EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION OF THE WESTERN BALKANS: THE CASES OF KOSOVO, NORTH MACEDONIA, BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

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Abstract

The Western Balkans is a multi-lingual and multi-religious area. It is very heterogeneous, but the countries share many characteristics and face similar challenges. The strategic importance of the region to the North Atlantic Alliance is well-documented. The primary objectives of the NATO in this region include the promotion of stability, security, and integration into the Euro-Atlantic community. The European Union has established the Stabilization and Association Mechanism for the Western Balkans. Since 2003, when the European perspective was recognised for Western Balkan partners, all countries have concluded a "Stabilization and Association Agreement", which sets out the general framework for their relations with the Union. This study will examine the results of the European Union's investment in peace and security, as well as the growing involvement of NATO in peacekeeping operations. A comparative analysis of the three countries is based on a comprehensive review of relevant documents, including the NATO and EU documents that establish the benchmarks for enlargement, the Copenhagen (1993) and Madrid (1995) criteria, the European Commission's annual enlargement packages, and interviews with government officials. The results of the study highlight the interactions and interdependencies between the analysed countries and their allies. Furthermore, the study offers significant insights into the varied levels of stability influenced by EU conditionality.

Keywords: Western Balkans, Security, NATO, Integration, EU, Candidate Country, Stability.

INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the Yugoslav wars between 1995 (the end of the Bosnian War) and 1999 (the end of the Kosovo War), international organisations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU) were involved in the peace-building process.

The Western Balkans is a geographical area within the European continent that presents several unresolved issues. Over the past decades, the Western Balkans region has been plagued by a series of crises, including not only economic and social challenges, but also security concerns. Various internal political factors, the insufficient pace of economic and social progress, and unresolved political challenges complicate the security context of the Western Balkans. In addition to democratic and socio-economic setbacks, numerous unresolved bilateral disputes threaten the stability of the countries.

The region is currently characterised by the tense relationship between Serbia and Kosovo, the challenges faced by international actors in the functioning of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the dispute between North Macedonia and Bulgaria over language and recognition of the Bulgarian minority. There are also two serious security problems in the region. Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), involving Serbia and Croatia, and Kosovo, involving Serbia, Albania and Macedonia.[1]

Conflict prevention and peace-building can only be successful if they are pursued in parallel in three key areas: creating a secure environment, promoting sustainable democratic systems, and fostering economic and social well-being. The two organisations, NATO and the EU, complement each other in providing advice and co-operation in the active prevention and resolution of armed crises and violent conflicts.[2] The countries of the region face many of the same problems. This is why the Western Balkans themselves have emphasised cooperation with the EU and NATO. Economic development, the reduction of socio-political divisions and democratization are key factors on the road to Euro-Atlantic integration.[3]

New or re-emerging challenges require a more coherent strategy and a stronger NATO and EU commitment to peace and stability. Post-war reconstruction required greater NATO and EU efforts in peacekeeping and nation-building to integrate countries into democratic systems. NATO's decision to strengthen its cooperation with and engagement with the countries of the Western Balkans, and its intention to contribute to stability and security and to maintain and enhance consultations with the countries of the region, stated a commitment to fostering a collaborative environment that not only addresses immediate security concerns, but also promotes long-term political and economic development, ensuring that the region remains resilient against external threats and internal challenges. This approach underscores NATO's recognition of the strategic importance of the Western Balkans in the broader context of European stability and integration.

The Bucharest Summit Declaration of 2008 [4] and the Berlin Process, initiated in 2014, underscore the emphasis on stability in the Western Balkans as part of broader security considerations. These initiatives seek to bolster cooperation and provide support for the region's Euro-Atlantic integration. NATO's commitment is further underscored by its engagement through the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program and the Membership Action Plan (MAP). Strategic documents also highlight broader security challenges in the context of geopolitical tensions, such as Russia's actions in Ukraine. The most recent reaffirmation of the strategic significance of the Western Balkans came at the Washington Summit on July 10, 2024.[5] In this declaration, NATO leaders explicitly stated that "the Western Balkans and the Black Sea regions are of strategic importance for the Alliance," emphasizing their commitment to the security and stability of these areas. These decisions are indicative of NATO's long-standing commitment to stability and security in the Western Balkans, with sustained support for the region being a consistent theme in its strategic outlook.

NATO uses a variety of instruments to enhance security cooperation, support political reform and promote stability in the Western Balkans. The Kosovo Force (KFOR) is a NATO-led peacekeeping mission in Kosovo to provide a safe and secure environment. It plays a crucial role in maintaining peace and supporting the development of local security institutions. NATO's involvement in Bosnia and Herzegovina began with the implementation of the military aspects of the Dayton Peace Agreement.[6] NATO conducted its first major crisis response operation in the country, known as Stabilization Force (SFOR). Over time, this operation evolved into a more supportive role. The PfP program facilitates cooperation between NATO

[1] Delevic, Milica. 2007a. Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans. Chaillot papers 104. Vol. 4. Paris: Institute for Security Studies: 97.
[2] Kutllovci, Sheqir, and Orha Çeku. 2024. "North AtlanticTreatyOrganization (NATO) and Itsrole for Security in the Western Balkans." Access to Justice in Eastern Europe 7 (3)
[3] Kutllovci, Sheqir, and Orha Çeku. 2024. "North AtlanticTreatyOrganization (NATO) and Itsrole for Security in the Western Balkans." Access to Justice in Eastern Europe 7 (3)
[4] NATO. 2024. "Relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina." NATO Homepage. January 30, 2024.
[5] Ibid
[6] Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe: "Dayton Peace Agreement" 14 December 1995.

and partner countries in the region, allowing for joint training exercises, dialogue, and capability development, and enhancing interoperability with NATO forces. The Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) provides a forum for dialogue and cooperation between NATO members and partner countries in the Western Balkans, addressing security challenges and fostering collaboration on defense-related issues.

The EU has a special interest in the region because of its geographical proximity to its Member States. The EU aims to promote stability and prosperity within and beyond its borders and to develop a stable neighborhood with which it enjoys close, peaceful and co-operative relations. As part of the strategy for the Western Balkans, the Stability Pact region[7] was established in 1999 on the initiative of the European Union, with the participation of the Western Balkan countries and international organizations, NATO and the United States as partners.

