, a Kosovo Security Force was also created under KFOR's guidance, tasked with territorial protection and crisis response operations.<sup>64</sup> However, in December 2018, Kosovo's parliament backed the government's plan to transform the 3,000-strong, lightly armed Kosovo Security Force (KSF) into a formal and fully fledged army expected to grow to 5,000 active troops and 3,000 reservists in the next decade.<sup>65</sup>

The move was met with criticism from Serbia as well as from EU officials and NATO. Pristina insisted that the future army would mainly contribute to international missions and would not be used against Serbs in Northern Kosovo. On the other hand, Serbian officials have raised the possibility of a military intervention<sup>66</sup> to protect the Serb minority in Kosovo if a Kosovo army is formally established. The attempts to prop up its security capability was confirmed by an increase of six million

<sup>58</sup> <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/croatias-deal-to-buy-f-16-jets-from-israel-is-off/>

<sup>59</sup> <https://www.janes.com/article/89734/croatian-rfp-for-fighter-aircraft-expected-by-the-end-of-july>

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-47990274>

<sup>61</sup> <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/interviews/36603-igor-tabak>

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/politics/34640-croatia-and-albania>

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Data%20for%20all%20countries%20from%201988%E2%80%932018%20in%20constant%20%282017%29%20USD%20%28pdf%29.pdf>

<sup>64</sup> [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_101890.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_101890.htm)

<sup>65</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/14/world/europe/kosovo-army-serbia-nato.html>

<sup>66</sup> <http://hr.n1info.com/Regija/a353506/Brnabic-kaze-da-bi-vojska-mogla-intervenirati-ako-Kosovo-osnuje-vojsku.html>

euros in Kosovo's defence budget for 2019 and the plan to increase the budget for KSF by 5 million euros every following year.<sup>67</sup>

Although the formation of a standing army will take time, Kosovo has become a more functional state and feels empowered to pursue its strategic interests. In that regard, the major police operation against organised crime suspects conducted in the Serb dominated Northern Kosovo in May 2019 can be also regarded as a show of strength.<sup>68</sup> The operation, deemed violent and provocative by Belgrade caused Serbia to put its armed forces on alert.<sup>69</sup>

Moreover, these developments occurred amid suggestions of possible land swaps between Kosovo and Serbia and strengthening ties between Albania and Kosovo which in July 2019 formally agreed on a convergence on foreign policy.<sup>70</sup>

### 3.2.5 Serbia

Serbia has boasted the strongest military power in the region over the last decades thanks to the inheritance of most of the resources of the powerful Yugoslavian National Army. In the aftermath of the Kosovo war in 1999, Serbia experienced a gradual decline in military spending although ebbs and flows were present.<sup>71</sup> In 2017 this declining trend was reversed and military expenditure in 2018 amounted to 904 m USD, the highest in a decade,<sup>72</sup> amid plans to further strengthen Serbia's military capabilities in the forthcoming years.<sup>73</sup>

In August 2019, the Serbian government approved the draft of a new national security and defence strategy. While reiterating its military neutrality, formally declared in 2007, the objectives of the draft revolve around the deterrence of armed threats, improvement of Serbia's international status, preservation of Kosovo and prevention and elimination of other separatist threats.<sup>74</sup> In that regard, the recent military build-up has been unfolding against a background of renewed tensions between Kosovo and Serbia.

Furthermore, the expansion of NATO in Southeast Europe is an additional matter of concern for the country. As North Macedonia approaches NATO membership, Serbia, along with Bosnia, will find itself surrounded by NATO members. The general mistrust towards NATO's policies in the region and a perceived militarization of its neighbourhood play a pivotal role in Serbia's strategic choices as the Serbian President Alexander Vucic recently implied.<sup>75</sup> Although Serbia has been open to

<sup>67</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/02/08/kosovo-splashes-money-for-newly-established-army-02-08-2019/>

<sup>68</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/05/28/kosovo-police-stage-major-raid-in-serb-majority-north/>

<sup>69</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/05/28/serbia-places-troops-alert-kosovo-police-raids/>

<sup>70</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/07/03/kosovo-and-albania-agree-to-run-joint-foreign-policy/>

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Data%20for%20all%20countries%20from%201988%E2%80%932018%20in%20constant%20%282017%29%20USD%20%28pdf%29.pdf>

<sup>72</sup> <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Data%20for%20all%20countries%20from%201988%E2%80%932018%20in%20constant%20%282017%29%20USD%20%28pdf%29.pdf>

<sup>73</sup> <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/3653512/vucic-vojska-srbije-ce-biti-jos-jaca.html>

<sup>74</sup> <https://www.janes.com/article/90584/serbian-government-approves-new-defence-security-strategies>

