THE CURRENT

The Western Balkans: A Fragile Security Landscape

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The Western Balkans region remains one of the most geographically sensitive areas in Europe. Despite progress toward EU integration, contemporary security challenges require the six countries in the region to take bold steps to align stability with democratic substance.

INTRODUCTION

Situated in Southeastern Europe, the six Western Balkan nations part of the Western Balkans 6 Chamber Investment Forum (WB6)—Montenegro, Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovnia—occupy a central position at the crossroads of three major geopolitical forces: the West, Islam, and Russia. The region's complex history has been shaped by violent ethnic conflicts, territorial disputes, nearly five centuries of Ottoman rule,

and approximately 45 years under communist regimes. Over the past century, it has been the battleground for two Balkan Wars, two world wars, and a series of wars that accompanied the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. It was also the site of the largest genocide in Europe since World War II.

Although the countries in the region have made remarkable progress toward stability since the

1990s, persisting issues continue to pose threats to national security as well as broader regional stability. The interplay between external geopolitical interests, internal divisions, and weak state institutions continues to foster an environment of uncertainty and volatility. Furthermore, the Western Balkans nations remain outside the European Union, despite being entirely surrounded by its member states.

ETHNIC TENSIONS AND POLITICAL INSTABILITY

Despite the fact that armed conflicts ended in mid-1999, ethnic tensions persist in the Western Balkans. Ethno-nationalism remains a powerful force in the region, particularly in states that were once part of Yugoslav Federation.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the fragile power-sharing arrangement among Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs, established in the 1995 Dayton Agreement, has led to a political system characterized by stalemate and ineffective governance. The rise of nationalist political parties, especially those that challenge the legitimacy of the state, threatens to undermine the delicate balance achieved through the Dayton framework. According to Bojana Zorić and Věra Stojarová, "the country continues to be divided along ethnic and religious lines that transpose onto every political, economic, and social debate." Serbia's close ties with Republika Srpska, generally bypassing the institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina, have played a significant role in shaping Republika Srpska's political positioning and its broader approach to key national and international issues. These relations have been a determining factor not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina's nonrecognition of Kosovo's statehood but also in the persistent lack of internal consensus necessary for NATO accession and the structural challenges that continue to hinder the country's progress in the EU integration process.

In Kosovo, Serbia's refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence continues to fuel tension. Serb-majority municipalities in northern Kosovo are heavily influenced by Belgrade, complicating the governance of the region. The efforts of the government of Kosovo to extend the enforcement of the rule of law and to dismantle parallel structures funded by Serbia have been accompanied by violent protests and the withdrawal of Kosovo Serbs from Kosovo's institutions. Attacks against the police and Kosovo's critical infrastructure have also occurred, further exacerbating the challenges.

In 2023 in Banjska, where a paramilitary group found refuge, a large arsenal of weapons and other logistical equipment was discovered within an Orthodox monastery administered by the Serbian Orthodox Church. This development added another layer of complexity to an already tense situation, especially since the Church does not recognize the state of Kosovo. The deliberate use of religious institutions as shelters in Kosovo serves not only to provide a sense of security but also to create interethnic and interreligious tensions. Such tensions can then be exploited, particularly if Kosovo's law enforcement authorities attempt to intervene, potentially escalating into violence and unrest both within Kosovo and beyond.

The strong connection between the Serbian state and the Serbian Orthodox church, along with Serbia's insistence on establishing the Association of Serb-majority municipalities, are perceived by Albanians as instruments that Serbia could employ to destabilize Kosovo, justify continuous interference in its internal affairs, and render it a dysfunctional state, with repercussions extending beyond the region.

After the 2006 independence referendum, Montenegro officially separated from Serbia. Since then, the nation's political climate has been characterized by ongoing unrest and significantly influenced by the Democratic Party of Socialists' efforts to maintain its hold on power. The close connection between ethnicity and religion has exacerbated divisions among groups, deepening tensions and fragmenting Montenegrin society over time. In 2019, widespread unrest and protests broke out, primarily in reaction to the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion and Belief and the Legal

Status of Religious Communities. Through this law, the government aimed to address the issue of the properties of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Montenegrin Orthodox Church in Montenegro. However, as noted by O. Injac and T. Goranović in 2023, the true intention behind the law was, according to some interpretations, to challenge the growing political and economic influence of the church. This significantly contributed to the Democratic Party of Socialists losing the general elections after nearly three decades in power. Furthermore, persistent debates over Serbian and Montenegrin identities in public discourse continue to undermine Montenegro's political stability.