The Stability Pact was a new policy instrument towards the region, where NATO had to provide security and maintain peace, but it also redefined the role of the EU in the region.[8] The significance of the Stability Pact is that it provided a framework within which the EU could also contribute to lasting peace and stability, democracy and economic prosperity in the region. The Stability Pact (1999) was welcomed in the Western Balkans, which saw it as a new opportunity to forge political links with the West in order to attract much-needed funds to deal with the costly consequences of the conflict and the region's difficult transition. In May 1999, in response to the security challenges facing the region, the EU launched the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) for the Western Balkans, offering a European perspective.[9]

The goal of the EU was to play a more proactive role in the Balkans.[10] The SAP put more emphasis on democratization and the integration of the Western Balkans into EU structures on the basis of contractual relations. At the Thessaloniki European Council in 2003, the EU confirmed the membership perspective for the Western Balkans and concluded treaties, Stabilization and Association Agreements (SAAs) with each country, offering a perspective of EU membership on the basis of the Copenhagen criteria to be fulfilled. The agreements are based on a merit-based process depending on the concrete results achieved by each individual country.

The prospect of a contractual relationship was progressive and complementary to NATO's stabilization efforts. The differences between the roles of NATO and the EU are significant, according to Delevic. Although both are vital to the democratic development, peace and future prosperity of the region. „Stabilization of the region and its integration into the EU, while meant to be part of the same package, seem also to entail a contradictory logic: while for stabilization, the regional dimension is crucial, integration – even within the regional framework – is an essentially bilateral exercise."[11]

The main purpose of the study is to present the scope and significance of the security issues in the region, with a particular focus on BiH, North Macedonia and Kosovo, in the light of NATO and EU efforts to find a solution that will make the region more politically and economically stable and thus ready for integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. The ultimate goal of the Western Balkan countries is integration into Euro-Atlantic structures, while the ultimate goal of NATO and the EU is to contribute to lasting peace and stability, democracy and economic prosperity in the region.

This paper will address the question when the Stabilization and Association Process was launched, there were unresolved conflicts, ethnic tensions and lack of security in the Western Balkans. What are the results NATO has achieved? Does the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) enable the EU to play

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[7] Council of Europe. "Stability Pact DG IV/EDU/HIST (2003)10" of 10 June 1999. Strasbourg.
[8] Phinnemore, David, and Peter Siani-Davies. 2003. "Beyond Intervention? - The Balkans, the Stability Pact and the European Union." In International Intervention in the Balkans since 1995, 174–174.
[9] Comission of the European Communities. 1999. "Communication from the Comission to the Council and the European Parliament on the Stabilisation and Association Process for Countries of South-Eastern Europe." Vol. COM(l999)235 final. Brussels.
[10] Ibid
[11] Loc.cit., Delevic

a leading role in peacekeeping operations, conflict prevention and strengthening the security of the Western Balkans?

The paper begins with a brief overview of the role of international organizations in the Western Balkans. This is followed by an analysis of the role of NATO and the EU in building and stabilising peace, focusing on the three Western Balkan countries. The third section turns to the European Union and the Western Balkans missions. The fourth section deals with the Stabilization and Association Agreements as a means of security cooperation. The final section examines the developments in the integration of the Western Balkans into the Euro-Atlantic structures. Finally, the conclusion is drawn.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A mixed research method was used to understand the complexity of the issues under investigation, using the literature review approach as secondary research and qualitative research as primary research. The concept of Europeanization as applied in the candidate and potential candidate countries, but also its impact on the process of stabilization and Europeanization in the analysed Western Balkan countries is used qualitatively. The empirical research sheds light on one of the emphasized criteria for EU accession, the pre-accession strategy for the EU membership the Stabilization and Association Agreements (SAAs), but also in other monitoring mechanisms used by the EU to scrutinize the presence of NATO and EU missions, which are specifically addressed in the paper. The author's process of document selection, interviewing, and analysis in qualitative research allows the researcher to test the hypothesis in the content analysis process.

RESULTS

The Role of NATO and the EU in Peacebuilding and Stabilization

NATO's peacekeeping and stabilization roles in conflict-prone regions are increasingly intertwined in the context of today's security challenges. The Alliance brings unique strengths to peacekeeping and stabilization efforts, combining military capabilities with diplomatic initiatives. NATO's military presence and operational expertise complement the EU's focus on political dialogue, economic development and institution-building through its Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP).

Due to its geographical proximity, the European Union has a strong interest in the stability of the region. The countries of the Western Balkans, which are very heterogeneous, have been engaged with the European Union mainly since the creation of the Stability Pact in 1999. The accession perspective is the main driver of transformation in the region, thereby enhancing security, which is essential for promoting reconciliation and stability. The country cases highlight the need for a permanent NATO and EU presence to prevent conflict and maintain peace in the region.

NATO's engagement often involves military operations and crisis management. These operations underscore NATO's ability to respond to crises and support peacekeeping efforts. The EU, on the other hand, focuses on long-term stability through political and economic means. It emphasizes the importance of democratic governance, economic development, and institution building as essential components of sustainable peace. The partnership between NATO and the EU is crucial, as they share common values and strategic interests, with many member countries overlapping. Together, they promote democratic values and work towards the peaceful resolution of disputes, ensuring that both military and civilian approaches are used in the pursuit of lasting peace and security. They promote a comprehensive approach to peace and stability, particularly in the Western Balkans, where historical conflicts and socio-political complexities continue to pose significant challenges.

This paper will explore the collaborative frameworks and strategies employed by NATO and the EU, assessing their impact on security, peacebuilding and regional stability in the post-conflict landscape.

Republic of North Macedonia

After the devastating terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, the United States and Europe understandably feel compelled to reallocate resources from the Balkan region in order to sustain the fight against global terrorism. Yet, almost ten years later, the region has posed one of the most significant strategic and political challenges for the West.

