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WESTERN BALKANS: RENEWED SECURITY CHALLENGES ON NATO'S DOORSTEP

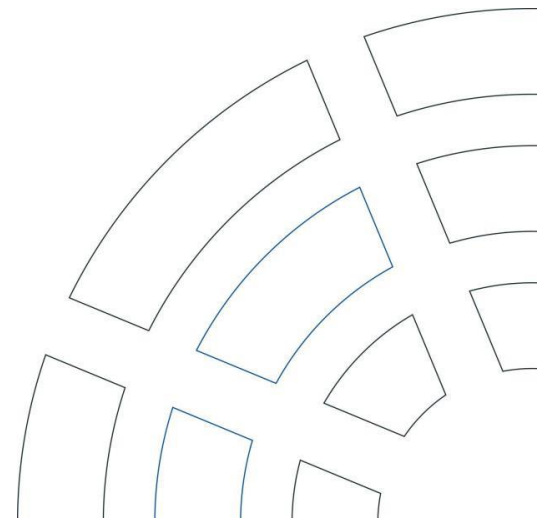
Report

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Founded in 1955, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly acts as a consultative interparliamentary organisation which is institutionally separate from NATO. This report was adopted by the Defence and Security Committee at the 2024 NATO PA Annual Session in Montréal, Canada. It is based on information from publicly available sources or NATO PA meetings – which are all unclassified.



2023 witnessed a significant return of violent confrontations in northern Kosovo. The incidents sounded an alarm bell to the international community about the seriousness of the persistent challenges in the Western Balkans. The absence of a pathway to the normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina sows the threat of serious conflict with potential regional implications. Allies responded to the escalation in violence in Kosovo by reinforcing their KFOR mission, which included more heavily armed forces adapted to handle the changing security dynamics.

Political tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) also has latent potential to break down the Dayton Agreement, which has held a tenuous peace between the principal constituent peoples of the country for almost 30 years. The High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina recently portrayed the political situation in the country as a 'mixed picture', emphasising that, despite some progress toward European integration, attempts to undermine the General Framework Agreement for Peace continued.

In a region in which almost all states and territories look for a Euro-Atlantic future, recalcitrant issue sets in Kosovo and BiH must refocus significant Allied attention: Allies must come to terms with the potential for broader destabilisation these challenges pose. A stalled Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue and charged political paralysis in BiH prevent the advancement of Serbia, BiH, and Kosovo on the EU path; remain the principal factor for regional instability; block efficient regional economic integration; and underwrite criminal networks' exploitation of the regions' weak institutions for the trafficking of arms, drugs and people. Further complicating the issues are the inroads presented by the persistence of corruption and weak state institutions for Russian and Chinese influence – while each has different goals in the region, they are aligned in their broader counter-West efforts, which includes the splintering of Allied consensus and blocking the consolidation of the Euro-Atlantic.

Despite these challenges, Allies stressed the Western Balkans' strategic importance and their continued commitment to their security and stability at the Washington Summit. Allies stated they will continue to “enhance [their] political dialogue and practical cooperation...to support reforms, regional peace and security, and counter malign influence, including disinformation, hybrid, and cyber threats, posed by both state and non-state actors” (NATO, 2024b).

This report highlights the root causes and current drivers of the region's main security challenges and advocates for greater attention to the resolution of the Belgrade-Pristina dispute and increased political attention to Bosnia and Herzegovina's political stalemate. The key means to doing so are via renewed efforts to facilitate EU expansion in the region. NATO Allies must also realise their view on the region has to change: KFOR must receive more support and Allies must find new ways and means to expand their military cooperation with the region to help turn the tide of a regional security dynamic headed in the wrong direction at a challenging time in Euro-Atlantic security.

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I- INTRODUCTION

1. An escalation of violence in northern Kosovo, particularly over the 2022-2023 period, has alerted Allies and their partners to the continued seriousness of the challenges in the Western Balkans. Belgrade and Pristina's inability to find a *modus vivendi* is a potential powder keg for a serious renewal of violence in the region. In response, Allies have reinforced NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR) and changed its disposition to align with the evolving security challenges on the ground.
2. Political tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is another challenge filled with significant latent potential to break down the Dayton Agreement, the post-war settlement that has held a tenuous peace between the country's principal ethnic groups for almost 30 years. Christian Schmidt, the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, stated in his most recent report that the political situation remained a 'mixed picture' – while the EU continued to provide momentum for an accelerated European integration, Bosnia and Herzegovina fell short of fully benefitting from this initiative; and attempts to undermine the General Framework Agreement for Peace continued (OHR, 2024b).
3. In a region in which almost all states and territories are looking for a Euro-Atlantic future, recalcitrant issue sets in both Kosovo and BiH should refocus significant Allied attention: Allies must come to terms with the potential for broader destabilisation these challenges pose. The absence of a pathway to the normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina, as well as the charged political paralysis in BiH, prevents the advancement of the EU accession processes of all three; remains the principal factor for regional instability; blocks efficient regional economic integration; and contributes to the scourge of criminal networks exploiting the regions' weak institutions for the trafficking of arms, drugs and people.
4. Further complicating the issues, and closer regional integration, are the inroads presented by the persistence of corruption and weak state institutions for Russian and Chinese influence – while each has different goals in their respective regional influence, they are aligned in their broader counter-West efforts, which includes the splintering of Allied consensus and consolidation of the Euro-Atlantic.
5. Despite these challenges, Allies stressed the Western Balkans' strategic importance and their continued commitment to their security and stability at the Washington Summit. Allies stated they will continue to “enhance [their] political dialogue and practical cooperation...to support reforms, regional peace and security, and counter malign influence, including disinformation, hybrid, and cyber threats, posed by both state and non-state actors” (NATO, 2024b). In addition to the myriad regional initiatives and other avenues of political and military cooperation, Allies also stressed the importance of closer regional cooperation and the adherence to continued democratic reforms as key pathways forward to Euro-Atlantic integration and, as a result, enduring stability (NATO, 2024b). As this report makes clear, Allies must continue to act proactively to prevent broader destabilisation in the region, which these challenges may precipitate.
6. This report highlights the key challenges facing Allies in the Western Balkans. The direction of travel of these challenges contrasts with the levels of attention required from Allies to solve them. It highlights the history and status quo in BiH, and reviews recent escalations in the Belgrade-Pristina dispute. It also highlights the dynamic and complex challenge of Russian and Chinese interference and manipulation in the region. It concludes with a series of recommendations for Allied governments and parliaments to consider as they weigh up their levels of renewed engagement.

II- UNDERSTANDING ENDURING REGIONAL CHALLENGES

7. There is no doubt significant progress has been made across the Western Balkans since the violent wars wreaked havoc and destruction across the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Western Balkan governments are, to varying degrees, consolidating their positions within the Euro-Atlantic community, and strengthening intra-regional political, economic and military cooperation.

8. At the same time, border disputes and minority rights continue to fuel political disputes across the region. The patchwork of political entities comprising Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to wrangle over every kind of major issue set in the region, causing a high degree of political divisiveness and, recently, concerns that the three constituent peoples may be again trending toward a forced break-up of the post-Dayton political compromise. As High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Christian Schmidt, noted in his May, 2024 report, while the reporting period certainly witnessed progress toward EU integration and institution strengthening, it was also characterised by an “unprecedented level of attacks” against the post-war settlement (OHR, 2024a). In his subsequent report, published in November 2024, the High Representative stated that the political situation provided a ‘mixed picture’. While “the EU continued to provide momentum for an accelerated European integration...Bosnia and Herzegovina fell short of fully benefitting from this initiative”; and attempts to undermine the General Framework Agreement for Peace continue (OHR, 2024b).

