



RESTORING BRITISH LEADERSHIP IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Policy Recommendations for
the Government of the United
Kingdom ahead of the London
Conference of the Berlin
Process Summit

OCTOBER 2025

FOREWORD BY RT HON LORD
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Foreword

All too often recent history shows that what happens in the Western Balkans does not stop in the Western Balkans. That is why we had better, in our own as well as their interest, watch - and be concerned - at events in all the countries of the region.

This report gives a glimpse of what the UK, the EU and NATO can do to stabilise a region which matters to all of us. It needs examining - and urgently taken account of.

Of course, as I said to Western Balkans parliamentarians last week in Westminster as part of the Berlin Process meetings, the responsibility for sorting out the problems of the region lies with the people of the region itself. If the countries of the region want to be part of mainstream Europe, then they had better get a grip on some of the forces preventing it.

For so long as the Russians, the Chinese and other state actors use the region as an adventure playground then the living standards of people will decline and the younger generation will simply leave. The world's attention has shifted from the region and so people must themselves do what is necessary to sort out crime, corruption, nationalisms and historic grievances. The future does not wait for those who live in history.

I recommend the thrust of this report and hope that it gets the attention it - and the region which means so much to me - deserves.



The Rt Hon. the Lord Robertson of Port Ellen KT

10th Secretary General of NATO

Former Secretary of State for Defence and Lead Reviewer of the Strategic Defence Review 2025

Executive Summary of Recommendations

- The United Kingdom must champion burden-sharing, making the Western Balkans a focus of its regional co-operation with NATO and the EU. It should spearhead the creation of a recently proposed Balkans Joint Expeditionary Force (BJEF); work with allies to invest directly in programs and start-ups in the region with the aim of incentivising local economic growth and stemming migration; recommit to promoting good governance and the rule of law in the Western Balkans to support Euro-Atlantic aspirations and reducing illegal migration flows; and provide technical assistance to Western Balkans countries that helps them to integrate more closely with both the EU's internal market and NATO.
- Britain should advocate for the continued enlargement of NATO as a means of ensuring stability to the vulnerable Western Balkans. Transitional, bilateral security agreements with both Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) in the meantime would demonstrate a strong signal of the United Kingdom's desire to press for the NATO membership of both countries, in alignment with mutual security benefits. As part of its ongoing commitments to countering Russian and Chinese incursions into Europe, the United Kingdom should seek to counter Moscow and Beijing's political, security, and economic deployments in the Western Balkans by partnering with local actors to shore up support for democracy and pro-Western sentiments.
- Britain must act as an honest broker in the region, utilising its position as a NATO country, a permanent member of the UN Security Council and a European power outside of the EU. It should offer to mediate disputes between EU member states and Western Balkans countries that affect the latter's EU accession perspectives. It should also redouble diplomatic overtures to ensure the recognition of Kosovo's statehood by the five EU non-recognisers. The Special Envoy to the Western Balkans, currently Dame Karen Pierce, Britain's most experienced and respected diplomat, must be effectively utilised to play this role on behalf of the British government.

Introduction

Europe is at war. The bonds of the transatlantic community have never been as challenged as they are today in an era of increased global instability and rapidly accelerating great power competition. Russia remains a significant threat to the security of the European continent, while China, as per the United Kingdom's Strategic Defence Review 2025, represents a "sophisticated and persistent challenge". Migration is at the top of the political agenda for the Euro-Atlantic community, increasingly interplaying with the traditional security discourse. The lines between the domestic and the foreign have never been more blurred, and their combined product never more volatile.

The United Kingdom occupies a unique position in this new global order, and its grand strategy must be fit to purpose – for its own security, and the integrity of its alliances. To that end, the British government must seek to counter Russia's imperial machinations on the continent but also the growing machinations of China in Europe, to prevent spillover from the war in Ukraine to other vulnerable regions of Eurasia; to shore up the resolve and capacities of NATO to defend the Euro-Atlantic order; and to ensure long-term US commitments to the security of the United Kingdom and its continental allies.

These aims run through the Western Balkans and require a comprehensive retooling of the United Kingdom's posture and approach to the region. The reasons for a new approach are easily explained.