After gaining independence on 8 September 1991, North Macedonia had to face several problems, including the contentious issue of the name dispute, which received significant international publicity. After the independence, the region was under the domination of three powerful neighboring countries: Greece for its name and historical ties, Bulgaria for its language and cultural heritage, and Serbia for its autonomous church. The Albanian population makes up 25-30% of the country's total population and has been demanding more rights since independence. The start of the Kosovo War also inflamed Albanian nationalists, but the conflict ended with international intervention. Ultimately, the outbreak of violent ethnic conflict was effectively averted.[12]

In the following years, the restitution of stability resulted in notable achievements for the EU, such as the attainment of candidate status on 16 December 2005, but without substantial changes in the name dispute. In March 2020, North Macedonia not only achieved candidate status but also effectively became a member of the "Vilnius Nine", a group of nine former communist states that sought to carry out the next wave of the NATO's enlargement. These states considered alliances and institutional membership to be essential for overall security and for attracting foreign investments.[13]

North Macedonia did not take part in the Yugoslav conflicts in the first half of the 1990s, so its declaration of independence was peaceful, and its stability gave it better prospects for NATO and EU accession than other Western Balkan countries. This contributed to its admission to the PfP program on 15 November 1995 and to the NATO's Science for Peace and Security (SPS) Program in 1998. The NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) was launched on 19 April 1999, and the country was granted candidate status by the EU in 2005. The Kosovo war and the Albanian uprising have further strengthened the relationship between NATO and North Macedonia, as evidenced by the fact that NATO has sent several missions to the country. Most notably, NATO maintained a military headquarters in Skopje to provide support for security sector reform until 2012, when it became the NATO Liaison Office Skopje, which has since performed advisory tasks.[14]

On 2 May 2003, Albania and Croatia signed the US-Adriatic Charter in preparation for NATO accession, committing to closer security and defense cooperation and the establishment of NATO-compatible armed forces. The Greek veto at the Brussels meeting of foreign ministers on 6 March 2008 was a disappointing setback to the stabilization of the Western alliance system, making clear that NATO accession is not possible without a resolution of the name dispute. North Macedonia's initial advantage has gradually disappeared with the accession of Albania and Croatia to NATO in 2009 and Montenegro in 2017. As for EU membership, Croatia joined it in 2013, Montenegro in 2012, and Serbia was granted candidate status in 2012. However, the Liaison Office in Skopje continues to operate, and North Macedonia has actively participated in NATO and EU missions since the early 2000s. The largest of these is the KFOR

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[12] Egeresi, Zoltán. 2020. "Észak-Macedónia Hosszú Útja a NATO-Tagságig." NKE Stratégiai Védelmi Kutatóközpont Elemzések 10 (March):3–3.

[13] Liotta, P. H., and Cindy R. Jebb. 2002. "Macedonia: End of the Beginning or Beginning of the End?" The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters 32 (1): 2–2. https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.2081.

[14] Háry, Szabolcs. 2019. "Védelem- És Biztonságpolitika a Nyugat-Balkánon." In Európaizáció a Nyugat-Balkánon, edited by Boglárka Koller and Tibor Ördögh, 131–131. Budapest: Dialóg Campus Kiadó.

mission, but the Army of the Republic of North Macedonia also took over most of the tasks at NATO headquarters in Skopje by 2007 with the help of the Host Nation Support Coordination Center established in spring 2006.[15]

Following the signing of the Prespa Agreement with the Greek government on 17 June 2018, North Macedonia was invited to start negotiations[16] during the NATO Summit in Brussels on 11-12 July 2018. Subsequently, the NATO Permanent Representatives signed the Accession Protocol on 6 February 2019.[17] This protocol was ratified by all legislatures of the 29 member states, with Spain being the last to ratify on 19 March 2020. As a result, North Macedonia became NATO's 30th member.[18]

In conclusion, North Macedonia's journey from a fledgling independent state to NATO's 30th member is an example of resilience, diplomacy, and strategic partnerships. The challenges posed by its complex historical context, in particular the name dispute and ethnic tensions, could easily have derailed its aspirations for international integration. As North Macedonia stands as a symbol of stability and cooperation in the Balkans, North Macedonia's accession to NATO not only enhances its security but also contributes to the Alliance's collective defense framework. This achievement underscores the importance of diplomatic engagement and the role of international organizations in fostering peace and stability in volatile regions.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Established under the Dayton Peace Agreement (1995), Bosnia and Herzegovina is a federal state consisting of two highly autonomous entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska (Bosnian Serb Republic). A key obstacle to building a functioning state out of the two entities has been the need to strengthen the capacity of state-level institutions, particularly in terms of decentralizing authority to state-level entities.[19]

The country's central institutions consist of a directly elected tripartite Presidency, rotating every eight months between a Bosniak, a Serb and a Croat for a four-year term. The Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as Head of State, appoints a multi-ethnic Council of Ministers. The Council is chaired by the Prime Minister.[20]

NATO has been a major contributor to peacebuilding and security in BiH since deploying its first peacekeeping mission in 1995 and continues to provide support for defense reform. However, the transition from communism to a liberal economic system and the legacy of the 1992-1995 Bosnian war have posed challenges to the peacebuilding process. Implementing reforms in a country with a highly complex political system and significant decentralized power has proved difficult. Nevertheless, the Bosnian authorities have made significant progress towards Euro-Atlantic integration, and the defense reform is often recognized as the most successful post-war reform in the country.[21]

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[15] Loc.cit., Egeresi
[16] NATO Headquarters. 2018. "NATO Summit Guide - A Stronger and More Agile Alliance." Brussels: NATO Public Diplomacy Division.
[17] NATO. 2019. "NATO Allies Sign Accession Protocol for the Future Republic of North Macedonia." NATO Homepage. February 6, 2019.
[18] NATO. 2020. "North Macedonia Joins NATO as 30th Ally." NATO Homepage. March 30, 2020.
[19] Aybet, Gülnur. 2010. "NATO Conditionality in Bosnia and Herzegovina." Problems of Post-Communism 57 (5): 21–21. https://doi.org/10.2753/PPC1075-8216570502.
[20] Kemenszky, Ágnes. 2019. "Bosznia-Hercegovina Politikai Rendszere." In Délkelet-Európa Politikai Rendszerei (1990-2017), edited by Boglárka Koller and Tibor Ördögh, 71–72. Budapest: Dialóg Campus Kiadó.
[21] Busterud, Ingrid Olstad. 2015. "Defense Sector Reform in the Western Balkans – Different Approaches and Different Tools." European Security 24 (2): 337–337. https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2014.893428.