9. As reported across several NATO PA committees recently, the most high-profile enduring and volatile regional security challenge is the ongoing dispute between Belgrade and Pristina. Recent tensions in northern Kosovo have led to violent clashes between ethnic Serbs and Kosovo Police, forcing the involvement of EULEX and NATO KFOR personnel – at their most extreme, these events have led to casualties among the belligerents, significant injuries among EULEX personnel and NATO peacekeeping forces, and forced the KFOR mission to increase and adapt its force posture. In both Serbia and Kosovo and Bosnia Herzegovina, Allied and other international armed forces and Western diplomatic engagement remain crucial to peace and stability.

10. The following breaks down the ongoing challenges facing Bosnia and Herzegovina and the recent exacerbation of tensions in the ongoing dispute between Belgrade and Pristina:

A. BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

11. The General Framework Agreement for Peace (GFAP) was the principal political outcome of the Dayton Peace negotiations. The Dayton Peace Accords, signed in December 1995, put an end to the devastating 3.5 year-long war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹ The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina was only one of the wars that brought asunder the former Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia over the course of the 1990s, but it was also the most deadly and destructive. The GFAP has worked ever since to hold together peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the fragile nation that came out of the war.²

12. The agreed-upon constitution recognises three constituent peoples: Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs. The country’s *de facto* internal divisions were recognised in a complicated set of compromises

1 The 1992-1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina between three major ethnic groups (Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks) continues to impact governing the country today. An estimated 100,000 civilians were killed in the war, and 2.2 million people were displaced across the region and beyond. The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina was also characterised by a significant number of war crimes and severe human rights violations, which were prosecuted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) until 2017.

2 The GFAP consists of 11 Annexes on Military Aspects, Regional Stabilization, Inter-Entity Boundary Issues, Elections, Constitution, Arbitration, Human Rights, Refugees and Displaced Persons, Commission to Preserve National Monuments, Bosnia and Herzegovina Public Corporations, Civilian Implementation and on the International Police Task Force.

resulting in two larger ethnic entities, the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska (RS) and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH), composed of a majority of Bosniaks and a minority of Croats (but also a smaller minority of Serbs, and even smaller populations of other ethnic groups).³ The initially disputed autonomous Brcko district is home to all three. Bosnia and Herzegovina has a rotating presidency among the three constituent peoples. The constitution divides competences between the state and the entities; the entities have relatively broad executive, legal and judicial authorities.

13. Electoral laws in BiH have been at the centre of political paralysis since the formation of the state itself. Key issues centre on the selection of the Croat member of the tripartite presidency and election integrity. Voter registration and vote counting – both are currently controlled by the political parties – are at the centre of the electoral integrity challenges.

14. The state- and territorial-level electoral systems' ethnic restrictions have long been challenged by Bosnian and international courts. Perhaps the most noteworthy is the *Sejdić and Finci vs BiH* case, which saw the plaintiffs taking on the GFAP power-sharing provisions, which stipulate that posts in the tripartite presidency of BiH and the House of Peoples (upper house of parliament) must be reserved for ethnic Bosniaks, Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats only. *Sejdić and Finci* are Roma and Jewish, respectively, and their ethnicities' exclusion from holding high office in BiH under the GFAP, they claimed, violated their democratic rights. The 2009 decision of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled in favour of the plaintiffs, noting the regulations concerning the tripartite presidency and the House of Peoples violated the European Convention on Human Rights. The EU subsequently noted that constitutional reform was a key prerequisite to BiH's Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA), which in turn serves as the basis for the implementation of the accession process.

15. A decade later, in its 2019 opinion on BiH's application for EU membership, the European Commission highlighted 14 reform priorities which focus on democracy/functionality, rule of law, fundamental rights and public administration reform - the opinion specifically recommended for constitutional amendments to deal with the above-mentioned 2009 ECHR ruling, the elimination of veto rights in decision making, and guarantee legal stability for the distribution of competences across levels of government (European Commission, 2019).

16. For decades, but particularly in recent years, ethnically aligned political parties have been able to hinder or boycott normal government decision making. For example, the government worked with a technical mandate from 2018-2022, as the political parties refused to compromise on an executive and blocked the financing of a state-level budget (NATO PA, 2023). In 2022, the BiH Central Election Commission was forced to borrow money to hold elections due to the lack of participation by the Croat HDZ BiH party (Kurtic, 2022).

17. Beyond the ability to form governments and pass budgets to fund state institutions, the inter-party political paralysis has also been a key driver of escalating divisive rhetoric by BiH political leaders, leading experts to voice concerns about the potential for renewed conflict (Economist, 2022). In recent years, Milorad Dodik, President of the Republika Srpska, has expressed his desire to rescind powers granted by the RS to Bosnia and Herzegovina and to recreate the RS Army (Economist, 2022). These moves come on top of a long-standing refusal to participate in the registration of immovable defence property with Bosnia and Herzegovina, as part of BiH's agreements to move its application to join NATO forward (*this issue is described more fully below*).

18. Since late 2022, High Representative Christian Schmidt, the international official overseeing the civilian implementation of the peace deal, has amended the country's constitution to address the challenge of political paralysis. Over three electoral law interventions, the most recent being

3 The FBiH and RS are divided into 79 and 64 municipalities respectively and the FBiH is divided into ten cantons, each with separate constitutions.

26 March 2024, Mr Schmidt has amended the constitution to change the formation of the BiH parliament (House of the Peoples) to allow for greater minority representation, to change the deadline for the formation of a government after an election, and to include an ‘integrity package’ to ensure electoral fairness, which includes the implementation of electronic vote counting, identification and polling, as well as the exclusion of convicted war criminals from standing in elections (Kurtic, 2024a). In total, HR Schmidt has intervened 11 times to ensure the basic functioning of the state and to uphold the framework for peace and stability in BiH.

19. While the interventions by HR Schmidt under his so-called ‘Bonn powers’ to impose changes have been received with a mixed reaction by the international community, they have met with increased resistance by some of the parties in the entities, particularly by RS leadership (RFE/RL, 2023). As noted above, RS President Milorad Dodik and the RS government have ratcheted up their challenges to the High Representative and the BiH government in recent years. For example, in July 2021, RS representatives boycotted BiH institutions in response to a ban on genocide denial imposed by then High Representative Valentin Inzko (Dunai and Seddon, 2021). In December of the same year, the RS National Assembly passed a non-binding vote in favour of withdrawing from joint BiH defence, tax and judiciary structures (Dunai, 2022). Soon after, the United States sanctioned Dodik for “destabilizing corrupt activities and attempts to dismantle the Dayton Peace Accords” (US Department of the Treasury, 2022). In June 2023, the National Assembly escalated the situation further by ceasing recognition of the BiH Constitutional Court and the decisions of the High Representative – a move that amounts to the *de facto* expulsion of the High Representative from the RS (Vulović, 2023b).

20. In reaction to the most recent electoral law amendment imposed by HR Schmidt, the RS adopted draft legislation to create a new election law for the entity which would effectively create a parallel, independent election system. The move by the RS National Assembly contravenes the peace agreements, which stipulate the two entities can only make their own laws in accordance with the state-level law (Kurtic, 2024b). When moving the new draft legislation, President Dodik again threatened the integrity of BiH by calling for the enactment of all RS draft laws related to its status, which includes the withdrawal from agreements on the status of the armed forces, the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council and indirect taxes (Kurtic, 2024b).

21. As a result of the political impasses due to the complex power-sharing arrangements, Bosnia and Herzegovina is stagnating and beset with increasing challenges driven by widespread corruption and state capture practices by the existing political parties. Today, BiH has among the world’s highest unemployment levels, particularly among young people between 15-24 (29.8%) (World Bank, 2024). Entrenched corruption and cronyism, an anaemic and stymied private sector, and a bloated and party-captured public sector are all key factors pushing sizeable numbers of the country’s population to leave all together. As experts told the delegation at the 2023 Rose-Roth seminar in Sarajevo, BiH has lost one quarter of its population since the end of the war, and, as a recent study found, a full remaining third of the country’s youth expressed a strong desire to emigrate. The Bosnia and Herzegovina diaspora is so large today, its remittances account for almost ten percent of total GDP (NATO PA, 2023).

