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## Security Challenges and Strategic Environment in the Western Balkans

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**Abstract:** The Western Balkans, a region with complex historical, political, and ethnic dynamics, presents unique security challenges for both regional actors and the broader European Union (EU). This paper examines the security environment in the Western Balkans, focusing on interethnic tensions, organized crime, political instability, and the impact of external actors. By analysing key issues and the influence of EU and NATO integration, the study provides insights into both current challenges and future strategies for achieving long-term stability.

**Keywords:** security; stability; pillars; western Balkans

### 1. Introduction

The Western Balkans, comprising countries like Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, has been a focal point of European security policy since the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. This region, located strategically at the crossroads of Europe, remains an area of geostrategic significance

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due to its cultural diversity, historic conflicts, and transitional economies. Although significant progress has been made in areas such as governance and economic development, security remains a persistent concern. Major threats include political instability, unresolved ethnic conflicts, organized crime, and the influence of external powers, notably the EU, NATO, and Russia. Today, the concept of security has broadened significantly beyond traditional military defence to encompass various dimensions that address an increasingly interconnected and complex world. Modern security is no longer solely about protecting national borders from external threats; it also includes economic, environmental, technological, social, and human factors. Here's a breakdown of what is typically considered under the broad concept of security today, as National and Military Security, Human Security because the human security broadens the concept to include the protection of individuals' well-being and rights. This covers economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security, and political security and key organizations like the UN advocate for policies that protect individuals from threats such as poverty, disease, and oppression, emphasizing that security is incomplete without addressing individual vulnerabilities, Economic Security, Environmental Security, Health Security, Migration and Refugee Security because mass migration due to conflict, economic hardship, or environmental changes presents security challenges for both sending and receiving countries. Ensuring the security of migrants, protecting them from human trafficking, and addressing the strain on receiving communities and resources are critical elements of contemporary security. Modern security is interdependent, where threats in one area can cascade into others. For instance, environmental degradation can lead to resource scarcity, triggering economic instability, mass migration, and conflict. This interconnected nature requires a holistic and multi-dimensional approach, engaging multiple actors, including governments, international organizations, NGOs, and local communities, to achieve sustainable and comprehensive security for individuals and states alike.

This paper discusses the primary security challenges in the Western Balkans, examines the roles of major regional and international actors, and explores policy frameworks for enhancing stability in the region.

## **2. Interethnic Tensions and Political Fragmentation**

Ethnic and religious diversity is one of the defining features of the Western Balkans. However, it has also been a significant source of tension, resulting in deep-rooted

divisions and periodic violence. Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, is divided among Bosniak, Croat, and Serb communities, each with its political ambitions and visions for the country's future. The Dayton Agreement, while ending the Bosnian War in 1995, created a decentralized political structure that has often hindered effective governance.

In Kosovo, tensions between the Albanian majority and Serbian minority continue to threaten stability. Serbia's refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence has led to recurring diplomatic and on-the-ground confrontations. Recently, the EU-brokered dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo has made some progress, yet long-term solutions remain elusive. These interethnic tensions are not only sources of internal instability but also present risks for the broader region, as unresolved disputes may spill over into neighbouring countries.

Political fragmentation exacerbates these ethnic divisions, with nationalist parties often leveraging ethnic identities to consolidate power. This tactic hinders reform efforts and complicates international efforts at fostering stability. The EU has attempted to mitigate these risks through the Stabilization and Association Process, aiming to prepare the Western Balkans for future integration. However, these initiatives are frequently hindered by political actors who capitalize on ethnic divisions for electoral gains. The Western Balkans—a region that includes Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia—is characterized by a complex mosaic of ethnicities, languages, and religions. This diversity has often led to interethnic tensions, particularly in post-Yugoslav states where historical grievances and identity issues remain potent sources of division. These interethnic tensions are compounded by political fragmentation, as multiple ethnic groups within each country often have distinct political goals, which can lead to gridlock, instability, and periodic conflict. The roots of ethnic tensions in the Western Balkans go back centuries but were particularly inflamed during the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s. Following the disintegration of Yugoslavia, newly formed countries emerged with sizable ethnic minorities that maintained cultural, religious, and political ties to neighbouring states. This situation created a landscape where ethnic identities and historical grievances became central to the political organization, often manifesting as separatist ambitions or antagonism toward other groups.