TABLE 1: Setting goals for NATO cooperation

State	Partnership for Peace (PfP)	Membership Action Plan (MAP)	Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP)	NATO accession
North Macedonia	15 November 1995	19 April 1999	-	19 March 2020
Bosnia and Hercegovina	14 December 2006	5 December 2018	10 September 2008	-
Kosovo	-	-	-	-

In July 2001, BiH announced its initial commitment to participate in NATO's PfP program. In order to confirm its candidacy, former NATO Secretary General George Robertson (1999-2004) outlined specific criteria for participation. These criteria include the adoption of the Law on State Defense, state authority over the armed forces, democratic and parliamentary supervision of the armed forces, the establishment of the Ministry of Defense of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the fulfillment of commitments under the Dayton Peace Agreement.[22]

The inclusion of BiH in the PfP was of enormous importance to the country. While its participation would certainly strengthen its defense and security structures, the symbolic value of welcoming the country into the Euro-Atlantic integration process was even more important. In January 2003, they responded to the Peace Implementation Council (PIC) by presenting their defense objectives and commitments. These commitments marked substantial progress in the area of defense reform and also expressed their intention to "join the European Union and the Euro-Atlantic defense structures and become a credible candidate for the Partnership for Peace as soon as possible".[23]

Following the Riga summit on 29 November 2006, BiH was invited to join the Partnership for Peace, which it did on 14 December. Since May 2007, the country has been actively participating in the PfP Planning and Review Process (PARP), which provides a systematic framework for identifying the forces and capabilities available to the Alliance for conducting multinational training, exercises, peacekeeping, and crisis management operations. It serves as a critical tool for assessing progress in defense and military reform.[24]

Another notable initiative in the pursuit of NATO integration was the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP), which was initially approved on 10 September 2008. During the Tallinn Summit in Estonia on 22 April 2010, NATO declared its intention to launch the MAP for BiH, with specific requirements. Despite the incomplete fulfilment of these requirements, NATO Foreign Ministers invited BiH to present their first Annual National Program (ANP) on 14 December 2018. The agenda specifically addresses political, economic, defense, security, and legal reforms and serves as a basis for collaboration and political discourse between NATO and BiH. Its submission would lead to the activation of the MAP, marking another significant step forward in Bosnia and Herzegovina's relationship with NATO.[25]

On 23 December 2019, the tripartite presidency of BiH submitted a "Reform Agenda" to NATO. However, the document's status as an ANP remained uncertain. Milorad Dodik (2006), the president of the Republika Srpska, rejected the country's application for NATO membership, stating that the document did

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[22] Staples, James. 2004. "Defence Reform and PfP in Bosnia and Herzegovina." The RUSI Journal 149 (4): 34–35. https://doi.org/10.1080/03071840408523137.

[23] Ibid

[24] Loc.cit., NATO, 2024

[25] Šiljak, Dženita, and Kristian L. Nielsen. 2020. "NATO: Bosnia and Herzegovina's Best Friend and Worst Enemy." KKI Policy Brief 62:6–8.

not meet the criteria for classification as an ANP. Željko Komšić (2023-2024), the current Croat member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Šefik Džaferović (2022-2022), the Bosnian member of the Presidency, have stated that the country is making progress towards NATO membership. Despite the ongoing dispute over admission, NATO issued a public declaration on 31 January 2020, stating that BiH is "participating" in the MAP and indicating its position on the discussion of the proposed draft reform plan.[26]

Despite their domestic political disputes, Bosnia and Herzegovina and NATO have long been considered partners. Following its PfP membership, BiH has been an active participant in the Interoperability Platform since 2014. This platform brings together 24 partners that actively participate as allies in NATO operations. BiH is also an active participant in the Building Integrity (BI) program, which aims to promote the transparent and efficient use of defense resources. Since 2009, Bosnia and Herzegovina have contributed officers to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and is actively involved in NATO's Resolute Support Mission (RSM) in Afghanistan.[27]

In addition to its NATO membership, Bosnia and Herzegovina formally submitted its application for EU membership on 15 February 2016. The Council has also called on the country's leadership to intensify its efforts to implement its reform agenda on the rule of law and public administration. The NATO Secretary General, John Stoltenberg has underscored the need for collaboration among political leaders in BiH to maintain unity and protect national institutions. He emphasizes that "all political leaders must work together to preserve unity and protect national institutions", adding that "this is key to the country's peace and security and to stability in the Western Balkans".[28]

Bosnia and Herzegovina's journey since the Dayton Peace Agreement (1995) has been marked by both significant challenges and remarkable progress. Established as a federal state with two highly autonomous entities, the country has grappled with the complexities of its political structure while striving for stability and integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions. The tripartite presidency and the multi-ethnic Council of Ministers reflect the delicate balance of power among the country's various ethnic groups, but the need to strengthen state-level institutions remains a critical obstacle to effective governance. Ongoing support for defense reform has been recognized as one of the most successful post-war initiatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Despite internal political disputes and the complexities of meeting NATO membership criteria, Bosnia and Herzegovina has made progress towards integration.

Ultimately, the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina depends on its ability to overcome political divisions and strengthen its institutional capacity. By fostering cooperation and a commitment to reform, the country can aspire to achieve its goals of NATO and EU membership, thereby secure a more stable future for all its citizens.

Republic of Kosovo

All the conflicts that followed the breakup of the former Yugoslavia had in common that they were mostly motivated by ethnic factors, with the aim of challenging the real or perceived supremacy of a particular power. The primary objective of those who initiated the fighting was to ensure the long-term survival of their ethnic group and the autonomy that would support it. At one point, the conflicts in Kosovo threatened the stability of the international order and provided an opportunity for Russian and American troops to engage in direct combat for the first time since the end of the Cold War.[29]

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[26] Loc.cit., Šiljak and Nielsen, 2020
[27] Ibid
[28] Loc.cit., NATO, 2024
[29] Márkusz, László. 2022. "A Koszovói Háború És a KFOR Békefenntartó Misszió." Nemzet És Biztonság 15 (3): 89–90.