22. The absence of strong state institutions has also meant criminal networks use the relative power vacuum for all forms of trafficking. BiH ranks among the highest in Europe in terms of criminality (markets and actors) and the lowest in terms of state resilience capable of countering crime. As such, criminal networks exploit the country as a source, transit route and destination for drugs, human trafficking (sexual exploitation and forced labour) and arms trafficking (GI-TOC, 2023). In its 2023 report on BiH’s bid for EU accession, the European Commission noted that BiH is “between an early stage and some level of preparation in the prevention of and fight against corruption and organised crime,” and that, while no progress had been made against corruption, some progress was made in the fight against organised crime (European Commission, 2023). But, as the report makes clear, the bar for progress is relatively low, as the Council of Ministers had

“adopted a strategy on organised crime,” with the contact point for cooperation with Europol being initiated in June 2023 (European Commission, 2023).

23. Bosnia and Herzegovina is also a transit point for migrants along the so-called Balkan route between Southeastern Europe and the Schengen Zone. Although in recent years, there has been a decrease in irregular border crossings – down 31 percent between 2022 and 2023 – irregular migration remains a significant challenge for the BiH government (Siviero, 2024). For migrants passing through BiH, reception centres and provisional camps can accommodate upwards of 8,000 at a time, but in 2020, it was estimated that a quarter of the 70,000 migrants who passed through slept in makeshift camps lacking sanitation (Guglietta, 2024). Further, crossing conditions are dangerous: in 2023, at least 30 bodies were found in the Drina River between BiH and Serbia, and in August 2024, a boat carrying 30 migrants capsized, of which 10 drowned (Stojanovic and Kurtic, 2024). The BiH border police, operating at several hundred officers below capacity due to uncompetitive pay and poor working conditions, is unable to adequately patrol its 1,600km border (Kurtic, 2024). This lack of enforcement capacity has led to increased criminal activity. In early 2024, Europol reported the border between BiH and Croatia as the second most active crossing for migrant smugglers in the Balkans (Ljubas, 2024).

24. In December 2022, the European Council granted BiH candidate status for EU membership, and, in November 2023, the European Commission recommended opening EU accession negotiations once it makes significant enough progress along the 14 key priority areas highlighted in the 2019 report (European Commission, 2023). The Commission’s 2023 and 2024 reports noted some progress on these reforms. The European Council agreed to open negotiations in March 2024.

25. The Commission’s report cautioned, however, that any positive developments it highlighted are undermined by negative ones within the RS (European Commission, 2023). The 2023 decision by the RS to disregard the decisions of the Constitutional Court directly challenges the rule of law in BiH, and the RS has further eroded civil liberties by reintroducing criminal penalties for defamation and proposing a draft law that would label civil society groups as ‘foreign agents’ (European Commission, 2023).

26. Without a shared vision between the three constituent peoples for the country’s political future, progress toward European and Euro-Atlantic integration will be difficult, and regional and global developments have only made BiH’s domestic politics more challenging. As discussed below, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and increased tensions in northern Kosovo have both emboldened President Dodik to advance his secessionist agenda and test the limits of Western diplomacy and crisis management (Vulović, 2023b).

B. NATO’S COMMITMENT TO PEACE AND STABILITY IN BIH: CONSISTENT AND ENDURING

27. NATO deployed the Implementation Force (IFOR) to BiH in December 1995 to oversee the military aspects of the General Framework for Peace. Within a year, it was replaced by the Stabilisation Force (SFOR), which, in turn, assisted with reconstruction and defence structure reform. In line with NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) requirements, SFOR helped establish a unified command and control, as well as doctrine and training standards for what would become the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina by 2006. Two years earlier, primary responsibility for the military aspects of the GFAP was handed over to the EU’s Operation Althea – EUFOR Althea remains in the country. In early 2022, EU leaders, concerned about the possible spillover of conflict into the Balkans after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, decided to almost double EUFOR to 1,100 troops (Daly, 2023). In November 2023, the UN Security Council extended the authorisation for EUFOR Althea for an additional year. The author of the resolution, the Swiss representative to the Council, said that the extension of EUFOR Althea comes as “inflammatory rhetoric and secessionist threats have intensified” in recent months (UN, 2023).

28. As part of its post-2006 membership in NATO's PfP, Allies worked with BiH to develop a reform programme to facilitate closer cooperation with NATO. Four years later, in 2010, Allies invited BiH to join NATO's Membership Action Plan (MAP). NATO's MAP aligns advice and assistance to aspirant nations' specific needs. A key hurdle to moving BiH's MAP forward, however, was the requirement to register all immovable defence property with the central state – which, the leadership of the RS entity has refused to implement.

29. Seeking a means to break the impasse, Allied foreign ministers indicated they would accept BiH's first Annual National Programme under its MAP in 2018. As Allies have made clear with multiple declarations, BiH's participation in the MAP does not prejudice any decision on future membership, while, in parallel, stressing the country's need to continue pursuing essential democratic and defence sector reforms to achieve its goal of accession. Due to subsequent protests from RS officials about the submission of an Annual National Programme, another compromise was reached and BiH, ultimately, submitted its first 'Reform Programme' to NATO Allies in 2019 (NATO, 2024a).

30. To coordinate the activities within the Reform Programme, Bosnia and Herzegovina also created the Commission for Cooperation with NATO in early 2021. At the November 2023 Rose-Roth Seminar in Sarajevo, the Speaker of the House of Peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kemal Ademović, said that BiH continues to fulfil its Reform Programme obligations despite challenges, but he acknowledged further progress requires consensus amongst the three constituent peoples (NATO PA, 2023).

31. In parallel, BiH has sent its own forces in support of NATO operations and missions. For example, in 2009, BiH contributed forces to the operation in Afghanistan, contributing officers to German and Danish ISAF contingents, and supported the Resolute Support Mission until 2021. In 2023, the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina certified an infantry battalion group to NATO combat readiness standards, the largest unit ever to be certified through the Partnership for Peace mechanism – noteworthy accomplishment. Bosnia and Herzegovina has also offered to contribute two platoons to NATO's high readiness forces. BiH is also improving its own national civil emergency and disaster management capabilities. In 2017, it hosted NATO's Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) disaster preparedness and response exercise. It has been a member of NATO's Science for Peace and Security (SPS) Programme since 2007, cooperating in areas such as mine and unexploded ordnance clearance, cyber defence and counterterrorism. BiH scientists are also involved in an SPS programme that uses quantum technology in 5G networks to improve communications security (NATO, 2024a).

32. Given Bosnia and Herzegovina's long-standing partnership, and in light of Russia's February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine and its fundamental impact on the European security environment, NATO Allies agreed to a set of additional political and practical measures to help the country accelerate reform efforts and strengthen resilience at the 2022 Madrid Summit. Key among these measures was the development of a new defence capacity building package for the Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Alliance's broader Defence and Related Security Capacity Building (DCB) Initiative was launched at the 2014 Wales Summit to provide selected partners with additional strategic advice and practical assistance to help them build capacity in areas where NATO has particular expertise. NATO Defence Ministers endorsed the new DCB package for BiH in February 2023 – the package focuses on cooperation on crisis management, cyber defence, counter-terrorism, aero-medical evacuation, and CBRN defence (NATO, 2024c).

III- THE BELGRADE-PRISTINA DISPUTE – ORIGINS TO TODAY

33. Widespread and organised efforts to achieve Kosovo's independence from Serbia began in earnest in the 1980s. In response, Slobodan Milošević removed Kosovo's autonomous status in 1989 when he became President of the Republic of Serbia. As Yugoslavia splintered in the wars of the 1990s, Milošević increased systematic repression of Kosovar identity and rights. Kosovars launched an insurgency in response, forming the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), which had begun full-scale fighting with the Serbian armed forces by 1998.