For instance, Bosnia and Herzegovina remains divided among its three primary ethnic communities: Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs. The Dayton Agreement of 1995,

which ended the Bosnian War, imposed a complex political structure intended to ensure representation for each ethnic group. However, this structure has often been criticized for entrenching divisions, as each community retains considerable autonomy and sometimes pursues conflicting agendas. The Serbian entity, Republika Srpska, has periodically threatened secession, which would disrupt the delicate balance of power and could potentially reignite conflict. This tense arrangement showcases how unresolved historical grievances continue to affect stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina, hampering progress toward effective governance and reform. Political fragmentation in the Western Balkans is driven by nationalist parties that often gain support by appealing to ethnic identities. This trend has created governance systems where coalition governments are either highly unstable or unable to implement meaningful reforms due to internal divisions. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, the decentralized political system established by the Dayton Agreement has made it extremely difficult for the central government to enact unified policies. Nationalist parties representing the Bosniak, Croat, and Serb populations frequently clash, preventing the creation of a cohesive national identity and delaying reforms required for potential EU membership.

Similarly, in North Macedonia, the relationship between the ethnic Macedonian majority and the Albanian minority remains fragile. In 2001, an armed conflict between Macedonian forces and Albanian rebels led to the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which granted greater rights to Albanians, including official language recognition and representation in government institutions. Although this agreement was a step toward reconciliation, tensions still simmer, and political dynamics remain influenced by ethnic lines. Ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia often have their own political parties, and while interethnic cooperation has improved in recent years, societal divisions continue to impact politics and prevent unified national decision-making. The persistence of interethnic tensions and political fragmentation in the Western Balkans has significant implications for regional stability. First, these issues hinder governance and make it difficult for countries to enact reforms, reducing their chances of EU accession and economic integration. The EU's influence in the region is often weakened by local leaders who leverage nationalist rhetoric to gain support, which undermines efforts at fostering cross-border cooperation and peacebuilding. Second, these tensions create opportunities for external actors to exert influence. Russia, for instance, has supported Serbia in its refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence, aligning itself with Serbian nationalist interests to increase its foothold in the region. Other actors, such as Turkey and

China, have also found openings in the Western Balkans due to its fragmented political landscape, providing investment and diplomatic support that sometimes conflicts with EU goals. Third, interethnic tensions can escalate into localized violence, which risks spilling over borders and destabilizing neighboring countries. The Western Balkans is still recovering from the wars of the 1990s, and while large-scale conflict is unlikely, unresolved issues could lead to unrest that threatens security and economic stability in the broader European context.

### **3. Organized Crime and Corruption**

Organized crime is a major security threat in the Western Balkans, facilitated by weak state institutions, high levels of corruption, and the region's geographical position along key trafficking routes for drugs, arms, and human trafficking. Criminal networks in the region have become highly organized and transnational, cooperating with criminal groups across Europe and beyond. For instance, Albanian criminal organizations are involved in narcotics trafficking, while Serbian networks have been linked to arms smuggling and money laundering.

Corruption further complicates the situation, with criminal networks often infiltrating political structures. This interdependence between organized crime and political actors erodes public trust in institutions and weakens the rule of law. The EU has supported anti-corruption and judicial reforms in the Western Balkans as part of its accession process. However, progress is slow, with entrenched interests often resisting change. This lack of progress on corruption hampers EU aspirations and perpetuates a cycle of poverty, social division, and instability. The Western Balkans faces substantial challenges related to organized crime and corruption, which impact political stability, economic growth, and regional security. Organized crime networks in this region are deeply rooted and involved in a range of illegal activities, including drug trafficking, human trafficking, arms smuggling, money laundering, and more. This criminal activity, in turn, is often facilitated by pervasive corruption within state institutions, which impedes law enforcement, erodes public trust, and complicates efforts for Western integration, such as accession to the European Union (EU). This analysis explores the causes, scope, and implications of organized crime and corruption in the Western Balkans, as well as strategies for combating these challenges. Corruption is deeply intertwined with organized crime in the Western Balkans, enabling criminal networks to operate with impunity. High levels of corruption within government institutions, law enforcement, and the judiciary create