Serbia continues to grapple with the legacy of the wars it was involved in during the 1990s. The discourse adopted in Serbia's national security documents reflects the view that Kosovo is referred to as an autonomous province of Serbia. Its independence is portrayed as an attempted secession, which is presented in the strategies as a threat to Serbia's national interests, due to its alleged potential to further destabilize the country, particularly in southern municipalities inhabited by ethnic Albanians. In the latest security strategy, the preservation of Republika Srpska has been included as one of the foreign policy priorities of Serbia.

Issues related to Kosovo and Republika Srpska are frequently used by Serbian politics to divert attention from its failures and widespread corruption, which recently led to massive protests initiated by students from the University of Belgrade. In stark contrast to the rights enjoyed by the Serbian minority in Kosovo, the indigenous Albanians in southern Serbia remain the most discriminated population in the region. For years, they have been subjected to a policy of address passivization. Through this policy, Serbian authorities have been removing ethnic Albanians from the population register, stripping them of their rights and leaving thousands stateless. These removals reduce the official size of the country's Albanian minority, consequently affecting state funding allocations, their representation at all levels of government,

and their access to essential services. Serbia has also been advocating for the creation of an Association of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo, and the mass passivization of Albanians in southern Serbia appears to be a preemptive measure aimed at preventing Kosovo from making similar political demands.

Unlike the former republics of the Yugoslav Federation, which gained independence in the 1990s through war, Macedonia seceded peacefully through a referendum. However, it could not avoid ethnic conflict. From the very beginning of its existence as an independent state, ethnic Albanians in the Republic of North Macedonia faced marginalization, discrimination, and exclusion from political and economic life. Their protests were violently suppressed by the authorities. These long-standing tensions eventually led to the 2001 conflict, the creation of the National Liberation Army, and subsequently the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA). Although the agreement helped establish power-sharing mechanisms and greater rights for Albanians, it remains only partially implemented. Issues such as equitable representation, language rights, and political inclusion remain sensitive. These lead to recurring tensions, especially during pre-election periods, where ethnic, religious, and cultural differences, along with mutual discontent, are instrumentalized for political purposes.

Since the fall of the communist regime in the early 1990s, Albania has faced recurring political crises, primarily linked to weak institutions, corruption, and the lack of a democratic political culture. While ethnic tensions have been far less prevalent due to Albania's largely homogeneous population, ethnically charged arguments have occasionally been used as tools in the country's intense political battles.

ORGANIZED CRIME AND CORRUPTION

Organized crime is another critical security threat in the Western Balkans. The region is regarded as a transit point for illicit drugs,

human trafficking, migrant smuggling, and weapons trade. It is predominantly controlled by criminal networks operating as highly adaptive enterprises, exploiting weaknesses in border security, financial systems, and law enforcement coordination to sustain their illegal activities. The Balkan route is a major corridor for trafficking opiates and, more recently, methamphetamine, running from Afghanistan through Iran and Türkiye, then dividing into three branches that all lead into Europe. Between 2019 and 2022, the route generated an estimated total annual illicit gross income ranging from US$13.9 to US$21.4 billion. The total worth of these trafficking operations exceeds the GDP of many countries along the route, showing the substantial economic impact of such illegal activities.

Profits from criminal activities are laundered either within the Western Balkans—through investments in real estate, luxury vehicles, and other assets—or abroad. These funds are primarily invested in sectors such as construction and trade and are also used to bribe segments of law enforcement or political circles. This enables criminal organizations access to privileged information and ensures the uninterrupted continuation of their operations. Corruption and organized crime strengthen each other, undermining the rule of law in the region.

Even after many years of prolonged transition, the countries in the Western Balkans continue to be consistently ranked in various indices as hybrid regimes or weak democracies. Corruption within public institutions is one of the key factors contributing to this extended transition and impedes the implementation of reforms. By weakening state capacity and creating systemic vulnerabilities, corruption obstructs the establishment of institutions critical for the region's long-term security.