A. NATO'S INTERVENTION

34. Allied forces' 1999 air campaign forced the withdrawal of the Yugoslav army from Kosovo. UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1244 gave NATO forces a mandate to remain in the territory as a peace and stability force able to "operate without hindrance in Kosovo and with the authority to establish and maintain a secure environment for all citizens of Kosovo and otherwise carry out its mission" (NATO, 1999). NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR) was initially 50,000 strong.⁴ KFOR remains in place, though the focus of its UN-mandated tasking has evolved significantly over time – it is NATO's longest-running operation and, currently, its largest.

35. Over the years, the mission has worked on tasks, including displaced persons and refugee assistance, reconstruction and demining, security and public order, patrimonial site protection, border security, cross-border weapons smuggling interdiction and the implementation of a Kosovo-wide weapons, ammunition and explosives amnesty programme (including weapons destruction). It has also supported the establishment of civilian institutions, law and order, the judicial and penal system, the electoral process, and other aspects of the political, economic and social life of Kosovo (NATO, 2023).⁵

36. KFOR also partners with EU and UN efforts in Kosovo, the European Union Rule of Law Mission (EULEX) and the United Nations Interim Administration Mission (UNMIK).⁶ Today, EULEX monitors and advises on rule of law issues, particularly via cooperation with the Kosovar police and judicial and customs authorities. It retains limited executive functions in customs and border control affairs.

37. Extensive international community efforts to establish a negotiated settlement with Serbia in the years after the conflict were, ultimately, unsuccessful. In 2008, Kosovo unilaterally declared independence, which has never been accepted by Serbia. Serbia challenged Kosovo's declaration at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), claiming it had broken international law in doing so. In 2010, the ICJ issued an advisory opinion stating Kosovo had not. After the ICJ opinion, the United States and the EU were the primary drivers behind a renewal of efforts to seek a normalisation of relations between Belgrade-Pristina. (*The challenges of the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue are outlined further below.*)

38. In June 2009, NATO defence ministers approved KFOR's gradual transition to a deterrent presence, which included a restructuring of the force and its strength. Some KFOR responsibilities, such as the protection of religious and cultural sites, were transferred to the Kosovo Police as a

4 KFOR is a peace enforcement operation operating under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.

5 The operation also gives particular attention to the protection of minorities; to include regular patrols near minority enclaves, checkpoints, and the provision of escorts; as well as the protection of cultural heritage sites (NATO, 2023).

6 UNSCR 1244 initially divided responsibilities for transitional operation of Kosovo between KFOR and UNMIK; while KFOR provided security, UNMIK was to provide transitional civil administration. Though UNMIK's tasks were largely assumed by EULEX in 2008, UNMIK maintains a small presence in Kosovo. NATO and UNMIK representatives meet regularly to coordinate their respective activities across their areas of responsibility.

result.⁷ In line with the achievement of security levels, the North Atlantic Council (NAC) approved KFOR to be reduced below 5,000. By 2020, the total KFOR presence was 3,400. Renewed violence in Kosovo since 2021 has driven KFOR adaptation and increases up to 4,623. As of October 2024, KFOR's current strength is over 4,300 troops (NATO, 2024c).

(The challenge of renewed violence – and its implications for the NATO and EU missions in Kosovo – is outlined in more detail below in the Persistent Challenges Between Belgrade and Pristina section.)

B. KOSOVO SECURITY FORCE

39. In 2008, in coordination with international and local authorities, KFOR assisted in standing down the Kosovo Protection Corps (KPC)⁸ and, in its place, helped to establish the Kosovo Security Force (KSF), with civilian oversight structures. The KSF's original design was mandated to be a lightly armed volunteer force with other domestic, essential, non-policing tasks such as emergency response, with a maximum of 2,500 personnel and an additional maximum of 800 reservists (NATO, 2023). The KSF was declared operational in June 2013.

40. The NATO Advisory and Liaison Team (NALT) in Kosovo continues to coordinate capacity building efforts with security organisations in Kosovo. The NALT consists of about 45 military and civilian personnel from 13 Allied and partner nations. NALT assistance ranges from executive to force level in areas such as logistics, procurement, financing, force development and planning, as well as leadership skills (NATO, 2023).

41. Since 2018, Kosovo has increased investment in the KSF and strengthened international partnerships. Between 2020 and 2023, Kosovo's government doubled the budget for the Ministry of Defence and tripled investment in armaments (AA, 2023). To modernise the KSF, Kosovo has looked to international suppliers: in 2023, it purchased Bayraktar TB-2 drones from Türkiye, and in January 2024, the US Department of State approved a sale of Javelin anti-tank missiles to Kosovo worth USD 75 million (Gjevori, 2023; Kraja, 2024).

42. Kosovo has also begun deploying the KSF internationally. In 2021, a KSF platoon was sent on a six-month peacekeeping mission to Kuwait under the command of the Iowa National Guard (Kllokoqi, Semini and AP, 2021). KSF soldiers have participated in HAZMAT, explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) and crowd control exercises with US military forces at the Hohenfels Training Area in Germany (Joint Multinational Readiness Center, 2020; 7th Army Training Command, 2022). In January 2023, several members of the KSF were deployed to the Falkland Islands under the British military (KOHA, 2023) and, in February of that year, a team of 39 soldiers were sent to southeast Türkiye on a humanitarian mission following the deadly earthquake there (Office of the Prime Minister of Kosovo, 2023).

C. CONTROVERSY SURROUNDING KSF TRANSITION TO THE KOSOVO ARMED FORCES

43. In 2018, the Kosovo Assembly voted to transition the KSF into the Kosovo Armed Forces (KAF) within a decade. The adopted laws foresee a future KAF structure of 5,000 active personnel and up to 3,000 reservists.⁹ Serbia immediately objected to the initiative, stating the UNSCR 1244 provisions

7 The transfer of policing authorities of religious and cultural heritage sites has been referred to as the 'unfixing process'. To date, all but one remaining originally designated site remains under fixed KFOR protection, the Decani Monastery (NATO, 2023).

8 The KPC was a civilian emergency service agency established by UNMIK in 1999.
https://unmik.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/regulations/02english/E1999regs/RE1999_08.htm

9 105 of the 120-member Assembly voted in favour of the legislation; the 11 deputies representing the Serb minority population boycotted the vote (Bytyci, 2018).

allow for KFOR to be the sole armed force present in Kosovo and that a new Kosovo Armed Force may be used to expel the ethnically Serb population remaining in the country (France 24, 2018).

44. At the time, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said the decision was “in principle a matter for Kosovo to decide,” but that it was “ill-timed” and would necessitate a NAC review of NATO’s level of engagement with the KSF (NATO, 2018). Stoltenberg also expressed concern that the process had not been inclusive. UK Ambassador to the UN at the time, Karen Pierce, stated a position in line with most Allies – “The United Kingdom believes it is Kosovo’s right as an independent, self-governing state to develop its own armed forces. Our legal interpretation of UNSCR 1244 is that it does not – repeat not – contain anything that precludes the future transition of the mandate of the Kosovo Security Force” (UK Government, 2019). As the KFOR Political Advisor told members at the October 2022 Rose-Roth Seminar in Pristina, the KAF mandate and its missions will inevitably rub against KFOR’s in the longer term, which will clearly necessitate mutually agreed-upon deconfliction at the appropriate time.

D. PERSISTENT CHALLENGES BETWEEN BELGRADE AND PRISTINA

45. The absence of significant steps toward the normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina is currently the region’s most challenging and volatile dispute. It has many significant immediate impacts: it prevents both from advancing their EU accession processes, it is a significant factor in regional instability, a hurdle to closer and more effective regional economic cooperation, and a contributor to the power vacuums that create opportunities for criminal networks to exploit the region as avenue, arena and area for the trafficking of arms, drugs and people.

46. At the core of the dispute are two key issues: Serbia’s non-recognition (and active international campaign against recognition) of Kosovo’s statehood and the ways and means of integrating Kosovo’s Serb minority population – particularly in the four northern municipalities bordering Serbia, where Serbs constitute over 90% of population.