a permissive environment for illegal activities. This corruption exists at multiple levels, from “petty” corruption, where public services are routinely exploited for bribes, to “grand” corruption, where high-ranking officials are complicit in criminal enterprises. Political Corruption: Organized crime groups often have direct links to political elites, who may rely on them for financial support, electoral assistance, or influence over voters. This dynamic allows criminal organizations to infiltrate politics and secure immunity from prosecution, creating a symbiotic relationship between organized crime and corrupt politicians. These arrangements undermine the rule of law and weaken the democratic processes that are essential for EU integration and regional stability. Judicial Corruption: A compromised judiciary is one of the major obstacles to fighting organized crime in the Western Balkans. Cases against high-profile criminals are often delayed or dismissed due to judicial corruption, which prevents effective prosecution and accountability. Criminal groups exploit these weaknesses, using bribery, intimidation, or political connections to influence judges and prosecutors. Law Enforcement Vulnerabilities: Corruption also extends to law enforcement agencies, where bribery and collusion are common. In some instances, police officers actively participate in criminal activities or turn a blind eye to trafficking operations, compromising efforts to control organized crime. This undermines public trust in law enforcement and deters citizens from cooperating with authorities in reporting crimes.

#### **4. Influence of External Powers**

The Western Balkans’ strategic location has made it an arena of competition for influence among global powers, including the EU, NATO, Russia, China, and Turkey. The EU has long been the dominant external actor, promoting democratic reforms, economic integration, and rule of law through its accession process. NATO has also played a key role, with Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia becoming members, thereby contributing to a broader regional security framework.

However, Russia’s influence remains significant, especially in Serbia, where it leverages historical, cultural, and religious ties. Russia opposes NATO expansion in the region and has attempted to sway public opinion against Western institutions, particularly through its media influence. Moscow’s support for Serbia in the Kosovo dispute has fueled nationalist sentiments, complicating dialogue efforts.

China has also increased its presence, primarily through economic investments under the Belt and Road Initiative. Infrastructure projects and loans have provided an economic lifeline for some Western Balkan countries, but they raise concerns about debt dependency and reduced EU influence. Turkey has a strong presence, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, where it uses religious and cultural ties to bolster its influence. Although Turkey is a NATO member, its policies sometimes diverge from EU objectives, complicating the geopolitical landscape.

### **5. The Role of the EU and NATO in Regional Stability**

The EU and NATO have both taken active roles in promoting stability in the Western Balkans, recognizing that the region's stability directly impacts European security. The EU's enlargement policy has driven reform efforts across the region, with the promise of future membership providing strong incentives for political and economic reforms. While Albania and North Macedonia have achieved EU candidate status, Serbia and Montenegro have advanced further in the accession process, though progress is often slowed by domestic political issues.

NATO's engagement has been similarly impactful. The 1999 NATO intervention in Kosovo marked a turning point in the region's post-Cold War history. Today, NATO membership serves as both a security guarantee and a catalyst for defence reforms. However, NATO expansion remains controversial, particularly for Serbia, which is historically and culturally aligned with Russia.

Both organizations face challenges. The slow pace of EU integration has led to scepticism among local populations, and the influence of alternative actors like Russia and China has complicated the EU's ability to effect change. Nonetheless, the EU and NATO remain central to long-term stability in the Western Balkans.

### **6. Conclusion**

The Western Balkans presents a complex security environment marked by ethnic tensions, political fragmentation, organized crime, and the influence of external actors. The EU and NATO have made significant progress in stabilizing the region, yet challenges persist. Addressing these issues requires sustained international engagement, comprehensive reforms, and a renewed commitment to regional cooperation.

The future stability of the Western Balkans hinges on successful integration with the EU and NATO, effective governance reforms, and the resolution of longstanding ethnic and political disputes. A collaborative approach, involving local governments, civil society, and international partners, will be essential in achieving a stable, prosperous Western Balkans aligned with European values. As the EU and NATO look toward the future, a proactive, cohesive strategy will be crucial for navigating the region's unique security challenges.

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