Why The Western Balkans Matter To The Security And National Interest Of The United Kingdom: Countering Russia And China's Influence On Europe's Southeastern Frontier

The United Kingdom's recently published Strategic Defence Review and National Security Strategy refer to Russia as an "acute threat" to Europe's security, "waging war on our continent and probing our defences at home". China has been described as a "sophisticated and persistent challenge", which leverages "its economic, technological, and military capabilities, seeking to... erode US influence, and put pressure on the rules-based international order." The British government and security apparatus consider these two states as the biggest challenges to the security of Europe and the national security of the United Kingdom.

US retrenchment from the Western Balkans region, the EU's slow paced accession agenda, the United Kingdom's lost influence over the accession process and decreased security presence have created a vacuum in a region that has long been described as the soft underbelly of Europe. These conditions have encouraged Russia and China to ramp up their own presence and fill a void, often welcomed by

governments and political actors in the region. This poses a significant challenge to the United Kingdom and the wider Euro-Atlantic community.

Russia's Malign Influence in the Western Balkans

Since the onset of Russia's full invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Western Balkans have been widely identified as a likely zone of increased (in)direct Russian aggression.¹² This has also been noted by the former Foreign Secretary and now Deputy Prime Minister, David Lammy,³ and a similar view was taken by his predecessors.⁴

Today, Russia maintains a robust intelligence⁵⁶ and paramilitary⁷⁸ presence in Serbia, and Belgrade is, along with Belarus, the chief procurer of Russian and Chinese⁹ arms in Europe. Russia and Serbia routinely conduct joint intelligence operations in the region, with the explicit aim of preventing further NATO enlargement in the Western Balkans.¹⁰ Belgrade is also the chief transit node for volunteers who have enlisted in the Russian occupation forces in Ukraine, some of whom, in turn, have been recruited into Russia's intelligence services.¹¹ Serbia is also the site of the largest Russian intelligence station in the region, the Russian Humanitarian Centre in Nis,¹² and the country also hosts a complex network of companies, civic associations, and purported cultural initiatives which serve as front organizations for Russian strategic interests.¹³ Throughout the region, the Serbian Orthodox Church also acts as a major enactor of Serbian and Russian political pressure; contributing to the suppression of democratic dissent and Serbia.¹⁴¹⁵ In August, the *Financial Times* editorial board called ongoing

¹ <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/national-security-daily/2024/05/29/why-putins-next-target-could-be-the-balkans-00160479>

² <https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/06/will-russian-political-warfare-operations-in-the-balkans-fuel-its-next-war/>

³ <https://www.politico.eu/article/with-all-eyes-on-ukraine-europe-is-urged-not-to-forget-the-other-hotspot/>

⁴ <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-nato-sarajevo-government-and-politics-b3e033188a47d24a6809223080987c5c>

⁵ <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-spy--suspects-belgium-expelled-gru-svr-osce-serbia-central-asia/33342428.html>

⁶ <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/07/15/disruptors-inside-russias-balkan-training-camps-for-moldovan-destabilisation/>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/12/russian-trained-mercenaries-back-bosnias-serb-separatists>

⁸ <https://detektor.ba/2019/07/19/how-russian-fighters-train-serb-teens-at-military-patriotic-camps/?lang=en>

⁹ <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-china-military-exercises-eu-alarm-russia/33476628.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.occrp.org/en/project/spooks-and-spin-information-war-in-the-balkans/leaked-documents-show-russian-serbian-attempts-to-meddle-in-macedonia>

¹¹ <https://sites.tufts.edu/fletcherussia/russias-foreign-mercenaries-in-ukraine-war-military-leak-shows-bosnian-serb-fighter-as-gru-officer/>

¹² <https://www.voanews.com/a/united-states-sees-russia-humanitarian-center-serbia-spy-outpost/3902402.html>

¹³ <https://3gimbals.com/insights/the-hybrid-architecture-of-russian-intelligence-in-the-western-balkans/>

¹⁴ <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2023/little-substance-considerable-impact/russian-sources-of-influence-in-serbia-montenegro-and-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>

¹⁵ <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/the-serbian-orthodox-church-and-extreme-right-groups-a-marriage-of-convenience-or-organic-partnership>

efforts by the EU and Britain to ignore Serbia's "slip into Russia's orbit...no longer tenable."¹⁶