Elevated levels of corruption have eroded public trust in government institutions, fostering discontent and providing fertile ground for extremist ideologies to thrive. The resulting systemic weaknesses further open the door for foreign powers to exert influence, exploiting institutional fragility for political or economic leverage.

MIGRATION AND REFUGEE FLOWS

In addition to illicit flows of legal and illegal goods, the Balkans remain a critical transit route for migrants and refugees, particularly from the Middle East, Asia, and Africa, seeking entry into the European Union. The 2015 migrant crisis revealed the region's border vulnerabilities and its limited capacity to manage large-scale movements of people. Despite financial aid and support from the EU to address migration challenges, the region's response has been inconsistent and often shaped by political considerations.

At the same time, the Western Balkans have experienced a steep population decline over the past two decades, with the population dropping by nearly 2.5 million to just over 16 million. Economic and political transitions, coupled with the conflicts of the 1990s, have led to one in five citizens living abroad. Looking to the future, the UN projects an additional population decline of 3 million by 2050. Bosnia and Herzegovina is expected to experience the largest decline (-22 percent), followed by Albania (-19.5 percent) and Serbia (-18 percent).

However, the most critical issue for the Western Balkan countries remains the high levels of emigration of qualified and skilled labor. The countries of the Western Balkan are among those most affected by brain drain globally. Research conducted by the German Marshall Fund of the United States estimates that they could lose between 25 and 50 percent of their skilled and educated workforce in the coming decades, a scenario that raises significant concerns about the democratic and economic advancement of the WB6 countries and their future prospects for EU membership.

Key push factors include low living standards, poor prospects of career progression, and high levels of corruption and political instability. Additionally, inefficiencies in the labor

market contribute to persistently high unemployment, particularly among young people. While unemployment has declined over the past decade, it remains significantly above global averages. Moreover, the pull factors of developed countries, such as better economic conditions, improved labor prospects, education opportunities, legal migration policies, and simplified pathways to citizenship, play a significant role in encouraging emigration, as they are primarily aimed at attracting educated and skilled young individuals.

Beyond emigration, all the Balkan nations are facing challenges such as an aging population and declining birth rates. None of the WB6 nations currently exceed a fertility rate of 2.1, the minimum required for generational replacement. The regional average stands at approximately 1.5 children per woman of childbearing age, which is comparable to the EU average.

FOREIGN INFLUENCE AND GEOPOLITICAL RIVALRIES

The strategic location of the Western Balkans has ensured its role as crossroads for trade, religions, and cultures for centuries. Today, it is a geopolitical battleground for influence between different players such as the EU, NATO, Russia, China, Türkiye, and the Gulf States. These external actors seek to expand their influence in the region, each with differing strategic interests.

Since 1998, the EU and NATO have pursued the goal of integrating the Western Balkan countries among others into their political and security structures. However, progress in the integration process has been slow, uneven, and nonlinear, with most WB6 countries continuing to face significant challenges in meeting the necessary criteria for membership.

Russia has long been leveraging historical and cultural ties to advance its economic and energy interests, weaken the overall appeal of the Western democratic model, and undermine the integration of the Western Balkans into the

EU and NATO. Consistent with its unprovoked aggression against Ukraine for over a decade now, Russia is interested in deepening divisions within the region and weaponizing interreligious and interethnic tensions to advance its strategic goals. By leveraging its close ties with Serbia and Republika Srpska, Russia actively fuels long-standing tensions there to keep old conflicts alive so they can be reignited when strategically beneficial. It aims to exploit the resulting instability to consolidate control over currently occupied areas and expand the territory under its occupation, while also increasing its influence, including in the Western Balkans.

China has made significant inroads into the Balkans through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), offering large-scale infrastructure projects and investments aimed at integrating the region into its broader strategy for political and economic expansion in Europe. However, for several years, the influx of Chinese capital has raised concerns about the risk of debt dependency, as many of these investments are structured as loans that impose a financial burden on recipient states. Furthermore, China's growing economic leverage and strategic presence in the Western Balkans may increasingly be perceived as a viable alternative to the Western model. This perception is more likely to take root in a region where stability has often been prioritized over the consolidation of democratic institutions and culture, which remain fragile. As a result, the countries' long-standing efforts to integrate into Euro-Atlantic structures could be compromised.

Türkiye has adopted a multidimensional approach to the Western Balkans, integrating elements of soft power, economic investment, and personal engagement. Building on shared historical and religious ties, particularly with countries that have significant Muslim populations, Ankara has deepened its presence through infrastructure projects, educational initiatives, the construction of mosques and Islamic centers, as well as fostering strong personal ties with political, religious, and community leaders. This strategy, often described as

Neo-Ottomanism, reflects Türkiye's ambition to strengthen its role as a regional power by cultivating influence across regions that were once part of the Ottoman Empire. While promoting regional stability and cooperation, Türkiye also seeks to position itself as a strategic alternative to Western actors through the pragmatic use of its historical legacy.

The *Gulf States*, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran, have actively advanced their stricter interpretations of Islam that are gradually taking root in the Western Balkans, differing significantly from the secular Islamic traditions historically observed in the region. Iran's regional influence has predominantly been cultural, focusing on initiatives such as language education and cultural exchange. Although Iran is a Shiite-majority state, it has supported even Sunni groups and expanded its strategic outreach beyond the Middle East. Different from the other Western Balkan nations, Albania has experienced long-standing tensions with Iran, which persisted for nearly a decade and culminated in a complete severance of diplomatic ties. This tension was mainly due to Albania's decision to host members of the Iranian opposition group Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK), who now number over 3,000.

In 2022, following a cyberattack targeting the Albanian government's digital infrastructure, an act that Albanian authorities stated was orchestrated and sponsored by the Islamic Republic of Iran, Albania severed diplomatic relations and expelled the Iranian diplomatic mission. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has reinforced its presence in the Balkans through both cultural and economic initiatives, including funding the construction of several mosques. During the Bosnian War in the 1990s, it provided significant aid to the Muslim cause and has continued its efforts to expand its influence in the region.

TOWARD INTEGRATION

The six Western Balkan nations must strengthen their efforts toward EU accession. These efforts include internal and external governance, economic, and social actions. Specifically, the governments of the Western Balkan nations should

- *Reduce ethnic tensions*. Governments should promote genuine local autonomy, underpinned by a strengthened the rule of law and accompanied by consistent monitoring and effective enforcement of minority rights. These efforts should be further supported through EU integration mechanisms and regional initiatives such as the Berlin Process.
- *Strengthen regional cooperation*. An integrated approach includes harmonizing criminal legislation, enhancing operational information exchange, establishing joint structures for border control and criminal investigations, and developing a coordinated system for asylum and return procedures, in line with EU standards.
- *Combat corruption.* Deep and credible reforms against corruption, ensuring judicial independence, transparency in the activities of the public administration, and institutional accountability will restore public trust, create genuine economic opportunities, and curb the massive emigration of young people.
- *Establish transparent review mechanisms for foreign investments.* Such mechanisms, especially in strategic sectors such as energy and telecommunications, will ensure investments from actors not aligned with democratic values do not compromise national security.
- *Counter disinformation campaigns.* Western Balkan countries must more effectively combat propaganda and through initiatives such as media literacy, systematically identify, monitor, and analyze disinformation campaigns.
- *Strengthen control over foreign funding for religious organizations.* In addition to supporting education and training of local clerics, such laws and regulations would prevent conditional financing that could undermine religious autonomy and social cohesion.
- *Promote the region as a strategic investment destination for the European*

Union and the United States. The Western Balkans are a security buffer, energy gateway, and frontline against authoritarian influence.

CONCLUSION

Addressing the region's internal and external security challenges requires a coordinated approach involving both local governments and international actors, particularly the European Union and NATO. In contexts marked by corruption and weak institutions, domestic authorities often lack the will or capacity to pursue reforms. Therefore, the continued engagement of the European Union and the United States is essential to drive political change, promote good governance, strengthen democratic resilience, and deter spoilers of peace. This engagement must also move beyond the prevailing emphasis on stability at the expense of democratic depth. Ultimately, only by aligning stability with democratic substance can the region truly move beyond transitional fragility and toward sustainable peace. ~ Σ

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