<sup>75</sup> <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/3653512/vucic-vojska-srbije-ce-biti-jos-jaca.html>

military collaborations with NATO and EU countries as well<sup>76</sup> it, has mostly relied on Russia and more recently on China when it comes to weapons acquisition.<sup>77</sup>

Serbia has recently embarked on a modernization programme of its military equipment. In that regard the agreement on military-technical cooperation with Russia remains pivotal. The agreement foresees the acquisition of 10 outdated MiG-29 fighters, 30 T-72C main battle tanks and 30 BRDM-2 armoured vehicles, MI-17 and possibly MI-35 helicopters, Antonov An-26 transport aeroplanes<sup>78</sup> and perhaps the Russian air defence S-300 system.<sup>79</sup> In view of their strong military partnership, a military base for servicing Russian military helicopters with troops deployment in Serbia could be on the table.<sup>80</sup>

Besides Russia, Serbia has lately forged stronger ties with China as well in the field of security and intelligence. Besides the acquisition of China-made face recognition cameras and the establishments of joint police patrols,<sup>81</sup> Serbia has recently agreed to buy nine Chengdu Pterodactyl-1 combat drones.<sup>82</sup> Strategic geopolitical considerations aside, the importance of Serbia's defence industry should not be discounted as it plays a critical economic role and generates over 500 million euros annually.<sup>83</sup> The increase of spending on security might be also linked to the government's need to preserve internal order as the Serbian government takes more authoritarian stances.<sup>84</sup>

### 3.2.6 North Macedonia

The military expenditure of North Macedonia has progressively decreased following the conflict in 2001. Although an increase has been recorded over the last two years,<sup>85</sup> the 2018 military budget of 117 million USD does not indicate a dangerous pattern and it can be mostly attributed to the country's bid to become a NATO member. While North Macedonia currently spends 1 percent of its GDP on defence, this number is expected to increase to 2 percent by 2024, in line with current membership obligations.<sup>86</sup>

Furthermore, the country has been implementing changes to right-size its military and replace its Soviet legacy military equipment to meet its membership requirements.<sup>87</sup> NATO membership will be instrumental in stabilizing the country especially due to its ethnic cleavages and past political and ethnic turmoil. In February 2019, Skopje signed a protocol that will lead the country to become the Alliance's 30th member once the agreement is ratified by all 29 NATO allies.<sup>88</sup> Nonetheless, North Macedonia has still to overcome certain technical impasses before joining as a fully-fledged

<sup>76</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/12/13/serbian-guns-have-consequences-for-balkans-and-beyond-12-12-2018/>

<sup>77</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/12/13/serbian-guns-have-consequences-for-balkans-and-beyond-12-12-2018/>

<sup>78</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/12/13/serbian-guns-have-consequences-for-balkans-and-beyond-12-12-2018/>

<sup>79</sup> [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%208%20Russia%20Balkans\\_0.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%208%20Russia%20Balkans_0.pdf)

<sup>80</sup> [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%208%20Russia%20Balkans\\_0.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%208%20Russia%20Balkans_0.pdf)

<sup>81</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/08/19/china-eyes-growing-role-in-serbias-security-field/>

<sup>82</sup> <https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory/china-boost-serb-military-drones-equipment-65509859>

<sup>83</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/12/13/serbian-guns-have-consequences-for-balkans-and-beyond-12-12-2018/>

<sup>84</sup> <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/3483586/vojska-srbije-nece-do-zvoliti-pokusaje-drzavnog-udara.html>

<sup>85</sup> <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Data%20for%20all%20countries%20from%201988%E2%80%932018%20in%20constant%20%282017%29%20USD%20%28pdf%29.pdf>

<sup>86</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/04/north-macedonia-gets-coveted-seat-at-natos-table-balkans-greece-prespa-agreement-nato-membership-europe/>

<sup>87</sup> [https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/061219\\_Wheelbarger\\_Testimony.pdf](https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/061219_Wheelbarger_Testimony.pdf)

<sup>88</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/nato-ready-to-welcome-north-macedonia-as-30th-member/29978820.html>



functioning member, especially with regard to the alignment of the North Macedonian military with NATO's integrated command and its air defence structures.<sup>89</sup>

The NATO membership also closes the door to Russian hopes of creating another zone of influence in the region. Last year, the US Congress approved eight million US dollars to help North Macedonia fight Russian propaganda.<sup>90</sup> As a whole, North Macedonia is not currently posing any threat to regional security and NATO membership can bring internal stability. However, the expansion of NATO in the region has been worryingly followed by neighbouring non-NATO countries.