E. THE BELGRADE-PRISTINA DIALOGUE

47. As noted above, after Serbia’s rejection of Kosovo’s 2008 independence claim, and the subsequent ICJ opinion noting the action did not contravene international law, the EU and the United States advocated for a renewal of dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina to find a pathway to a normalisation of relations. The EU became the principal driver by launching in 2011 high-level talks – the initial focus was on practical ‘technical’ issues as a confidence-building mechanism to move to the political level. EU membership was used as a key incentive driver for both sides throughout and, by April 2013, the two prime ministers signed the Brussels Agreement.¹⁰ The agreement had 15 points, with key focuses being on the establishment of an Association of Serb-majority Municipalities (ASM) to guarantee sufficient autonomy, while also removing parallel Serb structures to encourage greater integration of the municipalities into Kosovo government structures.¹¹ The agreement also states neither side would attempt to block the other’s bid to enter the EU.

48. Despite some initial technical successes, the process failed to deliver on the ultimate political ends it sought, namely a mutually agreed-upon political settlement to the dispute. The dialogue froze completely in 2018, when Pristina imposed 100 percent tariffs on Serbian goods in retaliation for Serbia blocking Pristina’s bid to join Interpol, which was part of a broader derecognition campaign by Serbia against Kosovo (BBC, 2018). Once again, the EU and United States stepped in to defuse tensions and restart the dialogue. On 2 April 2020, as a sign of their *bona fides*, the EU appointed Miroslav Lajčák as the EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue and made it clear that a “comprehensive normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo...is key to their

10 Officially the First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalisation of Relations.

11 Autonomy for economic development, education, health care, and urban and rural planning, but to move to incorporate the municipalities’ police and judiciaries into the Kosovo system.

respective European paths” (Council Decision, 2020). By July 2020, after significant pressure from the United States, Kosovo partially lifted the imposed tariffs, paving the way to restart the dialogue.

49. Once again, technical agreements demonstrated some progress, such as new open transportation routes, but the dialogue again foundered relatively quickly. In 2022, European and US leaders worked diligently to refocus the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, fearing that the Kremlin could use its influence in the Western Balkans to destabilise the region (Morina, 2023). In September 2022, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and French President Emmanuel Macron sent advisors to assist the EU Special Representative Lajčák with negotiations (Vulović, 2023). In parallel with its decisions to increase force presence, NATO also increased its high-level political attention to the issue.

50. European negotiators presented Belgrade and Pristina with their official proposal – Agreement on the Path to Normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia (commonly referred to as the European Proposal) and its Implementation Annex. Modelled after the 1972 Basic Treaty between the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic, the proposal calls for Serbia to recognise Kosovo’s *de facto* but not *de jure* independence. From Belgrade’s perspective, Kosovo would legally remain Serbian territory, but Belgrade would acknowledge some aspects of Kosovo’s statehood. Serbia would end its derecognition campaign and allow Kosovo to enter international organisations, it would recognise documents and license plates issued by Kosovo, and Serbia and Kosovo would establish permanent representations at each other’s seats of government. The primary difference between the 2023 European Proposal and earlier plans for rapprochement between Belgrade and Pristina is that the latest plan requires Serbia to allow international recognition of Kosovo, something it has consistently opposed (Vulović, 2023).

51. In February 2023, in Brussels, the European Council endorsed the European Proposal, and Belgrade and Pristina gave verbal approval to the proposal at a subsequent meeting in Ohrid, North Macedonia, in March 2023 – referred to as the Ohrid Agreement. Implementation, however, remains a challenge due to divergent views on sequencing. Key elements of the agreement’s stipulations are outlined in Articles 4 & 7. Article 4 states clearly: “The Parties proceed on the assumption that neither of the two can represent the other in the international sphere or act on its behalf. Serbia will not object to Kosovo’s membership in any international organisation” (EEAS, 2023). While Article 7 mandates: “Both Parties commit to establish specific arrangements and guarantees...to ensure an appropriate level of self-management for the Serbian community in Kosovo and ability for service provision in specific areas, including the possibility for financial support by Serbia and a direct communication channel for the Serbian community to the Government of Kosovo” (EEAS, 2023). Neither has been implemented and each side believes the other should move first on the respective articles which impact them the most - delayed implementation has, unfortunately, only led to further complications.

52. In the absence of signatures on the agreement, the two key issues fester, with the escalating challenges in northern Kosovo being the most acute to local and regional security. Escalatory steps taken by both sides, particularly Pristina since 2021, have brought about a state of political paralysis with a high potential for spilling over into violence. The following section reviews the recent period of escalation in violence in northern Kosovo.

F. RENEWED VIOLENCE POST-2021

53. A steady uptick in violence since 2022 in Kosovo is a worrying trend and is further complicating the ability to reach a negotiated settlement on the normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina. A seemingly low-level disagreement over new license plate requirements imposed by the government in Pristina in 2021, for example, was capable of reigniting tensions and significantly escalating already existing levels of violence in northern Kosovo. As the issue festered, protesters from the Serbian community blocked the Administrative Boundary Line (ABL) with Serbia. The escalating tensions led to the Pristina government sending special police forces to keep the ABL open, which in parallel led the government in Belgrade to deploy some of its armed forces to the

ABL area in response (Butcher and Boffey, 2021). European Union and United States diplomatic efforts calmed tensions, and after a September 2021 EU-mediated agreement, both sides allowed NATO KFOR troops to increase their patrols to ensure security at the ABL crossings (Butcher and Boffey, 2021). Disagreements on what types of license plates were or were not permitted in Kosovo continued into 2022 and, after the Kosovo government threatened to impose fines on all drivers violating the new license plate rule, prompted a mass resignation of Serb officials (local government, police and judiciary) in northern Kosovo and the boycotting of local elections planned for 18 December 2022 (Delauney, 2022). On 10 December, violent protests featuring explosives and gunfire erupted in northern Kosovo and led to an attack on a Kosovo Police patrol and roadblocks on major roads (AFP, 2022). In response to the escalation on the ground in northern Kosovo, Serbia placed its forces on the 'highest level of alert' (AFP, 2022a).

54. A subsequent boycott of local elections in April 2023 resulted in a turnout of only 3 to 5 percent of eligible voters across the four Serb-majority municipalities. As a result of the non-participation of almost the entirety of the municipalities' Serbian population, candidates from ethnic Albanian political parties were elected mayors of all four municipalities. Despite the absence of a clear mandate, and calls from both the EU and the United States not to do so, Kosovo PM Albin Kurti encouraged the new mayors to take office and dispatched security details from special police units to protect them as they moved into their offices (Karnitschnig and Hajdari, 2024; Economist, 2023). This entry by force into the municipal buildings prompted significant new levels of violence, during which, on 29 May, 93 KFOR personnel were injured when they were attacked by crowds as they continued to carry out their mandate to create a safe environment for all communities (AFP and Reuters, 2023; NATO, 2023c). In parallel to the protests, Serbia put its armed forces on high combat readiness.

55. The NATO Secretary General at the time, Jens Stoltenberg, condemned the attacks on KFOR noting: "Violence sets back Kosovo and the entire region," and "both Pristina and Belgrade must take concrete steps to de-escalate the situation" (NATO, 2023a). NATO responded to the attacks by significantly reinforcing KFOR, the bulk of which being five hundred service members of Türkiye's 65th mechanised infantry brigade (NATO, 2023b). A joint statement from the embassies of France, Germany, Italy, the United States, the United Kingdom and the EU condemned the decision by the government in Pristina to force the installation of the new mayors and called on the mayors to show restraint and represent all communities (EEAS, 2023a). In addition, the EU applied a package of "reversible and temporary measures", including "the suspension of high-level visits, contacts and events, as well as...financial cooperation," against Pristina. The removal of the punitive measures, according to EU spokesman Peter Stano, would depend on "development on the ground and credible steps by [Kosovo] Prime Minister Kurti" (Bami, 2023). The EU outlined three conditions for removing the measures imposed on the government in Pristina; an expectation that the Pristina authorities would not act in an escalatory fashion and immediately suspend policy operations in the vicinity of the municipal buildings; the mayors would perform their duties on premises other than the municipal buildings, and that the government would organise early elections as soon as possible in all four municipalities.