The war in Kosovo (1998-1999) and the independence of Kosovo from Serbia in 2008 have further undermined the relationship between the two parties. Despite Serbia's refusal to recognise Kosovo's independence, the process of integrating Kosovo into the international community has begun. With the aim of establishing normal relations, the EU launched the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue in 2011. However, despite the early successes of the 2013 Brussels Agreement, the dialogue has been stalled to a halt since 2018. Pristina wants to be fully recognized by Belgrade, while Belgrade wants to see Serb-majority municipalities, mostly located in northern Kosovo, become autonomous.[30]

The dispute between the parties led to a confrontation between the police and the Serbian community on the 29th of May 2023. The ongoing conflict began with the early municipal elections. Elections were held in four municipalities in northern Kosovo and Albanian mayors were elected with a turnout of 3%. The elections were followed by Serb demonstrations against the newly elected Albanian mayors being allowed to hold municipal office. The NATO-led KFOR operation also withdrew to contain the situation and reduce the risk of further escalation. KFOR is a long-standing NATO operation that has played a crucial role in keeping the peace in the Western Balkans.[31] The May riots led to the deployment of KFOR for crowd dispersal duties, and an additional 1,000 troops were added to the KFOR force in October 2023. The decision seemed justified in the context of the attack on the Kosovo police on 24 September and the escalating tensions in the region. On 24 September, an exchange of fire took place between armed Serbian nationals and the Kosovo police, resulting in several serious injuries.[32]

The EU has issued several declarations in an effort to reduce the future escalation of the conflict. Josep Borell (2019-2024), the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, is actively engaged in the management of the Kosovo issue. Negotiations have proved ineffective in establishing a dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. There is an inherent conflict of interest between the Serbian side and the Kosovo side on political issues, and both sides are not willing to make any concessions.[33]

The Kosovo-NATO partnership began on 24 March 1999, when NATO launched Operation Allied Force (OAF), an air operation aimed at preventing the ongoing humanitarian catastrophe in Kosovo by targeting the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY). At the end of the conflict, UN Security Council Resolution 1244 was adopted, authorizing an international civilian and military presence in Yugoslavia and allowing the deployment of the KFOR mission to the area. The primary objective of KFOR was to prevent the resumption of hostilities and to create a secure environment.[34]

The actual accession of Kosovo had two important criteria. The first is for Kosovo to become a member of the Adriatic Charter, a treaty signed by Albania, Croatia, the Republic of North Macedonia, and the United States to support Kosovo's aspirations to join NATO. BiH initially became a member in 2008, while Kosovo and Serbia have been observers since 2012. Kosovo's application for membership in 2014 was ultimately rejected by BiH. Membership of the Partnership for Peace, launched in 1994, is the second condition for accession. This involves operational bilateral cooperation between individual Euro-Atlantic partners and NATO, allowing partners to develop their own partnership with NATO as they choose.[35]

[30] Ármás, Julianna. 2022. "Észak-Koszovó, a Brüsszeli Dialógus Kulcsa(?)." Nemzet És Biztonság 3 (3): 56–57.

[31] Gelencsér, Kata. 2024. "Befagyott Konfliktusok Nyomán: Koszovó." Biztonsagpolitika.Hu. February 27, 2024.

[32] Siposhegyi, Zoltán. 2024. "Koszovó Diplomáciailag És Katonailag Is Rángatja a Szerbek Bajszát." Euronews.hu. April 18, 2024.

[33] Loc.cit., Gelencsér

[34] Kruijver, Kimberley, and Visar Xhambazi. 2020. "Kosovo's NATO Future: How to Square the Circle?" Netherlands Institute of International Relations, October, 3.

[35] Research Institute of Development and European Affairs (RIDEA). 2019. "Research Institute of Development and European Affairs: Input on the Eventual Membership of Kosovo to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)." Pristina: Research Institute of Development and European Affairs (RIDEA).

At its meeting in Tallinn on 23 and 24 March, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly gave its final approval to the upgrading of Kosovo's status from an observer to an associate member of NATO. From the perspective of Pristina, this outcome can be attributed to the long-standing and successful collaboration between the Kosovo Parliament and NATO. While Kosovo and other associate members have the right to propose resolutions and amendments, they do not have the right to vote. There are currently nine associated members, including Serbia.[36]

To achieve NATO membership, Kosovo must first demonstrate its commitment to a well-functioning democratic political system and institutional framework. While Kosovo has the military and political capacity to prepare for future cooperation with NATO, it has yet to clarify the specific methods it will use to enhance its partnership with the Alliance. Above all, Kosovo needs to demonstrate its political will to strengthen its cooperation with NATO.

The ongoing conflicts in the Balkans, and in particular the tensions over Kosovo, underscore the complex interplay of ethnic motivations and geopolitical interests that continue to shape the region. The legacy of the Kosovo war, marked by the quest for autonomy and recognition, has had a lasting impact on relations between Kosovo and Serbia, as well as on international dynamics involving NATO and the EU. Despite efforts to establish dialogue through initiatives such as the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue, progress has been hampered by entrenched positions and a lack of political will on both sides. As Kosovo seeks further integration into the international community and NATO membership, it faces the dual challenge of strengthening its democratic institutions and fostering an environment conducive to cooperation with both NATO and Serbia. To achieve full membership, however, Kosovo must not only demonstrate effective governance and military readiness, but also navigate the delicate political landscape that requires cooperation and compromise with Serbia.

The European Union and the Western Balkans Missions

In addition to NATO, the EU is also fully committed to the integration of the Western Balkans. The EU is the leading trading partner of the Western Balkans and provides the partners with political, financial, and technical assistance to help the countries implement the necessary reforms. Since the 1990s, the EU has shown a continuous commitment to ensuring peace and stability in the Western Balkans.

The Western Balkans Strategy,[37] adopted by the European Commission in 2018, includes among its objectives the expansion of CFSP/CSDP dialogues and the intensification of Western Balkan contributions to EU missions and operations.