In BiH, the Serbian and Russian-backed secessionist regime of Milorad Dodik has mounted a sustained, decade-long assault on the integrity of the Dayton Peace Agreement, thus derailing the country's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. In response to both American and British sanctions, Russia has been accelerating its official and covert support to the Banja Luka separatist authorities, which it initially began backing in meaningful fashion in the early 2010s.¹⁷ As an indication of his centrality in Russia's posture towards the Western Balkans, one should note that except for Aleksandr Lukashenko no foreign official has met as frequently in public with Putin as Dodik since 2022. Dodik is also believed to have had dozens of unreported encounters with senior Russian officials since the February 2022 invasion.

Russia has other partners in BiH too. The Croat nationalist leader, Dragan Covic, has worked in lockstep with Dodik to sabotage all meaningful efforts at reforming BiH's ineffective constitutional regime, the core requirement for ensuring the country's membership in NATO (and the EU). Simultaneously, Covic and his allies have emerged as a small but key node in aiding Russia's sanctions-busting strategy, providing Moscow both with a much-needed market for Russian gas,¹⁸¹⁹ and feeding the Kremlin's war machine critically needed metals.²⁰²¹

Leaders in Sarajevo are limited in their ability to respond due to the country's dysfunctional governance system. But they are not sitting idle. Despite its modest GDP, BiH has (unofficially) emerged since 2022 as one of the leading European providers of Ukraine's munitions needs. Because of a 2015 export ban to Ukraine²² official export figures are hard to obtain. But BiH's munitions manufacturers are booming,²³ and the estimated value of the country's defence sector has risen by a whopping 400% over the past decade.²⁴ US-based Regulus, for instance, has taken a large-stake in the largest munitions manufacturer in BiH, Pretis d.d., and has offered \$100 million to modernize the firm's production capacities.²⁵

For their part, Bosnian officials are clear that the country's defence industry serves not only as a strategic argument for BiH's NATO membership but also as a deterrent against growing Russian and Serb nationalist threats against the country's

¹⁶ <https://www.ft.com/content/c232a3c8-3f0e-495f-8280-dea6fccd292e>

¹⁷ <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-past-and-the-furious-how-russias-revisionism-threatens-bosnia/>

¹⁸ http://usabih.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/USABiH_Policy-Report_Winter-2025.pdf

¹⁹ <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/01/18/us-presses-bosnia-croat-leader-to-stop-blocking-gas-pipeline/>

²⁰ <https://www.gmfus.org/news/russias-efforts-destabilize-bosnia-and-herzegovina>

²¹ <https://spin-portal.info/china-russian-bypass-for-european-sanctions-aluminij-industries-mostar/>

²² This ban on the export of Bosnian-made arms and munitions to Ukraine was itself engineered by the Russian-aligned SNSD and HDZ blocs.

²³ <https://thedefensepost.com/2024/06/04/bosnia-ammunition-exports-us/>

²⁴ <https://sarajevotimes.com/significant-surge-in-arms-exports-from-bosnia-and-herzegovina-over-the-past-decade/>

²⁵ <https://regulusglobal.com/regulus-global-proposes-100-million-investment-to-modernize-pretis-d-d/>

sovereignty and territorial integrity. To that end, they are eager to see greater and more robust Western investment in this strategic industry.

In Kosovo, Serbia and Russia have worked jointly to foment the most significant security crisis in Europe outside of the battlefields of Ukraine. The September 2023 paramilitary attack in Banjska by armed extremists with direct ties to the government of Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic resulted in three deaths, including one Kosovo police officer. The events in Banjska resulted in a rare direct rebuke of the Serbian government by the then Biden administration, which feared that a significant troop build-up by Belgrade along the Kosovo border was a prelude to a full-on invasion.²⁶ The key person behind the Banjska attack, Milan Radoicic, remains at large in Serbia, despite pleas by some Western governments and institutions, such as NATO Secretary General, Mark Rutte, to bring those accountable to justice²⁷. These events follow years of provocations from the Serbian government which continue^{28,29}.