56. Despite the repeated calls from the EU and the U.S. on the Kurti government to work to deescalate the situation, the government in Pristina not only stalled, but continued to take measures that were perceived as escalatory. The protests and violence continued in June, and EU High Representative Josep Borrell called for an emergency trilateral meeting with Serbian President Vučić and Prime Minister Kurti at the end of the month, which both refused, each opting instead for separate meetings with Borrell (AP, 2023)

57. After a short period of de-escalation over the summer, tensions escalated sharply in September 2023, when a group of about 30 gunmen clashed with police in Banjska, in northern Kosovo, and barricaded themselves inside a Serbian orthodox monastery, resulting in a siege that killed one police officer and the three attackers (Dunai, 2023). Kosovo authorities believe that many more fighters were hiding in the forests between Banjska and the Serbian border, and they

discovered a large cache of weapons – this included anti-tank rocket launchers, mortars and grenade launchers, anti-tank mines and 24 vehicles (one armoured) (ICG, 2024)¹².

58. Kosovo Police believe Milan Radočić, a prominent figure in politics, business and crime in northern Kosovo, led the attackers. The United States sanctioned Radočić in 2021 for his involvement in a criminal organisation responsible for all forms of illicit trafficking in the region (US Department of the Treasury, 2021). In 2022, the UK imposed an asset freeze on Radočić for engaging in serious corruption (UK Government, 2022). Not long after the incident, Radočić surfaced in Serbia and claimed responsibility for the attack – he was arrested but later released on bail (O’Carroll and Borger, 2023).

59. NATO again reinforced KFOR with heavier armour and two hundred British and one hundred Romanian troops (NATO, 2023). As then UK Foreign Secretary, David Cameron, said on a visit to Kosovo a few months later: “Our troops are supporting...stability through NATO, our law enforcement experts are tackling corruption and organised crime, and our diplomats are working with partners to help preserve the gains achieved through peace and dialogue” (UK Government, 2024).

60. The EU has also increased its military and policing forces in response to the increased violence in northern Kosovo. In March 2022, the 105 personnel of the EULEX Formed Police Unit (FPU) were temporarily reinforced by 70 members from the European Gendarmerie Force (EUROGENDFOR) (EULEX, 2022a; EULEX, 2022b). In November 2022, in response to tensions and violence in the predominantly Serb north of Kosovo, the EULEX FPU was again reinforced by 23 Italian and 10 Lithuanian gendarmes (Bami, 2022; EUROGENDFOR, 2023).

61. Sustained diplomatic efforts by both the United States and the EU did, however, get the government in Pristina to petition for the removal of the mayors, and, after this, to schedule a referendum for April 2024. The 21 April 2024 referendum was boycotted by the Kosovo Serbs. The Serbian population in the north are also boycotting a census currently underway by the government in Pristina (Zorić and Dead, 2024).

62. In late October 2023, German Chancellor Scholz, French President Macron and Italian Prime Minister Meloni met with Serbian President Vučić and Kosovo Prime Minister Kurti on the sidelines of the European Council meeting in Brussels (Gogić, 2023). Their subsequent joint statement called on Kosovo “to launch the procedure to establish the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities,” and, for the first time, they were explicit in calling on Serbia to “deliver on de-facto recognition” (BPA, 2023). On 30 October, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen outlined the incentives for each party to implement: if Belgrade and Pristina honoured their commitments, each would gain partial access to the European Single Market and EU funds, and the EU could lift sanctions on Kosovo and advance its case for EU membership (Gogić, 2023; Prelec, 2023). The recent push at the European Council meeting has not, however, resulted in a breakthrough. Vučić has not signed the agreement and, with his successful re-election in December 2023, Belgrade’s position is unlikely to change (Nikolić, 2023).

63. On technical issues, there has been some progress. In June 2022, Belgrade and Pristina agreed on the Energy Agreements’ Implementation Roadmap, which will regulate electricity services in four Serb-majority municipalities in northern Kosovo (EEAS, 2022). In early January 2024, Serbia announced that vehicles with Kosovo license plates could enter its territory (Euronews with AP, 2024). Western governments have also become more aligned on their regional approach: in January 2024, the Spanish government said it would follow the majority of EU countries by recognising

¹² A previous draft for the Spring Session contained a reference to a statement made in the International Crisis Group (ICG) report *Northern Kosovo: Asserting Sovereignty amid Divided Loyalties*. The ICG has subsequently edited the text of this report for reporting accuracy. This revised document reflects that correction.

Kosovo passports and allowing visa-free travel for Kosovo passport holders (Dunai and Jopson, 2024).

64. The Kosovo government's move in January 2024 to impose a ban on the use and import of the Serbian dinar, however, ignited new tensions in northern Kosovo, as the move cut off Belgrade's ability to finance the remaining institutions it oversees, and, perhaps most costly and immediately, it cut off most residents' access to pensions and other benefits. The following month, the Kosovo government raided Serbian villages across its southern territories and confiscated Serbian dinars from local post offices (ICG, 2024). The United States strongly criticised Kosovo for "unnecessarily raising ethnic tensions" through its actions (Smith and O'Carroll, 2024). Kosovo government officials subsequently ignored US and EU pressure to suspend the latest measures and to get back to finding a workable solution to the broader Belgrade-Pristina dispute.

65. In May, Kosovo Police shut down six Serbian banks in four Serb-majority municipalities (Isufi et al., 2024). In response to Pristina's refusal to implement its commitments in line with the agreements facilitated by the EU-led dialogue, on 17 May 2024 the Council of Europe postponed putting the issue of Kosovo's membership in the Council on their agenda. In June 2024, Kosovo was rebuked by France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, the United States, the EU, and the OSCE for moving ahead with a decision to expropriate over 100 parcels of land in Serb-majority areas, an action they say is in violation of Kosovo's "own laws and regulations" (Bami, 2024). The Kosovo government's unilateral moves have elicited unprecedented condemnations, sanctions and other restrictive measures from its Western partners.

66. In June 2024, near the end of his term as High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Josep Borell lamented that the European Proposal "remains unimplemented one year after it was agreed," resulting in a "huge lost opportunity for both parties" (EEAS, 2024). After separate, bilateral meetings with each side in June 2024, Borell relayed Belgrade's and Pristina's conditions for moving ahead with the dialogue. Kurti said Kosovo would engage further if Belgrade formally signs the agreement, hands over perpetrators of the September 2023 attack to Kosovar authorities, and withdraws a December 2023 letter by Prime Minister Ana Brnabić to the European External Action service stating that Serbia would not accept de facto recognition of Kosovo (EEAS, 2024; Nikolić, 2023). Belgrade responded that it is unable to accept Pristina's conditions because of constitutional constraints, but that it could discuss Brnabić's letter (EEAS, 2024).

67. In May 2024, one year after the attack on NATO personnel, KFOR reiterated calls for the perpetrators to be held accountable. As of June 2024, Kosovo authorities had arrested only 5 individuals suspected of participating in the attack (Bami, 2024a).

G. SECURITY CHALLENGES STEMMING FROM THE RECENT UPTICK IN VIOLENCE IN NORTHERN KOSOVO

68. The mass resignation of Serbs from the police forces in northern Kosovo has left a relative security vacuum in the region that will likely only feed further security challenges. As experts note, organised crime has already taken full advantage of the tenuous situation, and it is penetrating all facets of political life in the region (Vulović, 2023a). Kosovo's efforts to exploit the situation to consolidate its control over the municipalities will likely only further compound the variables for more disruption.

IV- EXTERNAL INTERFERENCE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

69. The NATO 2022 Strategic Concept signalled a new era of strategic competition for the Alliance. Increasingly, Allies must navigate an international system where powers opposed to the rules-based order seek to gain influence and impose their own rules. Strategic competition is playing out across the globe, from the Indo-Pacific to the Sahel, but its emergence at the Alliance's doorstep in the Western Balkans is particularly concerning. Russia and China have extensive ties to the region — Russia through energy and political cooperation, and China through investment and economic ties. The EU remains the Western Balkans' top economic partner by far, but its status as the most influential external actor in the region is increasingly contested by other powers, with China being the most significant competitor (Volović, 2023c).

A. RUSSIA IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

70. The Western Balkans have long been a strategic interest for Russia. Historically, Russia has asserted a special pan-Slavic and pro-Eastern Orthodox Christianity relationship with the region, and Moscow uses its influence not only to shape regional politics, but to have broader influence in Europe as well. Russia has two main objectives in the Western Balkans: to protect Russian economic interests and to prevent the region's Euro-Atlantic integration. It accomplishes these by leveraging economic dependencies, especially in energy, as well as its close relationships with like-minded political leaders.

71. Today, Russia's regional economic footprint is minimal compared to that of the European Union, but it maintains influence over strategically important sectors.¹³ For example, Russia controls nearly 100% of gas imports in Serbia, Montenegro and BiH (Stanicek and Caprile, 2023). Gazprom, its state-owned energy firm, has a majority stake in Serbia's national oil company, and Russia controls about 30% of BiH's oil market (Ruge, 2022). Easy access to Russian natural gas from pipelines spanning the Black Sea has complicated regional efforts to diversify energy supplies. In May 2022, as energy prices soared in Europe following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Serbia signed a three-year natural gas deal with Russia to lock in lower prices (RFE/RL, 2022). In February 2023, Republika Srpska announced its intention to increase gas imports from Russia citing Gazprom's reliability as a partner (Reuters, 2024).

72. Russia's control over energy supplies in the Western Balkans is firm in the short term, but its future stake will diminish as states take steps to diversify their supplies and forms of energy procurement. In 2023, Serbia signed a deal with Azerbaijan to increase natural gas imports and it plans to open a new oil refinery capable of processing oil from non-Russian sources. Next door in BiH, there are plans for a natural gas pipeline that will connect BiH with an LNG terminal on the Croatian coast (Bechev, 2023).

73. Energy is a useful lever for Russia, but its main source of influence in the Western Balkans is political. Since the Cold War, Russia has leveraged the region's sectarian divisions, making inroads with local leaders. Moscow and Belgrade relations are particularly friendly. Russia has consistently opposed Kosovo's independence and vetoed UN resolutions, holding Serbian-backed forces responsible for violence and genocide during the Yugoslav Wars (Stanicek and Caprile, 2023). President Vučić has visited Russia four times since 2018, and the two countries signed a foreign policy coordination document on the sidelines of the 2022 UN General Assembly. Russia's political ties with the RS are even stronger. Between 2018 and 2023, RS President Dodik visited Russia more than any other European politician, the Kremlin has directly financed his election campaigns,

¹³ In 2021, Russia accounted for 2.7% of exports from the Western Balkans and 3.9% of imports (Stanicek and Caprile, 2023).

and, in January 2023, Dodik awarded Putin with the Order of the Republika Srpska, the entity's highest honour (Zweers et al., 2023).

74. Cooperation between Russia and Serbia and the RS extends to the military sphere. Russia is their principal supplier of arms and military equipment. Between 2018 and 2022, Serbia imported 31% of its arms from Russia, including anti-tank weapons, drones and other equipment (Wezeman et al., 2023; Zweers et al., 2023). Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its need for weaponry have not shut off the tap: in February 2024, Serbia received a Repellent anti-drone system from Russia, and Vučić said there are more arms deliveries to come (Antonijević, 2024). In the RS, Russia has armed the entity's police forces, and its mercenaries have trained Bosnian Serb paramilitary forces (McBride, 2023). In return, Serbia helps Russia skirt Western sanctions by exporting dual-use goods. It is estimated that between February 2022 and November 2023, Serbian firms exported USD 71.1 million in sanctioned goods to Russia, including electronics and communications equipment with military applications (Katic et al., 2023).

75. Russia has managed to keep these regional states in its orbit, but its influence is diminishing. In line with its EU accession process, Serbia is seeking to counterbalance some of its ties with Russia with European connections. Russia's economic reach is restricted by sanctions and its control of the region's energy is slipping due to diversification and another actor, the People's Republic of China, which has largely displaced it as the preferred non-Western partner.

76. Despite Kyiv's non-recognition of Kosovo's declared independence, the government in Pristina has declared its support for Ukraine's self-defence against Russia's invasion, and taken a position that Russia must lose the war in order to stem the spread of conflict further into Europe (Gera, 2024). During the 19 March 2024 meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, the government in Pristina committed to supply two military aid packages to Ukraine – the packages include essential military equipment such as trucks, tactical vehicles, APCs, and mortar artillery shells (Tovar, 2024).

B. CHINA IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

77. Within the past decade, China has become a major player in the Western Balkans. Much of its regional activity is through the Belt and Road Initiative, China's global programme of investment aimed at expanding Beijing's economic and political power (McBride et al., 2023). For China, developing closer ties to the Western Balkans means access to European markets and leverage against the West. Chinese investment in several eastern Mediterranean ports provides Chinese shipping firms with commercial nodes connecting China and Europe via the Western Balkans.

78. To facilitate trade with Europe, between 2009 and 2022, China invested EUR 32 billion in the Western Balkans across several sectors, including transportation, energy, metallurgy, mining and telecommunications (Stanicek and Tarpova, 2022). Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) has soared compared to other countries: in Serbia, Chinese FDI has risen from EUR 2.4 million in 2009 to EUR 1.4 billion in 2022, making China the single largest investor in Serbia, just shy of collective EU investment which stood at EUR 1.46 billion in 2022 (Vulović, 2023c).

79. Loans constitute over 75 percent of Chinese investment, the terms of which are often hidden from public scrutiny and leave recipients vulnerable to debt traps (Vulović, 2023c). Montenegro fell victim to this in 2021, when it had to request EU assistance with repaying a USD 1 billion loan from the Export-Import Bank of China used for building a highway. The EU and Western financial institutions were forced to guarantee a favourable dollar-euro exchange rate so Montenegro could afford its dollar-denominated payments (Scepanovic, 2023).

80. Unlike European loans which come with conditions to safeguard social, political, economic and environmental rights, Chinese loans have few strings attached. This makes Chinese capital attractive, but it comes at a cost: contracts lack transparency, Chinese firms use low-quality materials, and their practices entrench corruption, damage the environment, and violate human rights (Stanicek and Tarpova, 2022). In the Serbian village of Radinac, residents are protesting a

Chinese-owned steel mill because local cancer rates have quadrupled during the past decade (Reuters, 2021). Eighty kilometres away in Krivelj, residents say Chinese mining operations have poisoned drinking water (Pesic, 2024). Over the border in BiH, journalists have raised the alarm about the lack of transparency on large infrastructure projects. For example, the contract between the RS and the Chinese firm Shandong Hi-Speed International for the Banja Luka-Prijedor highway is worth EUR 300 million, but the details of it are completely unknown, and journalists have found that the government of the RS sold the land for the highway itself to the Chinese firm managing its construction (Cviko, 2023).

81. The RS welcomes the inflow of Chinese capital. President Dodik and the entity's leadership view it as a means to balance against the West, and the RS has become increasingly indebted to Chinese firms (Vulović, 2023c). In 2023, the RS looked to China for assistance with paying EUR 200 million of bonds sold on the Vienna Stock Exchange and, although China declined to loan more funds, the episode points to a growing dependence on China for financial stability in the RS (Kremic, 2023). Serbia, however, is the centrepiece of Chinese regional ambitions in the Western Balkans. Chinese firms have undertaken 61 projects in the country worth EUR 18.77 billion between 2013 and 2021. In 2023, the two countries signed a free trade agreement that included agreements for the construction of new motorways and the modernisation of Telekom Srbija by Huawei (Vulović, 2023c). Belgrade also sits at a strategically important junction in the China-Europe Land-Sea Express corridor, with aims of one day linking Budapest and Piraeus via the Serbian capital.

82. Cooperation between China and Serbia is not limited to trade and infrastructure investment. China has become Serbia's biggest source of arms and military equipment. In 2022, Serbia became the first operator of Chinese military equipment in Europe, importing HQ-22 surface-to-air missiles and CH-92 UAVs (Kastner, 2023). Serbia is now the largest UAV operator in the Western Balkans, a move that has pushed other regional states to acquire UAVs. Albania and Kosovo have purchased Bayraktar UAVs, and Croatia and North Macedonia have both reportedly acquired Israeli ones (Vuksanovic and Ejodus, 2023). The introduction of Chinese arms in the Western Balkans threatens to increase military tensions, and Chinese firms are eager to join the market there. At the International Armament and Military Equipment Fair in Belgrade in September 2023, Chinese firms advertised direct energy weapons, electronic warfare and anti-drone systems, anti-tank missiles and UAVs for Serbian buyers (Kastner, 2023).

83. Xi Jinping visited Belgrade on 7 May 2024 in a sign of the growing cooperation between the two countries. Serbian President, Aleksander Vučić, noted the visit was a symbol of the 'ironclad friendship' his nation has with China (Delauney, 2024). The visit coincided with the 25th anniversary of the unintentional errant missile strike on the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, as NATO forces prosecuted their campaign to stop the fighting in 1999. Experts noted Xi Jinping sought to use the visit to highlight China's continued and growing criticisms of NATO (Delauney, 2024).

C. EXTERNAL INFLUENCE ON THE RISE

84. States in the Middle East and the Gulf are looking toward the Western Balkans as well. Since the end of the Yugoslav Wars, Iran has projected soft power through the region by funding religious institutions and, in recent years, by developing friendly relations with Serbia, siding with Belgrade on the status of Kosovo. In return, Belgrade has condemned Western sanctions against the Islamic Republic (Cafiero, 2023). Saudi Arabia, for its part, has promoted Wahhabi Islam in the Western Balkans by funding religious and cultural institutions, and the United Arab Emirates has made inroads in the region through large real estate investments (Bechev and Öztürk, 2022; Vulović, 2023c).

85. The role of Middle East states and Russia is, however, minimal when compared to that of China. Russia maintains some influence over the region, but its reach is diminishing as it becomes more and more entangled in its costly invasion of Ukraine. The most significant strategic challenge

for NATO Allies and the European Union is how to counter Chinese influence and ensure that it does not impede the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans.

V- CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

86. This year, Allies celebrate the 20th anniversary of Slovenia's accession, and the 15th for Croatia and Albania. These are worth celebrating as success stories of anchoring peace and stability across the region and, as they contribute to NATO missions and operations, much further afield. More broadly, the Western Balkans are relatively well integrated into the Euro-Atlantic institutions and working on ever closer integration with the EU and in their own region. As a result, the region is seeing a growing degree of prosperity.

87. The region does, however, remain beset with several key challenges that continue to stymie further regional economic integration, invite corruption and all forms of criminality, and, ultimately, if mismanaged or left to fester, threaten a renewed outbreak of significant violence. As the discouraging recent trend in violence in north Kosovo makes clear, the absence of a pathway to the normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina is the most significant immediate factor in regional instability. The political stalemate in BiH has external observers concerned the post-war settlement there is at its most vulnerable point since its negotiation almost 30 years ago.

88. The principal international actors on the ground still in the region are reacting to the evolving situation. NATO adapted its force posture in Kosovo – it has both changed their disposition and added approximately 800 additional troops. The EU has adapted its numbers on the ground as well. The EU and the United States have redoubled efforts to bring both Belgrade and Pristina to sign and implement the European Proposal, to which both sides gave their verbal consent in March 2023. The High Representative in BiH has used his special intervention powers over on many occasions in the last two years; three times to amend the constitution to ensure free and fair elections, and to force the government to move forward with its principal duties.

89. Still far more needs to be done to meet the challenges of the day, which necessitate urgent, focused attention by all Allies and their partners. As such, this report recommends the following:

90. **First and foremost, NATO Allies, the EU, and their partners must continue to apply appropriate pressure on Belgrade and Pristina to unblock the dialogue to find a way forward on normalisation of relations between the two.** While it is clear the Agreement on the Path to Normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia and its Implementation Annex were a milestone achievement, the dispute between Belgrade and Pristina remains the region's most significant challenge due to a lack of agreement on the sequencing of implementing the agreement. The government in Pristina needs to find a clear, proactive, and positive agenda to reassure the Serbian population in northern Kosovo – this includes immediately acting to establish the Association of Serb-majority Municipalities, which will go a long way to instil much needed trust among the local population and address many of their legitimate concerns. In parallel, the government in Belgrade must stop its campaign objecting to Kosovo's membership in international organisations.

91. Beyond immediate and renewed focus on the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue, the broader region necessitates renewed focus as well.

92. For NATO Allies: Against the grain of current perceptions, Allies must do more in the region, particularly in Kosovo and BiH. Broadly, **this includes engaging more with Western Balkan Allies and, to the extent possible, partners in NATO institutions, initiatives, and missions.**

- a. This includes a new look at **increased joint training and exercising**. For example, the United Kingdom's Operation Orbital, which currently works with Ukrainian soldiers, could serve as a model for a new NATO training programme in BiH. NATO can continue to engage BiH in more multinational armed forces exercises; the recent inclusion of the AFBiH in the Defender Europe exercise is a good example.
 - i. **Allies should pay particular attention to cybersecurity cooperation with all Western Balkan Allies and partners to increase their capabilities to counter Russian hybrid threats.** This is particularly the case for weaker and more vulnerable partners such as BiH. As such, NATO Allies should consider expanding their DCB package to the country to help increase the country's resilience to such growing challenges.
- b. **The NATO force presence in Kosovo could still be further reinforced given the evolution of events on the ground in the region: Allies and the EU can work together to provide more fit-for-purpose forces in Kosovo and BiH.** Allied attention to Kosovo cannot be ignored – potentially more forces, properly positioned there are a priority. NATO's KFOR operation has an important role, however, that extends beyond the deterring of violence, as it also serves as a channel for positive outreach and confidence building with all communities in Kosovo and Serbia.
- c. **Focus on defence property modernisation where possible:** NATO Allies should work closely with the AFBiH on the immovable defence properties that are already registered and help move the process forward, despite RS intransigence on the issue.

93. For the EU: **The region's lingering security challenges and political stasis make it clear EU members must find consensus and re-engage fully on enlargement.** As regional interlocutors have made clear to Assembly members time and again, the region's integration into the EU will go a long way to resolve the region's key economic, political and security challenges.

94. The EU must, however, insist that accession is conditions-based, which would, in turn, put the necessary pressure on Serbia, Kosovo and BiH to be serious about strengthening their democratic institutions and the rule of law. This means establishing clear goals with deadlines, monitoring mechanisms, and, when necessary, penalties for failures to comply or progress.

- a. **With BiH more specifically, as the country is making a least a degree of progress toward the opening of accession negotiations, the EU, in cooperation with relevant international actors in the country, should push for more substantive constitutional reforms, particularly in view of the upcoming 30th anniversary of the Dayton Accords.** Any new political status quo, however, must address challenges related to political centralisation, evolving beyond the constituent people model, and reducing veto rights of the respective parties.
- b. **The EU should provide EUFOR Althea with the tools and funding necessary for the situation as it stands today, as a means of countering the dangerous trendlines in the country to break down the post-war settlement.**
- c. **Across the Western Balkans more broadly, the EU should continue to find new ways and means to engage with the region economically, as a means of encouraging better and more mutually beneficial interaction with the Euro-Atlantic community and to counter China's influence.** Such economic engagement can be a reward for democratic and rule of law reforms among those actors falling behind in these areas. Greater attention to regional investments would facilitate existing regional integration efforts such as the Common Regional Market, the Open Balkans Initiative, and the South-East European Cooperation Process.

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