CSDP operations and missions have been a bridge between the EU and partner countries. In 2003, the EU launched its first CSDP mission under the new European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP – the predecessor of CSDP). This was the EU Police Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina (EUPM). It supported the police reform process and further developed and consolidated local capacity and regional cooperation in the fight against organized crime. The EUPM also represents both a milestone and a test for the EU's civilian crisis mechanism in general and its police initiative in particular.[38]

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[36] NATO Parliamentary Assembly. 2024. "In Tallinn, Assembly Leadership Addresses Alliance Transformation & Ukraine Support Ahead of NATO's 75th Anniversary." NATO Parliamentary Assembly Homepage. March 24, 2024.
[37] European Commission. 2018. "Communication from the Comission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – A Credible Enlargement Perspective for and Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans." EUR-Lex.
[38] Osland, Kari M. 2004. "The EU Police Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina." International Peacekeeping 11 (3): 544–45. https://doi.org/10.1080/1353331042000249091.

The first ESDP military operation, Concordia,[39] was launched on 31 March 2003 in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). In accordance with the Berlin Plus agreement concluded a few days before the operation, Concordia was conducted using NATO assets, although Berlin Plus was a political necessity for EU-NATO relations. Concordia also deepened the Union's relationship with the Balkans, where the EU is the leading international organization deploying a full range of civilian and military crisis management instruments.[40]

The EU is currently engaged in the region through the CSDP with the military operation EUFOR Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the EU Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX KOSOVO), the Union's largest civilian mission to date and the only civilian CSDP mission with executive powers to date.

EUFOR Althea was launched in Bosnia and Herzegovina on 2 December 2004.[41] The operation was deployed under Chapter VII of the UN Charter to ensure compliance with the Dayton Peace Agreement and to contribute to a secure environment. The mission is currently contributing to building Bosnia and Herzegovina's resilience to external threats. EUFOR brings together EU Member States and non-EU troop-contributing countries. A total of EU Member States and non-EU troop-contributing countries are present in EUFOR. It provides an additional dimension to the current political engagement and police and monitoring missions. ALTHEA is the third and largest military operation the EU has undertaken to date. On 2 November 2023, the UN Security Council extended the mandate of the EUFOR Althea operation.[42]

The European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX)[43] was launched in 2008 as the largest civilian mission under the CSDP of the European Union. In addition to mentoring, monitoring, advising, and supporting the Belgrade–Pristina Dialogue, EULEX has also played an executive role in the field of rule of law, mostly through the investigation and prosecution of organized crime and war crimes. Council Decision 2023/1095 established EULEX's current mandate, which runs until 14 June 2025. Prior to establishing EULEX, the EU Planning Team deployed to Kosovo worked closely with NATO to develop arrangements for conducting joint operations.[44] The two organizations have integrated these plans into operational procedures without any formal political agreement. As a result, EULEX and NATO are in close contact at the lower levels and conduct regular training exercises.[45]

In summary, the European Union's commitment to the integration of the Western Balkans reflects a multi-faceted approach aimed at fostering peace, stability, and cooperation in the region. Through its Common Foreign and Security Policy and Common Security and Defense Policy, the EU has established a framework for engagement that includes both civilian and military missions, such as EUFOR Althea and EULEX KOSOVO. These operations not only support local reforms and enhance regional security, but also demonstrate the EU's role as a key actor in promoting stability. As the EU continues to expand its dialogue and collaboration with the Western Balkan partners, it remains essential that these countries embrace the necessary reforms and work towards greater integration within the European framework. This continued partnership is essential to ensure a secure and prosperous future for the Western Balkans.

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[39] Mace, Catriona. 2004. "Operation Concordia: Developing a 'European' Approach to Crisis Management?" International Peacekeeping 11 (3): 474–75. https://doi.org/10.1080/1353331042000249055.
[40] Ibid
[41] Filip, Ejdus, and Juncos Ana E. 2018. "Security Sector Reform as a Driver of Resilience in the Western Balkans: The Role of the Common Security and Defence Policy." Vienna.
[42] Paulina, Wankiewicz. 2023. "Changes to the EU's EUFOR Althea Operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina." Centre for Eastern Studies.
[43] Council Joint Action. 2008. "Council Joint Action 2008/124/CFSP of 4 February 2008 on the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo, EULEX KOSOVO." EUR-Lex.
[44] Chivvis, Christopher S. 2010. The Record So Far. RAND Corporation: 31-33. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg945osd.
[45] Ibid

Stabilization and Association Agreements

As for security cooperation, it is mostly externally driven and less coherent than economic or infrastructure cooperation. To establish the general framework of their relations with the Union, the countries of the Western Balkans are engaged in Stabilization and Association Agreements (SAAs). Bilateral relations with the EU are driven by conditionality, the association process is asymmetrical, and the countries are currently at different stages of the accession process to the European Union. „The EU approach was intended to be part of a gradual consolidation of peace. Therefore, the agreements with each of the countries concerned were to be designed to offer a substantial incentive to political stability and as an instrument for economic development and cooperation with the European Union."[46]

These agreements partially include provisions for legal harmonization. While these accords do not explicitly guarantee EU membership, they do play an important role in a country's accession to European integration, thereby increasing the likelihood of accession.[47]

The SAA between the EU and Bosnia and Herzegovina entered into force on 1 June 2015.[48] As part of the process, the EU and BiH convene in the Stabilization and Association Council. During the most recent conference on 19 July 2023, participants discussed EU-BiH relations and the pre-accession process, in particular the political and economic criteria, EU legislation, and pre-accession assistance.[49] In its conclusions adopted on 12 December 2023, the Council welcomed the reform efforts made by Bosnia and Herzegovina but noted the need for further constitutional and electoral reforms to guarantee equal and non-discriminatory treatment of all citizens, to foster the rule of law, and to intensify human rights reform efforts.[50]

The SAA with former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) entered into force on 1 April 2004.[51] The most recent meeting in Skopje on 17 March 2023 focused on relations between the EU and North Macedonia. The meeting also included a review of the progress towards EU accession.[52] The conclusions adopted by the Council on 12 December 2023 stated that, in order to further advance the accession process, North Macedonia needs to accelerate its reform efforts in the rule of law and achieve results in the autonomy of the judiciary and public administration. The country was also commended for its consistent cooperation on foreign policy issues and its adherence to the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy.[53]

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[46] Loc.cit., Delevic

[47] Kengyel, Ákos, ed. 2016. Az Európai Unió Közös Politikái. Akadémiai Kiadó. https://doi.org/10.1556/9789630597203.

[48] Council of the European Union and European Commission. n.d. "Council and Commission Decision (EU, Euratom) 2015/998 of 21 April 2015 on the Conclusion of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the European Communities and Their Member States, of the One Part, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, of the Other Part." EUR-Lex. Official Journal of the European Union.

[49] European Comission. 2023. "Bosnia and Herzegovina 2023 Report Accompanying the Document Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy." EUR-Lex.

[50] Ibid

[51] Council and Commission. 2004. "Council and Commission Decision of 23 February 2004 Concerning the Conclusion of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the European Communities and Their Member States, of the One Part, and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, of the Other Part." Official Journal.

[52] Ibid

[53] Council of the European Union. 2023. "Council Conclusions on Enlargement as Approved by the Council on 12 December 2023." Brussels.

The SAA was to enter into force for Kosovo on 1 April 2016.[54] At the latest meeting of the Stabilization and Association Council on 7 December 2016, the parties reached consensus on, inter alia, political criteria, financial cooperation and the implementation of the Stabilization and Association Agreement. The Stabilization and Association Council welcomed Kosovo's renewed commitment to European integration, but in line with BiH and North Macedonia, the Council identified reform priorities for Kosovo, such as strengthening the rule of law, implementing administrative reform, and promoting economic development.[55]

TABLE 2: EU Integration and Stabilization and Association Agreements

Status of the state	Independence	Stabilisation and Association Agreement	Candidate status for EU membership
North Macedonia	8 September 1991	1 April 2004	16 December 2005
Bosnia and Herzegovna	3 March 1993	1 June 2015	15 December 2022
Kosovo	17 February 2008	*1 April 2016*	14 December 2022 (potential candidate)

The SAAs play a crucial role in the peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts in the Western Balkans by establishing a framework for cooperation between the EU and the countries in the region. One of the main objectives of the SAAs is to facilitate economic development and integration into the EU. By creating a free trade area and promoting economic cooperation, the SAAs help to foster interdependence among the Western Balkan countries, which can reduce tensions and promote peaceful relations. Moreover, the SAAs are part of the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP), which aims to prepare these countries for eventual EU membership. This process includes the implementation of the necessary reforms in governance, rule of law, and human rights, which are essential for the establishment of a stable and democratic society. The commitment to these reforms not only enhances internal stability but also aligns the countries with EU standards, further integrating them into the European community.

The SAAs also provide a platform for political dialogue and cooperation on security issues. By engaging in discussions related to common foreign and security policy, the Western Balkan countries can address regional security challenges collectively. This collaborative approach is essential for building a sustainable peace, as it encourages countries to work together rather than in isolation.

DISCUSSION

The integration of the Western Balkans into Euro-Atlantic structures has been the focus of interest and attention of many scholars and researchers since 1999, when the stabilization and association process with the countries of the Western Balkans was launched. In addition to democratic and socio-economic setbacks in the region, numerous unresolved bilateral disputes and incomplete reconciliation processes after the violent conflicts of the 1990s threaten to undermine the fragile regional stability.[56]

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[54] Council of the European Union. 2016. "Council Decision (EU) 2016/342 of 12 February 2016 on the Conclusion, on Behalf of the Union, of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community, of the One Part, and Kosovo, of the Other Part." Official Journal of the European Union.
[55] Loc.cit., European Commission, 2023
[56] Damjanovski, Ivan, and Marko Kmezić. n.d. "Europeanisation and Institutionalisation of EU Rules in the Western Balkans." In Meaningful Reform in the Western Balkans between Formal Institutions and Informal Practices, edited

To overcome conflict and promote reconciliation, NATO and the EU are working closely with the countries of the Western Balkans to achieve common goals, the stability of the countries and the region as a whole. The United States of America and major European states have a strong interest in integrating the countries into the West and the European Union.[57] Much of the literature emphasises the formal incentives offered by NATO and the EU, the most important of which is membership itself and a relevant source of influence on domestic politics.

When analysing the process of the Europeanization of the post-communist countries, the former Yugoslav republics here included, some authors find the Europeanization process as a synonym of democratization and adoption of liberal democratic values.[58] In this context as Schimmelfenning points out that the EU and its conditionality played an important role in successful post-communist democratization and Europeanization of public policies.[59]

Not only the Member States, but also the candidate or non-member countries that are subject to Europeanisation. "The potential targets of Europeanization are equally broad – all actors and structures in the member states of the EU but also in candidate and non-member countries affected by policy diffusion from the EU."[60] Europeanization is taking place as the European Union expands through enlargement. Changing external borders affect the territorial reach of a governing system and the extent to which Europe as a continent becomes a single political space.[61] A discussion of the ways in which European space may be politically organized and governed presupposes that Europe as a geographical concept, the external boundary of Europe as a space or territory, can be delimited and defined.[62] Borzel and Risse argue that in order to achieve the process of Europeanization there must be some degree of misfit between the European level processes and domestic ones which ultimately leads to adaptational processes that have a cost – social and political one.[63]

NATO is a major contributor to international peace and security, with a strong emphasis on military capacity and crisis management. It is committed to the peaceful resolution of disputes but has the capability to undertake military operations if diplomatic efforts fail. NATO has led several peacekeeping missions in the past and is primarily focused on collective defense and military operations. It tends to lead operations in situations that may involve significant military engagement or require a robust military presence. The EU plays a leading role in peacekeeping operations as part of its Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP). The EU's approach is comprehensive, integrating both civilian and military tools to manage crises and strengthen international security.

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by Nicolas Hayoz, Jens Herlth, and Julia Richers. Vol. 20. Interdisciplinary Studies on Central and Eastern Europe: 23.

[57] Walsch, Christopher. 2015. "Visegrad Four in Bosnia-Herzegovina: State-Building and EU Approximation from a Central European Perspective." Society and Economy 37 (4): 428–428.

[58] Lewis, Paul G. 2008. "Changes in the Party Politics of the New EU Member States in Central Europe: Patterns of Europeanization and Democratization." Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans 10 (2): 565–66. https://doi.org/10.1080/14613190802145911.

[59] Schimmelfennig, Frank, and Ulrich Sedelmeier. 2019. "The Europeanization of Eastern Europe: The External Incentives Model Revisited." Journal of European Public Policy 27 (6): 814–33. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2019.1617333.

[60] Woźniakowski, Tomasz P., Frank Schimmelfennig, and Michał Matlak. 2018. "Europeanization Revisited: Central and Eastern Europe in the European Union" European University Institute. 8. https://doi:10.2870/675963

[61] Olsen, Johan P. 2002. "The Many Faces of Europeanization." JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies 40 (5): 923. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00403.

[62] Jönsson, Christer, Sven Tägil, and Gunnar Törnqvist. 2000. Organizing European Space. SAGE Publications.

[63] Börzel, Tanja A., and Thomas Risse. 2003. "Conceptualizing the Domestic Impact of Europe." In The Politics of Europeanization, edited by Kevin Featherstone and Claudio M. Radaelli. Oxford University Press. Oxford. 58. https://doi.org/10.1093/0199252092.003.0003.

Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia are actively involved in various NATO and EU missions and play an important role in peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts in the Balkans. Kosovo is not a NATO member but hosts the NATO-led Kosovo Force, which is a peacekeeping mission established to maintain security and stability in the region. KFOR's presence is crucial for ensuring a safe environment and freedom of movement for all communities in Kosovo. The mission is essential to peace-building, helping to prevent the recurrence of conflict and supporting the development of local security forces.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has a long history of NATO involvement, starting with the Implementation Force (IFOR) and later the Stabilization Force (SFOR), which were deployed to implement the military aspects of the Dayton Peace Agreement. Although NATO formally ended its SFOR mission in 2004, the European Union took over with the EUFOR mission and has continued the peacekeeping effort. Bosnia and Herzegovina is also engaged in a wide-ranging cooperation program with NATO, focusing on democratic, institutional, security sector, and defense reforms.

North Macedonia, a NATO member since 2020, has participated in several NATO operations. In the past, NATO has engaged in peace support operations in North Macedonia to address ethnic tensions and support stability. As a NATO member, North Macedonia contributes to various missions, enhancing regional security and demonstrating its commitment to collective defense. Involving these countries in NATO and EU missions is crucial to maintaining peace and stability in the Balkans, supporting democratic reform and fostering regional cooperation. Their role in these missions helps to prevent conflict, promote security and lay the foundations for a lasting peace in the region.

In summary, while both organizations are crucial to peacekeeping, the EU tends to lead in operations that require a comprehensive approach involving both civilian and military components, whereas NATO leads in more traditional military peacekeeping roles. Their cooperation and complementary roles are essential to address today's complex security challenges, with NATO focusing on military capabilities and crisis management, and the EU emphasizing political dialogue, economic development, and institution-building.

Evaluating the effectiveness of NATO-EU joint missions is of paramount importance, particularly in peacekeeping and crisis management. This includes assessing the transition from NATO-led to EU-led missions, such as EUFOR in Bosnia and Herzegovina. For later analyses, it is crucial how NATO and the EU can strengthen the defense capabilities of the Western Balkan countries so that they can better prepare for potential threats, including hybrid warfare and disinformation campaigns.

CONCLUSION

The EU reiterates its full and unequivocal commitment to the European Union membership perspective of the Western Balkans and urges the acceleration of the accession process, which must be based on reforms by the partners and on the principle of own merits, which is in the common interest of the EU and the partners. The European Union complicates normative efforts by imposing decisions, laws, procedures and mechanisms that are incompatible with the historical, political and social context of the countries. The EU's approach to North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo should not be rigid, but should also take into account the cultural and historical context, arguing that in these cases it is not only the candidate country that has to adapt to specific rules imposed by the EU, but that in order for European values to be successful, the Union should adapt to the situation on the ground. The EU is striving to Europeanise this part of the continent and to introduce the transformative force that is the European Union. Despite some visible progress towards European integration, research has shown that much remains to be done. While the EU focuses on political and economic integration, NATO's emphasis is on collective defense and military cooperation, which are essential for ensuring stability and security in Europe. NATO's principle of collective defense, enshrined in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, serves as a deterrent against potential aggressors. This principle reassures member, including those in the Western Balkans, that

they are part of a larger security framework. NATO facilitates military cooperation among its member states, enhancing interoperability and readiness. This is particularly important for Western Balkan countries aspiring to NATO membership, as they need to bring their military capabilities up to NATO standards.

Since the End of the Yugoslav war, the European Union has replaced its previous reactive approach with a more active engagement with the Western Balkans. This more active role has been reflected in the continuous development of the enlargement strategy. The EU has also been able to identify the factors delaying enlargement and has shown a willingness to provide more assistance to the candidate countries. The European Union has renewed its enlargement strategy to meet the challenges. This is particularly important as the slow integration process could undermine the EU's credibility and this situation could easily lead to an enlargement crisis. The European Union's renewed commitment to the region has preserved the credibility of the process, and the European Union can still be seen as a trustworthy transformative force in the region. The level of bilateral and multilateral political contacts in the region has increased significantly, but this is still not enough to ensure that the remaining security problems can be resolved without provoking major regional instability. For example, the unresolved status of Kosovo exacerbates existing tensions and increases regional instability. The right solution has to be found that does not disrupt cooperation at the political level and does not jeopardise what has been achieved. NATO has consistently emphasized its commitment to the stability and security of the Western Balkans, recognizing the region as crucial to broader European security considerations. NATO has played a pivotal role in peacekeeping and security operations in the Western Balkans, notably through missions such as KFOR and the SFOR in Bosnia and Herzegovina. NATO's involvement extends beyond military operations to include support for political and defense reforms in the region. This support is crucial to the integration of Western Balkan countries into Euro-Atlantic structures. Programs like the Partnership for Peace and the Membership Action Plan facilitate cooperation and help countries align their defense and security policies with NATO standards.

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