Since then, the Prishtina government has been on a major arms-buying spree in response to what it has identified as a clear security threat, purchasing \$72 million worth of American Javelin rockets and launchers,³⁰ and Turkish Bayraktar drones,³¹ among other high-ticket defence items.³² Such increased exports from the US are not likely to have been sanctioned had the Pentagon not shared a similar perception of the potential threat to Kosovo. In August 2025, the country also signed a joint procurement agreement with Albania and Croatia, with the three aiming to secure better offers from the U.S. and other Western arms and munitions dealers.³³ And in September, Kosovo announced it had earmarked a remarkable \$1.1 billion for the development of its domestic drone industry and the country's broader military modernization efforts.³⁴

Nevertheless, there is a huge gulf in the military and financial balance of power between Kosovo and Serbia in favour of the latter³⁵. While the NATO-led KFOR troops provide additional deterrence, there is some strategic ambiguity over how effectively the mission would respond to a territorial invasion of Northern Mitrovica by Serbia, supported by Russia. This is because Kosovo itself is not a NATO country and therefore not subject to Article V. Moreover, the KFOR peacekeeping force does not provide a deterrent to sub-threshold level influencing activity, such as electoral interference by

²⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/30/world/europe/kosovo-serbia-troops-nato.html>

²⁷ <https://x.com/SecGenNATO/status/1974153882440966317>

²⁸ <https://www.rferl.org/a/vucic-s-great-milosevic-evokes-ghost-of-greater-serbia-/29486327.html>

²⁹ <https://sarajevotimes.com/vucic-there-will-be-war-everyone-is-preparing-for-it/>

³⁰ <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-javelin-missiles-purchase-us-accepts/32770635.html>

³¹ <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/kosovo-buys-turkish-bayraktar-drones-2023-07-16/>

³² <https://telegrafi.com/en/50-autoblinda-per-kosoven-ambasada-amerikane-hap-tjeter-ne-angazhimin-tone-te-perbashket-per-forcimin-e-kapacitetit-mbrojtes-te-fsk-se/>

³³ <https://thedefensepost.com/2025/08/14/kosovo-albania-croatia-cooperation/>

³⁴ <https://thedefensepost.com/2025/09/12/kosovo-drones-strengthen-military/>

³⁵ <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-comparison-detail.php?country1=kosovo&country2=serbia>

Serbia through its active support for the Belgrade-backed ethnic Serb party in Kosovo, Serb List³⁶.

In nearby Montenegro, a NATO member state since 2016, the Putin and Vucic regimes' malign influence is entrenched at all political and societal levels. Since a 2016 coup attempt, suspected of having been conducted in part by Russian and Serbian operatives,³⁷³⁸ and the 2021 violence accompanying the installation of a new patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro³⁹, there are significant concerns about increased Russian and Serbian influence in the country.⁴⁰⁴¹ Much like neighbouring Serbia, Montenegro too has become a waystation for Russian commercial interests, above all those geared towards sanctions-busting.⁴² In 2024, the U.S. Treasury Department added Montenegro-based Russian national Sergey Kokorev and his International Business Corporation Bar (IBC) to their blacklist for "supplying Russia with advanced technology and equipment that it desperately needs to support its war machine".⁴³

At the margins of the region, Hungary, increasingly aligned with Russia's foreign policy, has emerged as a key political and financial backer⁴⁴ of Bosnian Serb secessionist Dodik and his regime. Hungarian special forces were even suspected of assisting in Dodik's then planned escape from BiH in March 2025,⁴⁵ after Dodik was charged with acts against BiH's constitutional order. Budapest has also blocked EU sanctions against Dodik, and Orban and his cabinet have overtly backed Dodik's efforts to break up BiH.⁴⁶ Hungary has also aggressively deepened its ties to Serbia. In April, the two countries signed a defence cooperation agreement⁴⁷ which many regional observers fear signals Budapest's commitment to aid Belgrade and/or Banja Luka in any future conflict(s) in BiH or Kosovo. This is a particular concern given Hungary's involvement in the NATO KFOR mission in Kosovo and the EU's own security mission in BiH, EUFOR.