### 3.2.7 Montenegro

Ever since it gained independence in 2006, Montenegro's military spending has been falling until a recent increase has led to a defence budget of 83.8 million USD\$ in 2018,<sup>91</sup> the highest in the country's short history. While the country's military strength and relevance remain marginal, the recent hike in the defence budget is mostly related to its recently obtained NATO membership. Although Montenegro intends to further increase defence spending in the forthcoming years this can be hardly viewed as a significant military build-up.<sup>92</sup>

Given its stature, Montenegro is willing to delegate security to NATO. In that regard, Montenegro's commitment to defence spending is a way improve its credibility within the Alliance and increase the chances of a NATO intervention on Montenegro's side should dangerous security threats arise in the region. As Montenegro remains committed to invest 2% of its GDP on defence by 2024, with military modernisation accounting for 20% of the budget,<sup>93</sup> NATO has propped up its support for the country's security. In 2018 the Alliance begun air policing patrols over Montenegro, a support provided to Allies without their own air forces.<sup>94</sup>

Montenegro has been often exposed to meddling from its neighbours and Russian attempts to steer the country away from Western influence. In October 2016, Russian GRU intelligence agents allegedly orchestrated a coup in Montenegro to try to install an anti-NATO government.<sup>95</sup> Indeed, Russia has been trying to extend its political clout over the country through economic coercion and cultural ties with a view to gaining access to Montenegro's strategic position.

In 2013 Russia has reportedly requested a permission to the Montenegrin government to gain access to the seaports of Bar and Kotor for its battleships.<sup>96</sup> While Montenegro remains a marginal regional military power, the increase in military spending coupled with the growing NATO presence in the region is making non-NATO regional countries uncomfortable.

<sup>89</sup> <https://www.janes.com/article/86398/north-macedonia-s-path-to-accession-still-faces-technical-challenges>

<sup>90</sup> <https://emerging-europe.com/voices/a-new-military-build-up-in-the-balkans/>

<sup>91</sup> <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Data%20for%20all%20countries%20from%201988%E2%80%932018%20in%20constant%20%282017%29%20USD%20%28pdf%29.pdf>

<sup>92</sup> <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Data%20for%20all%20countries%20from%201988%E2%80%932018%20in%20constant%20%282017%29%20USD%20%28pdf%29.pdf>

<sup>93</sup> [file:///C:/Users/titojagodo/Downloads/2019%20-%202028%20Long%20-%20Term%20Defence%20Development%20Plan%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/titojagodo/Downloads/2019%20-%202028%20Long%20-%20Term%20Defence%20Development%20Plan%20(1).pdf)

<sup>94</sup> [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_155113.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_155113.htm)

<sup>95</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/montenegro-nato-milo-ukanovic-murky-coup-plot/>

<sup>96</sup> [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%208%20Russia%20Balkans\\_0.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%208%20Russia%20Balkans_0.pdf)



## 4. Policy recommendations. How the EU can prevent further militarization.

### 4.1 Embracing the security provider role in the region

The EU should fully embrace its role as the main change driver in the region and strongly commit to regional peace, security and prosperity. Without EU's allure and stabilization role, the region could easily backslide from a reform-oriented agenda and facilitate the creation of new pockets of instability.

The EU should be also cognizant of the deteriorating American unilateralism and its new intermittent isolationism, exemplified in US President Donald Trump's motto 'America First' as well as its general disinterest towards the Western Balkans, where a *lasses-faire* approach seems to prevail at times. A lack of EU's engagement would also allow other geopolitical contenders such as Russia, China and Turkey, which might not have stability as their primary goal for the Western Balkans, to increase their political clout in the region.

Currently the opportunity cost of engaging in armed conflicts is much higher than in the 1990's for Western Balkans countries, since many countries have progressed on the EU path. Nonetheless, a waning EU soft power could decrease that opportunity cost of warmongering actions and further militarization. The EU should therefore strengthen its efforts to keep the region safe and be reminiscent of its incapacity to curb the Yugoslav wars in the 90's with the sole use of diplomacy.

### 4.2 Supporting EU-led Joint Military Cooperation

The EU should bring the Western Balkans closer to its Common Defence and Security Policy as suggested in the 2018 EU's Action Plan for the Western Balkans.<sup>97</sup> In that regard, it should further promote military cooperation, trainings and exchanges of good practices under the CDSP. An idea might be to create a Western Balkan contingent that would operate under the aegis of the CDSP, comprising troops from EU candidate and potential candidate countries in the region.

The contingent or battlegroup could operate jointly in civilian crisis management and natural disaster situations across the Western Balkans and beyond. This can help the region ultimately develop a common security architecture and culture, which will make it less vulnerable to conflicts and diminish the need for the presence of multiple external actors. A regional EU-led defence coordination office should be also established with representatives from all countries in the region.