³⁶ <https://euronews.al/en/germany-accuses-serbia-of-interfering-in-kosovo-elections/>

³⁷ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-malign-influence-montenegro-weaponization-and-exploitation-history-religion-and>

³⁸ <https://europeanvalues.cz/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Vulnerabilities-to-Russian-Influence-in-Montenegro.pdf>

³⁹ <https://www.politico.eu/article/montenegro-violent-clashes-church-independence/>

⁴⁰ <https://www.dw.com/en/montenegros-political-shift-a-turn-toward-serbia-and-russia/a-69849977>

⁴¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/09/world/europe/montenegro-eu-russia.html>

⁴² <https://www.rferl.org/a/ofac-sanctions-serbia-montenegro-russia/33182071.html>

⁴³ <https://me.usembassy.gov/u-s-treasury-targets-sanctions-evaders-supporting-russias-military-industrial-base/>

⁴⁴ <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/12/21/orban-hungary-gives-e100-million-support-to-bosnian-serbs/>

⁴⁵ <https://vsquare.org/viktor-orban-tek-special-police-forces-bosnia-banja-luka-milorad-dodik-extraction-us-tensions/>

⁴⁶ <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/friends-these-orbans-balkan-allies>

⁴⁷ <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2025/04/04/can-the-new-document-on-defence-cooperation-between-serbia-and-hungary-be-interpreted-as-a-military-alliance/>

China's Growing Influence in the Western Balkans

China's role in the Western Balkans is also growing through a “Silk Curtain” or “Silk Road”, that spreads across the region including neighbouring countries such as Hungary and Greece.

China's ties with Serbia are increasingly advanced. President Xi Jinping visited Serbia on a recent tour of Europe, while President Vucic of Serbia visited China and attended a military parade in September. In July, China and Serbia conducted joint special forces training, their first joint military exercise, building on increased Chinese defence and security exports to Serbia, including the CH-92A and CH-95 drone, the FK-3 medium-range and the HQ-17AE short-range surface-to-air missile systems⁴⁸.

Anger over the deaths of 14 people when an outdoor canopy of the Novi Sad railway station in Serbia collapsed, which has contributed to mass protests in Serbia against the Vucic government since, also bears a China dimension. Indeed, the Novi Sad railway station was renovated as part of a Chinese-led upgrade of Serbia's railway infrastructure, demonstrating the importance of the region to China's Belt and Road Initiative.⁴⁹ Though all Western Balkans countries have had strengthened economic relations with China to varying degrees, Serbia is seen as being “the leader” on receiving seemingly no strings support on large infrastructure projects with around 90 percent of the total loans amount provided by China in the region⁵⁰.

More widely, China has also helped build expensive infrastructure projects elsewhere in the Balkans, including the Bar-Boljare Highway in Montenegro, the majority of which has yet to be completed. Aside from the ineffective pace of delivery of this project, it has also been engulfed in political controversy, with the Montenegrin government taking out a loan of almost \$1 billion from China's Exim-Bank⁵¹ to fund its construction, which it later struggled to repay.⁵² Though Montenegro's assets were not seized through ‘debt trap diplomacy’ on this occasion, it is certainly a tool that China has demonstrated a willingness to use for geopolitical gain.⁵³⁵⁴ Other such infrastructure projects have been supported across the region. Moreover, China's economic relations with Western Balkans countries has not been limited to the building of highways and railway stations. It has also promoted its “Digital Silk Road”, with Huawei as the main Chinese telecommunications company involved in the

⁴⁸ <https://chinaobservers.eu/a-quiet-signal-serbia-deepens-military-ties-with-china-amid-global-distractions/>

⁴⁹ <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/11/04/serbian-govt-faces-growing-calls-for-answers-over-railway-station-deaths/>

⁵⁰ <https://www.gmfus.org/news/western-balkans-and-chinas-digital-silk-road-keen-strategic-cooperation-or-cautious-limited>

⁵¹ <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-exits-deal-chinese-highway-loan/32469505.html>

⁵² <https://www.bruegel.org/newsletter/eu-should-have-woken-long-ago-chinas-growing-influence-western-balkans>

⁵³ <https://chinaobservers.eu/western-balkans-economic-cooperation-with-china-between-positive-conditionality-and-economic-coercion/>

⁵⁴ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/00219096221137673>

Western Balkans's digital and telecommunications infrastructure.⁵⁵ With the decline in US support for regional media, China has also aggressively stepped into the growing information vacuum in the Western Balkans.

At this stage, China has been cautious to not put undue pressure on countries across the region and overtly leverage its economic support, however, as the economic dependence of the Western Balkans countries grows, as Western development programmes cease or are drawn down, and as enlargement fatigue continues to increase, China may find itself in a more suitable position to leverage the asymmetric relationship it has with the countries of the Western Balkans for its own gains.

The Challenge of Illegal Migration and Organized Crime

The United Kingdom government has prioritized tackling illegal migration and the joint challenge of organized crime gangs that make significant profits from smuggling illegal migrants. Indeed, in its recently published National Security Strategy, the government set out the following core objective:

Tackling organised immigration crime and cracking down on people smuggling requires partnerships with both source and transit countries, which is why we convened more than 50 countries and international organisations for the first major international summit to tackle organised immigration crime. Through the 2025 Calais Group Priority Plan – agreed with Germany, France, Belgium and the Netherlands – we have committed to enhancing law enforcement cooperation through Europol to tackle irregular migration and increase our border security. We have expanded our Joint Migration Taskforce with Albania and Kosovo to include North Macedonia, with plans to extend to Montenegro, and agreed a Joint Action plan to tackle human trafficking with Vietnam and a Border Security Pact with Iraq to target smuggling gangs.⁵⁶

This marks one of two references to countries in the Western Balkans in the Strategy (the other being a reference to the region as being key to one of three strategic dialogues agreed with the EU earlier this year).

Effectively stemming the flow of migration from key transit regions such as the Western Balkans requires a holistic approach that targets border corruption, state capacity, and organised crime, which countries across the Western Balkans struggle

⁵⁵ <https://www.gmfus.org/news/western-balkans-and-chinas-digital-silk-road-keen-strategic-cooperation-or-cautious-limited>

⁵⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-security-strategy-2025-security-for-the-british-people-in-a-dangerous-world/national-security-strategy-2025-security-for-the-british-people-in-a-dangerous-world-html#strategic-framework>

with.⁵⁷ Albania, for instance, recently proposed measures that would reduce penalties for corruption by high-ranking officials,⁵⁸ demonstrating the scale of the challenge. Effective good governance and capacity-building programmes including the training of border officials and police are essential to such an holistic approach on curbing illegal migration into the United Kingdom and the EU.⁵⁹

A Loss of Faith in Europe

All public polling presently available suggests that while the Western Balkan publics – except for Serbia – remain widely in favour of EU (and NATO) integration, their faith in the process has imploded. In short, the Western Balkans want to join the EU and NATO, but they do not believe the EU and NATO want them to join. North Macedonia, which after the 2018 Prespa Agreement emerged as the region's integration frontrunner, has seen its frustrations with the pace of its EU accession, like in several other Western Balkans countries, come with an increase in nationalist support, providing renewed opportunities for increased influence of Serbia, Russia, and China.

The EU's inability to influence the Bulgarian blockade of North Macedonia's accession process, after a similar three-decade veto by Athens which eventually resulted in aforementioned Prespa Agreement and the adoption of the official title of "North Macedonia" by the then government in Skopje, has decimated the bloc's credibility among ordinary citizens.⁶⁰ Indeed, across the region, the EU's credibility and relevance are reaching a generational nadir.⁶¹ Local publics still support their countries joining the bloc, but they do not believe it will happen, nor that the EU and its capitals are honest in their purported support for and interest in further enlargement. Such disillusionment will only further accelerate Russia and China's abilities to deepen their influence in the Western Balkans. A similar effect is achieved by the EU's confused centring of Serbia in its enlargement agenda, despite the cratering of pro-Western sentiment in the country, and its leadership's overt commitments to Russia and China.

⁵⁷ <https://knowledgehub.transparency.org/helpdesk/border-corruption-across-the-western-balkans-region>

⁵⁸ <https://euobserver.com/eu-and-the-world/arce67195d>

⁵⁹ <https://knowledgehub.transparency.org/helpdesk/border-corruption-across-the-western-balkans-region>

⁶⁰ <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/north-macedonias-elections-exposed-eus-diminished-credibility-western-balkans>

⁶¹ <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/briefs/eu-enlargement-and-integration-voices-support-and-scepticism>

Restoring British Leadership In The Western Balkans

The scale of the threat and the national interest for the United Kingdom in the Western Balkans is evident. The United Kingdom cannot allow its adversaries to entrench their position in the region, nor to foment further chaos therein. The posture of the United Kingdom towards the Western Balkans must therefore be reoriented to counter these threats by Russia, China, and others. Similarly, to effectively curb illegal migration, the British government must reinforce its relationships and the scale of support across the region. This new approach must be based on three core principles:

1. Britain Must Champion Burden-Sharing to Bridge the Transatlantic Gap

The United Kingdom has a vested strategic interest in bridging the growing (geo)political gap between the US and EU. The government's Ukraine policy is already informed by this approach but the nature of the shift in the American-European relationship is systemic. President Trump's views reflect a general weariness of the US electorate with respect to the country's overseas commitments, and the same is likely to be a factor in all future American administrations too.

Despite this, the Western Balkans is a region where American, European, and British interests all still largely converge. There is a collective interest in maintaining the peace and security of the region, and the region's deeper integration into the Euro-Atlantic order. A desire to stem illegal migration that transits from the region is also shared across Europe. This alignment is an opportunity, not only to achieve these goals in and of themselves, but also to shore up the political membrane binding the two sides of the Atlantic. Britain can best achieve that by stressing to its European allies the importance of greater burden sharing in the Western Balkans and leading by example.

The United Kingdom should spearhead the creation of a recently proposed Balkans Joint Expeditionary Force (BJEF)⁶² which would have as their primary sites of deployment BiH and Kosovo. In BiH, the BJEF should coordinate its deployment to support the EU's Operation Althea (i.e. EUFOR) and deepen the United Kingdom's security arrangements with BiH itself, with a particular focus on securing the critical Brcko corridor. In Kosovo, the BJEF should act to support NATO's KFOR, with the specific aim of providing an additional deterrence and supplanting a strong Hungarian presence in the country. At present, the United Kingdom only has 47 personnel deployed to KFOR, against Hungary's 365.

Similarly, on migration, the United Kingdom, working alongside its allies, should invest directly in programs and start-ups in the region with the aim of incentivising local

⁶² <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/bjef-joint-expeditionary-force-balkans>

economic growth. The emphasis should be on elevating the region's comparative advantages – e.g. low cost of living, public safety, growing investment opportunities etc. – without aggressively stigmatising freedom of movement (i.e. in the form of tourism, educational and cultural exchanges). The United Kingdom should also tap local Balkan diasporas to develop programs promoting re-investment in their respective countries of origin and promoting economic exchange with said diasporas for the purposes of promoting (re)growth and settlement in the region.

Likewise the United Kingdom should recommit to promoting good governance and the rule of law in the Western Balkans through programmes to increase the professional skills of the police, prosecutors and the court system, all things that will create a better business environment, attract more foreign investment and create export opportunities, and give the United Kingdom a better chance of tackling immigration crime in the region. Similarly, the United Kingdom should provide technical assistance to Western Balkan countries that helps them to integrate more closely with both the EU's internal market and improves their chances of accession as well as deepening the region's integration with NATO's security architecture.

2. Britain Must Advocate for NATO's Enlargement

Despite the United Kingdom's exit from the EU, it remains categorically invested in the security architecture of the continent, above all through NATO. This was confirmed by the Strategic Defence Review, which set out a "NATO First" policy. The Alliance also remains the most optimal vehicle for ensuring the long-term security of Europe as a whole, both through the maintenance of the transatlantic relationship, and the collective security guarantees of Article 5.

Britain should therefore advocate for the continued enlargement of NATO as a means of extending its security aegis to the vulnerable Western Balkans. BiH is already in the bloc's Membership Action Program (MAP) and thus is the most logical next candidate for membership. BiH's arms and munitions sector (which is already outpacing that of far-larger member states) also provides a compelling strategic argument for incorporating the country into the Alliance.

BiH's complex constitutional regime is the most obvious barrier to securing the country's membership in NATO, but this can be addressed through relatively limited reforms of the country's political system.⁶³ Britain should spearhead the creation of a coalition of the willing – including, for instance, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and Turkey – who would *a.* offer BiH officials a direct pathway to NATO membership within the next decade, in exchange for significant constitutional reform, in line with the EU

⁶³ <https://newlinesinstitute.org/political-systems/dayton-plus-a-policy-makers-guide-to-constitutional-reform-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>

acquis and the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights, and *b.* concrete security guarantees in the interim, to ensure the sensitive process of constitutional reform in BiH can be accomplished without the malign interference of Serbia, Russia, Croatia, or Hungary.

Kosovo's barrier to NATO entry comes through the non-recognition of the country by Spain, Greece, Slovakia, and Romania. Britain must reinforce its diplomatic engagement with these countries, working alongside Germany, France, and Italy as members of the NATO Quint, on this issue either bilaterally or through a multilateral agreement. The fact that Spain, Slovakia, and Romania recognise the State of Palestine but not Kosovo demonstrates that there is an opportunity for the United Kingdom to use its diplomatic weight to support Kosovo's recognition by its allies.

Transitional, bilateral security agreements with both Kosovo and BiH in the meantime would demonstrate a strong signal of the UK's desire to press for the NATO membership of both countries, in alignment with mutual security benefits. This approach should also include a broader commitment to countering Russian and Chinese influence operations in the region, including by stepping up bilateral contacts with governments in the region, increasing BBC World Service programming in Western Balkans languages, strengthening the British Council's presence in the region and encouraging students from the region to study in the United Kingdom.

As part of its ongoing commitments to countering Russian and Chinese incursions into Europe, the United Kingdom should further seek to counter Moscow and Beijing's political, security, and economic deployments in the Western Balkans by partnering with local governments and civil society to shore up democratic institutions and pro-Western public sentiments.

3. Britain Must Act as an Honest Broker in the Region

The United Kingdom's exit from the EU also affords the government an important degree of diplomatic flexibility, which can allow it to aid Britain's allies on the continent, and advance collective interests. Namely, because of its position outside the EU, but membership within NATO and the G7, the United Kingdom can play the role of an honest broker in helping to resolve entrenched disputes in the Western Balkans.

Britain should thus offer to mediate the North Macedonia-Bulgaria dispute, to prevent further backsliding of Skopje into the Russo-Serbian orbit. It can do so by brokering the impasse between the two sides based on the contents of their existing 2017 friendship treaty. The United Kingdom can also draw on best practices adopted since the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland, especially in education. To encourage progress, the United Kingdom can offer additional support in Bulgaria's OECD

accession aspirations, increase the scale of R&D and exchange programs between it and Sofia, and encourage further British investment in Bulgaria, on top of the existing £1 billion in trade between the two countries. Similar offers should be made to North Macedonia, coupled with agreements from France and Germany to shepherd the country towards an accelerated opening of EU accession chapters, ensuring greater North Macedonian access to EU development funds.

With respect to the moribund Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, the United Kingdom can innovate. Britain should aggressively push for Kosovo's inclusion into the Council of Europe and redouble diplomatic overtures to the five EU non-recognizers of Kosovo. The United Kingdom can also draw credibly on its own experiences with dealing with separatist sentiment to deflate, for instance, Spanish reservations about Kosovo vis. Catalonia and the Basque Country. In sum, the United Kingdom could rapidly engineer greater diplomatic parity between Kosovo and Serbia, which would decisively quash hopes in Belgrade that they can keep Kosovo in perpetual international limbo purely through their rejection of substantive dialogue.

The Special Envoy to the Western Balkans, currently Dame Karen Pierce, Britain's most experienced and respected diplomat, must be effectively utilised to play this role on behalf of the British government.

Conclusions

These recommendations are not exhaustive. However, they will reinforce Britain's role in Europe, pivoting the Western Balkans towards the centre of its grand strategy - both because of the strategic relevance of the region to the security of the British homelands, and the opportunities the Western Balkans afford the United Kingdom for strengthening the transatlantic relationship.

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The background of the entire page is a topographic map of the Pacific Ocean, showing the western coasts of North and South America on the left and the eastern coasts of Asia and Australia on the right. A large, semi-transparent red rectangle is centered over the middle of the ocean. The text of the New Diplomacy Project is contained within this red area.

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