### 4.3 Creating a Common regional defence market

In view of the new worrisome trend in defence spending, the EU could foster collaboration and joint initiatives between European and Western Balkans defence industries, with a focus on regional cooperation. Financial incentives and targeted projects would be instrumental in pooling together the interests of different defence industries in the region, which would help them set common goals and encourage coordinated policies. When it comes to defence policy, the EU has mainly focused on its industrial aspect while the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) has become mostly

---

<sup>97</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/annex-communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/annex-communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf)

demilitarised.<sup>98</sup> Such initiatives would function as trust building exercises and would be reminiscent of the European Coal and Steel Community which in 1951 triggered European integrations by creating a common market for the production and management of the two raw materials used to build weapons and make war.

#### ***4.4 Continuing EU missions in the Western Balkans***

The EU should extend the EUFOR Althea mission in Bosnia and possibly reinforce its deterrent role to send a stronger message to the country. In Kosovo, the EULEX mission should continue with its efforts to build sustainable rule of law in the country while maintain strong ties with the KFOR contingent. The EU might in the future consider the possibility of replacing KFOR with an EU-led military mission in Kosovo, as it did in Bosnia and North Macedonia.

#### ***4.5 A better strategic communication for the Western Balkans***

Although enlargement fatigue has weakened EU's credibility in the region, the EU still remains the main economic partner in the Western Balkans and contributes to regional development in terms of aid and programmes. The positive conditionality to stay on the EU path is strong, as the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) earmarked nearly €4 billion among individual partners in the Western Balkans and an additional €3 billion in multi-country funds for the period 2014-2020.<sup>99</sup>

However, a more effective strategic communication policy should highlight the support provided by the EU to the Western Balkans. This could reinforce the prospect of future enlargement, shift public opinion in favour of an EU-centric future, lessen regional mistrust and public support for more confrontational regional policies and impair the influence of other international players. Better strategic communication is therefore also important to countervail Russian influence and withstand its disruptive policies and meddling campaigns in the Western Balkans.

#### ***4.6 Supporting EU reforms led governments***

In securing its backyard and building resilience, the EU should more carefully look at the causes that lead to radicalization, ethnic tensions, violent extremism, and the rise of political forces that build consensus on ethno-centric and divisive agendas. The EU is currently trying to preserve its own stability and security by seeking the support of Western Balkans countries to neutralize or contain common security problems.

However, in doing so the EU is also tolerating governments in the region that are openly undermining democratic checks and balances and benefitting from regional tensions to consolidate internal power.<sup>100</sup> This EU short-term policy overlooks the detrimental threats that such attitudes create for regional security. Although security concerns are increasing globally, the EU should strongly promote democratic and European values as well as regional cooperation. In that regard, the militarization trend that we have recently witnessed should be strongly addressed as it paves the way to future instabilities.

---

<sup>98</sup>[https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/how\\_europe\\_can\\_stand\\_up\\_for\\_itself\\_in\\_the\\_next\\_five\\_years\\_eu\\_foreign\\_policy](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/how_europe_can_stand_up_for_itself_in_the_next_five_years_eu_foreign_policy)

<sup>99</sup>[https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eu\\_engagement\\_in\\_western\\_balkans\\_factsheet.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eu_engagement_in_western_balkans_factsheet.pdf)

<sup>100</sup>[http://kops.uni-konstanz.de/bitstream/handle/123456789/31950/Grimm\\_2-1rwig648v5gny0.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](http://kops.uni-konstanz.de/bitstream/handle/123456789/31950/Grimm_2-1rwig648v5gny0.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

## 5. Conclusions

The recent military build-up coupled with a growing polarization in the Western Balkans could lead to a less secure regional environment, especially in the case of a declining EU mediating and supporting role. Heightened tensions and new security concerns could easily arise and disrupt EU's resilience building goals in the region. Although enlargement is not on the EU priority list and a new conflict remains highly unlikely in the short term, the European Union should endeavour to implement new policies to reverse the current course and help foster reconciliation and cooperation in the region.

## VOCAL EUROPE

RUE DE LA SCIENCE 14B, 1040 BRUSSELS

TEL: +32 02 588 00 14

VOCALEUROPE.EU



[TWITTER.COM/THEVOCAL EUROPE](https://twitter.com/thevocaleurope)



[FACEBOOK.COM/VOCAL EUROPE](https://facebook.com/vocaleurope)



[YOUTUBE.COM/VOCAL EUROPE](https://youtube.com/vocaleurope)



[INSTAGRAM.COM/VOCAL EUROPE](https://instagram.com/vocaleurope)

## Disclaimer and Copyright

This document is prepared for, and addressed to Vocal Europe and its audience. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of its author(s) and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of Vocal Europe. Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged.