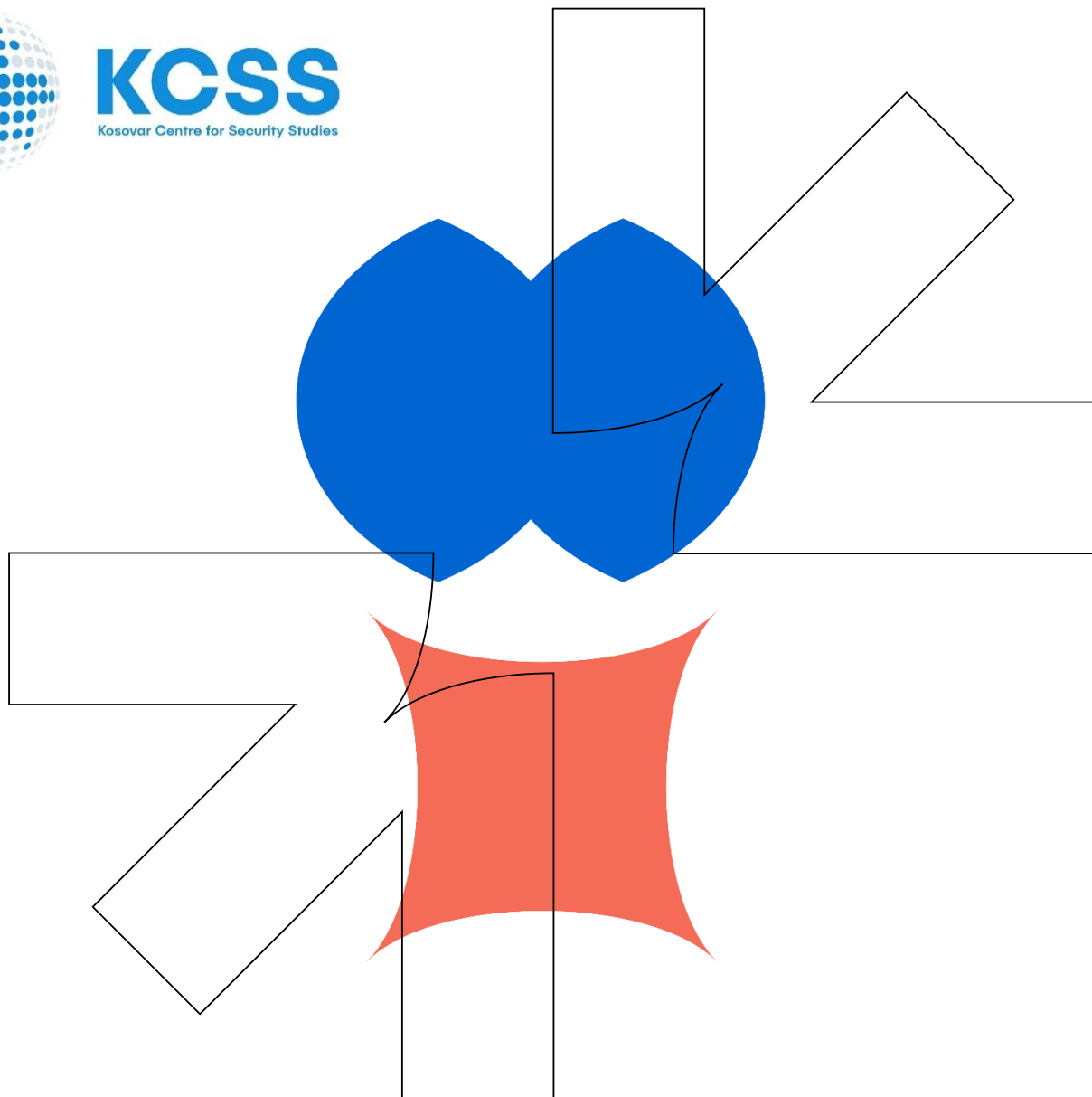




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Regional Security Cooperation in the Western Balkans

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Introduction

Security in the Western Balkans is no longer a peripheral matter—it is a central test of Europe’s ability to build a resilient and integrated security architecture in the face of mounting uncertainty. As war returns to the continent and the fault lines of global power shift, the Western Balkans sits at the intersection of unfinished statehood, fragile democratic institutions, and intensified geopolitical competition. In this complex environment, regional security cooperation has emerged not just as a policy choice, but as a strategic necessity. This report brings together the insights of leading experts on security and European integration to assess the state of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans and propose a forward-looking agenda. Published under the *Advancing Regional Security Cooperation in the Western Balkans (ASCEND-WB6)* project, within the IGNITA initiative and supported by the Open Society Foundations—Western Balkans, the report is designed to provoke a deeper, more consequential conversation on what it means to build meaningful security collaboration in an era marked by volatility and unpredictability.

The central argument is straightforward: no single Western Balkan country, regardless of its NATO status or progress on EU accession, can meet the scale and complexity of contemporary threats alone. Fragmentation—whether due to bilateral disputes, uneven institutional capacities, or divergent foreign policy alignments—has left the region vulnerable to both internal destabilization and external manipulation. Hybrid threats, disinformation, malign influence, cyberattacks, and organized crime networks do not respect borders. Yet cooperation remains reactive, under-institutionalized, and frequently sidelined by political distrust and competing allegiances.

Drawing on examples from joint law enforcement operations, EU integration frameworks, the Berlin Process, and civil society initiatives, this report maps both the achievements and shortcomings of current cooperation efforts. It also underscores the broader geopolitical stakes: the Western Balkans is not simply a region in transition—it is a proving ground for the EU’s credibility as a security actor and for the democratic agency of its aspiring members. The objective is not to offer yet another policy blueprint, but to help shift the narrative—from one of conditionality and compliance to one of co-responsibility and solidarity. Regional security is a public good. It must be produced collectively, anchored in mutual trust, institutional interoperability, and a shared vision for the region’s role in Europe’s evolving security order. This report is a contribution to that effort.

Regional Security Cooperation in the Western Balkans: A Strategic Imperative



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As the Western Balkans navigate a volatile geopolitical environment—marked by Russian aggression, hybrid threats, and shifting transatlantic alliances—regional security cooperation has evolved from a technical necessity into a strategic imperative. Long seen as a fragmented periphery, the region now sits on the frontline of Europe’s broader security architecture. Despite institutional hurdles, political friction, and uneven reform progress, enhanced cooperation among the Western Balkans is not merely desirable—it is essential for democratic resilience, crisis preparedness, and alignment with EU security frameworks. This report identifies four interconnected arguments demonstrating why regional security cooperation is indispensable for the region’s stability and future.

Regional Cooperation Is the Only Viable Path to Security Scale.

The Western Balkans comprise small states with limited resources, fragmented security institutions, and overlapping vulnerabilities. Alone, none can effectively address transnational threats like organized crime, arms trafficking, cyberattacks, or malign foreign influence. Cooperation transforms these limitations into strengths. Initiatives such as the Roadmap on Arms Control and the Western Balkans Cyber Capacity Centre show how pooling knowledge, sharing intelligence, and coordinating policies can generate security scale. For example, joint Europol operations have led to hundreds of arrests and the dismantling of drug and weapons networks. [On cybersecurity](#), regional

coordination intensified after the 2022 attacks on Albania and Montenegro, spurring the alignment of national policies with EU standards and the creation of regional alert-sharing mechanisms. These collective efforts increase the region's deterrence capacity and improve operational readiness. Fragmented state responses—like Serbia's military neutrality and Kosovo's lack of access to key EU agencies—highlight the cost of non-cooperation. Western Balkan states remain soft targets for external actors and organized networks without integration. Through platforms like the Berlin Process or IPA 8 funding, EU support amplifies the impact of regional cooperation but cannot replace the political will needed to sustain it. Put, scale through solidarity is not optional—it is the only way to match the complexity and speed of modern threats. In this context, security is a regional good that must be collectively produced, or it will remain individually out of reach.

Strategic Cohesion Is the Best Defense Against Malign Influence

The vacuum created by the EU's slow enlargement process has been eagerly filled by authoritarian powers—Russia, China, Turkey, and the Gulf states. Their influence is not uniform, but it is deliberate, targeted, and strategic. Russia exploits energy dependence and ethnonationalist sentiments, especially in Serbia and Republika Srpska, while China leverages debt diplomacy and infrastructure investment to foster dependency. In this context, a fragmented regional response is not just ineffective—it is dangerous. While some states expel Russian diplomats and align with EU sanctions, others deepen ties with Moscow or Beijing, enabling “forum shopping” by malign actors. A unified regional stance—on foreign direct investment screening, 5G infrastructure, and disinformation countermeasures—would dramatically raise the cost for external actors seeking to exploit divisions. Civil society can play a critical role here, exposing opaque deals and promoting transparency, but without institutional backing and political protection, its reach remains limited. The Berlin Process and initiatives like the Civil Society Forum offer a scaffolding for regional resilience, yet formal structures are still lacking. What's needed is an institutionalized security dialogue that aligns threat assessments and creates binding frameworks for coordinated response. This would also support the EU's strategic interests, as a resilient and self-coordinating Western Balkans can serve as a buffer, not a battleground, in the emerging global contest for influence. Without strategic unity, the region remains open to capture—politically, economically, and digitally.

Security Cooperation Anchors Democratic Reform and Rule of Law

The most persistent internal threats to the Western Balkans' stability are not tanks or terrorists—they are corruption, institutional decay, and elite impunity. Regional security

cooperation is uniquely positioned to counter these systemic issues by embedding transparency and accountability into cross-border frameworks. Cooperation in law enforcement and judiciary—such as joint extradition mechanisms, anti-corruption task forces, and witness protection programs—directly supports the rule of law. EU-aligned frameworks like the Integrative Internal Security Governance (IISG) or Europol's WB PaCT initiative foster professional standards and reduce political manipulation of security agencies. In countries where state capture and politicized policing remain rampant, regional coordination acts as both a buffer and a benchmark. It forces states to harmonize standards, adopt interoperable procedures, and subject themselves to peer scrutiny. For example, when high-risk criminal networks were dismantled through regional operations coordinated by North Macedonia, it was a clear demonstration of how collaboration outperforms isolated efforts. Moreover, cooperation fosters a community of practice among civil servants and law enforcement professionals, building a culture of integrity and mutual trust. These are the same individuals who will eventually operate within EU institutions. Therefore, regional cooperation is not only a means of managing threats—it is a mechanism of transformation. It strengthens the very institutional capacities required for EU accession. Without it, anti-reform actors will continue to manipulate nationalist narratives and block progress, both at home and across borders.

Fragmentation Undermines Collective Security—and the EU Project

Perhaps the most overlooked but fundamental truth is this: without deeper regional security cooperation, the Western Balkans remain a liability rather than an asset for the EU. Fragmentation—whether due to unresolved bilateral disputes, divergent foreign policy alignments, or mutual distrust—makes the region vulnerable to both internal collapse and external exploitation. The 2025 bilateral defense agreement between Hungary and Serbia, signed just days after a trilateral pact between Albania, Croatia, and Kosovo, is a stark warning. It signals a return to bloc politics, not integration. It weakens NATO cohesion, complicates EU alignment, and undercuts trust. The EU's vision of "gradual integration" depends on the ability of candidate states to act cohesively, not just individually. Yet, unresolved disputes—especially between Kosovo and Serbia—paralyze regional institutions and disqualify the region from accessing sensitive EU security mechanisms. Inconsistent participation in joint operations and the absence of a regional security council exacerbate this dysfunction. Fragmentation delays accession, undermines democratic consolidation, and keeps the region locked in a loop of instability. Conversely, deeper cooperation can signal political maturity, reduce the weight of bilateral tensions, and open the door for structured integration into the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). For Brussels, this would mean a secure

and interoperable periphery. For the region, it would mark a definitive shift from post-conflict fragility to collective agency. Without this shift, enlargement risks becoming a promise unkept—and European security a project unfinished.

The case for regional security cooperation in the Western Balkans is no longer an aspirational ideal—it is a strategic necessity. Faced with hybrid threats, external interference, democratic erosion, and fragmented capacities, the region must consolidate its resources, harmonize its policies, and commit to shared security frameworks. Regional cooperation enhances resilience, builds trust, and anchors reforms vital for EU accession. But more importantly, it offers a pathway from fragility to agency. Europe cannot be secure without a secure Balkans—and the Balkans cannot be secure without a united front. Security is no longer just about borders and arms; it is about solidarity, legitimacy, and the capacity to act together in a contested world. The time to act is now.

Our annual summit

Governmental and Institutional Approaches to Regional Security Cooperation



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Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has fundamentally reshaped the EU's approach to enlargement. What was once primarily a project of shared values and economic integration has now also become a matter of security and resilience. The war has exposed vulnerabilities along the EU's eastern and southeastern borders, fast-tracking Ukraine and Moldova's candidacy and prompting a strategic reassessment of the Western Balkans. No longer just a question of historical reconciliation or economic development, the region has become a frontline in the fight against foreign influence, disinformation, and geopolitical destabilisation.

This shift was underscored in February 2025 at the ministerial meeting in Rome with Western Balkan countries and the Friends of the Western Balkans Group. The HR/VP Kaja Kallas emphasised the "shared security perspective," while EU [Commissioner Marta Kos highlighted](#) the EU's strong focus on "common security challenges and the need to accelerate gradual integration against delivery of reforms by candidate countries". This shift in perspective is not just confined to Brussels – EU citizens are increasingly viewing membership through a security lens. According to the latest [Eurobarometer survey](#), 66% believe the EU should play a greater role in protecting citizens from global crises and security threats.

As the Western Balkans move further along their EU accession path, the key question is no longer just *when* they will join, but *how* they can contribute to the Union's evolving

security framework. This chapter examines the institutional mechanisms of security cooperation in the Western Balkans and beyond, highlighting both opportunities and obstacles. It explores how governments and institutions coordinate on shared security challenges, and the region’s potential to evolve from a security concern into a valuable asset for the EU.

Beyond borders: Western Balkans in the international security web

Security cooperation among Western Balkan countries is active, but it largely takes place within broader regional and EU-led frameworks (see Table 1). This is not only natural but also necessary. While bilateral agreements exist, security threats such as organised crime, terrorism, and human trafficking do not respect borders, so tackling them effectively requires cross-border coordination and integration into established international mechanisms. International and regional organisations provide essential platforms for intelligence-sharing, joint operations, and best practices. These frameworks ensure that security cooperation is not just *ad hoc* but part of a structured, ongoing effort aligned with European and international standards. Working within structured regional initiatives offers multiple advantages. It strengthens rule of law, fosters democratic stability, and enhances collective resilience against transnational threats.

TABLE 1. OVERVIEW OF MAJOR SECURITY FRAMEWORKS INVOLVING WESTERN BALKAN PARTNERS. AUTHOR'S RESEARCH.

Framework/Initiative	Type	Key actors¹	Scope	Purpose
European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training (CEPOL)	Law enforcement	EU institutions + working arrangements with WB6	EU-led	law enforcement training and learning
European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (EUROPOL)	Law enforcement	EU MS + operational agreements with WB6 (except Kosovo*),	EU-led	international and organised crime, cybercrime and terrorism

¹ The Western Balkans Six (WB6) refers to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. When specific countries within the WB6 are not participating in an initiative, they are explicitly mentioned

		working arrangements with Kosovo law enforcement authorities		
Integrative Internal Security Governance (IISG)	Security	WB6	regional	counter-terrorism, serious crime, border security
European Union Agency for Criminal Justice (EUROJUST)	Law Enforcement	EU MS + cooperation agreements with WB6 (except BiH and Kosovo)	EU-led	terrorism and serious organised crime
European Union Drugs Agency (ADA)	Security	EU MS + Norway and Türkiye, WB6 beneficiaries	EU-led	drug usage, drug addiction and related health complications
European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex)	Border management	EU MS + non-EU partners (incl. WB6)	EU-led	cross-border crime, border surveillance
European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT)	Security	EU MS + EU institutions and agencies, international organisations and non-EU partners (incl. WB6)	EU-led	organised, environmental, cyber crime, drugs, migrants and firearms trafficking, etc.
Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance - DCAF	Security	43 members (incl. BiH, Montenegro, and North Macedonia)	international	security sector governance

Police Cooperation Convention for Southeast Europe (PCC SEE)	Law enforcement	WB6 (except Kosovo) + Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary, Moldova, Romania	regional	cross-border cooperation
RACVIAC – Centre for Security Cooperation	Security	Some EU MS, WB6 + UK, Norway, etc.	international	security cooperation and dialogue
South-East Europe Defense Ministerial (SEDM) Process	Military	WB6 (except Kosovo), some EU MS, Georgia, Türkiye, Ukraine, US	regional	regional cooperation, defense
South East European Law Enforcement Center (SELEC)	Law enforcement	WB6 (except Kosovo) + Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Moldova, Romania, Türkiye	regional	cross-border crime, incl. serious and organised crime
Southeast Europe Policy Chiefs Association	Law enforcement	WB6 (except Kosovo) + Bulgaria, Moldova, Romania	regional	organised crime
South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SEESAC)	Security/ Military	WB6 + Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus	regional	disarmament, arms control, gender equality
The International Criminal Police	Law enforcement	196 members	international	crime on a global scale

Organisation (INTERPOL)		(incl. WB6, for Kosovo: UNMIK- INTERPOL Liaison Unit);		
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime	Law enforcement / Security	UN members (UNODC delivers technical assistance to Kosovo)	international	trafficking and abuse of illicit drugs

There have been notable examples of successful collaboration within existing security frameworks, including Europol in the period 2023-2025 (see Table 2). Sensitive and restricted information is exchanged through the [Secure Information Exchange Network Application \(SIENA\)](#), ensuring effective coordination. All six partner countries remain actively engaged in Europol activities, with Serbia standing out for its high involvement in nearly every operation. Beyond Europol, EU-funded initiatives play a crucial role in strengthening regional security cooperation. The [IPA 8-funded release of the first Western Balkan datasheet](#) in December 2024 marked a key milestone in preparing the region for future engagement with the EU Drugs Agency (EUDA). Similarly, the [“Western Balkans Partnership against Crime and Terrorism \(WB PaCT\)”](#), an EU-funded project implemented by Europol and running until 2028 enhances information sharing, facilitates regional cooperation, and supports the development of internal training capacities.

A key success in tackling arms trafficking is the “Roadmap for a Sustainable Solution to Arms Control in the Western Balkans by 2024”. Fully aligned with EU and international standards, the initiative was developed under the leadership of France and Germany, in consultation with the EU and other key stakeholders. While significant progress has been made, [much work remains](#). The inclusion of the Roadmap in the 2020-2025 EU Action Plan on Firearms Trafficking, along with the adoption of harmonised legislation, highlights its influence on policy, including at the EU level. The real achievement, however, lies in the growing cross-border cooperation within the criminal justice sector, where intelligence- and evidence-led operations are becoming the standard. This is the direction the region should continue to pursue.

TABLE 2. WESTERN BALKANS PARTICIPATING IN EUROPOL JOINT OPERATIONS BETWEEN 2023-2025. EUROPOL NEWSROOM.

Operation name	Year	Albania	BiH	Kosovo	Montenegro	North Macedonia	Serbia
Criminal ringleader and nice associates arrested	2025	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
25 arrests in global hit against AI-generated child sexual abuse material	2025	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
796 arrests in massive EU action	2024	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Balkans' biggest drug lords arrested	2023	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓
11 arrested in sting against cocaine traffickers	2024	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓
85 arrests in art trafficking operation	2024	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓
219 criminals arrested and 1374 victims identified	2024	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cocaine cartel collapses in Spain	2024	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓
Almost 1,400 firearms removed from circulation	2024	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓
Fake medicines worth EUR 64 million seized	2024	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓
566 arrests in coordinated Southern Europe actions	2023	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Balkan cartel sinks: Spain seizes	2023	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓

27 tonnes of cocaine							
62 transcontinental migrant smugglers arrested	2023	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓
256 eel smugglers arrested	2023	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓
Joint raids on Balkan route against migrant smuggling	2023	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓
EUR 87 million in fake clothes	2023	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓
1,426 potential victims identified in human trafficking	2023	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
37 arrested as violent Balkan criminal cell taken down	2023	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
Balkans' biggest drug lords arrested	2023	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓
22 firearms traffickers arrested across Europe	2023	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓
Call centres selling fake crypto taken down	2023	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓

Political and institutional roadblocks to deeper security cooperation

Despite the existence of various frameworks and initiatives aimed at strengthening security cooperation in the region, progress is yet to be attained. It remains uneven due to deep-rooted political and structural obstacles. Security cooperation often becomes entangled in broader political disputes, preventing practical collaboration from reaching its full potential. Instead of being purely a matter of operational efficiency, security initiatives frequently fall victim to unresolved tensions, politicisation, and institutional weaknesses across the region.

One of the biggest hurdles is the *persistent political influence over security institutions*. Law enforcement agencies and judicial bodies often struggle with external pressures that compromise their independence, making it difficult to ensure impartial enforcement of laws and fair judicial proceedings. [Political pressure is most acutely felt in decisions related to high-profile investigations](#), appointments, and promotions, weakening the ability of institutions (particularly specialised bodies) to act independently. These challenges weaken trust in security cooperation efforts and limit their effectiveness.

Unresolved disputes between countries, remain the most significant obstacle to deeper regional cooperation. The lack of reconciliation between these key actors affects not only political stability but also prevents meaningful security coordination. Illustrating this challenge, Kosovo's Minister of Internal Affairs and Public Administration, Xhelal Sveçla, highlighted the stark contrast, noting that Kosovo has signed 26 agreements with Albania, 14 with North Macedonia, and enjoys full security cooperation with Montenegro. However, when it comes to Serbia, he stated, ["Unfortunately, I have nothing to present."](#) This gap in collaboration underscores the fragility of security partnerships in the region. Without a structured approach to fostering dialogue and reconciliation, these divisions will continue to impede progress and weaken collective security efforts.

In this connection, the *limited role of civil society organisations (CSOs)* in security initiatives often reduces these efforts to a narrow security focus, neglecting important aspects like the rule of law and good governance. CSOs are crucial for ensuring accountability and transparency, including in security-related policies, aligning them with EU and international standards. Their oversight acts as a counterbalance to potential abuses, advocating for transparency and fairness. This is particularly crucial in post-conflict settings, where security measures need to be in harmony with the reconstruction of democratic institutions and the restoration of the rule of law. Additionally, CSOs play a key role in reconciliation at the grassroots level, fostering dialogue and rebuilding mutual trust in communities. This contributes to more inclusive and effective security cooperation, enhancing the legitimacy and sustainability of security initiatives.

A major limitation also lies in the *availability of resources*. Many security and judicial institutions across the region face financial and infrastructural constraints, [leading to disparities in operational capacity](#). This uneven distribution of resources hampers effective cooperation, as some countries struggle to meet the necessary standards for implementing regional security reforms. For instance, the lack of fully digitalised procedures and updated IT systems has hampered the efficiency and effectiveness of

border management processes, thus causing delays in the effective identification of migrants and referral to appropriate rights-based services, [in line with international and EU migrant protection standards](#).

Finally, *corruption and weak governance structures* continue to be a serious barrier. Endemic corruption erodes trust in institutions and prevents the establishment of robust security cooperation mechanisms. In the Western Balkans, 55% of citizens tend not to trust or completely distrust judicial institutions. This is a sharp increase compared to ten years ago when the [distrust of citizens scored 27% only](#). Without stronger governance and accountability, efforts to build a cohesive regional security network risk being undermined from within.

Conclusion: Why deeper cooperation means greater resilience

While regional security cooperation is essential, its effectiveness is often undermined by political interference, unresolved disputes, resource shortages, and governance failures. For security collaboration to be truly effective, trust, mutual understanding, and reconciliation must be at its core. Without these pillars, partnerships remain fragile, and disputes continue to obstruct progress. Bridging historical divisions through dialogue is not just an ideal but a necessity for sustainable cooperation.

The Western Balkans should no longer be viewed as a separate security concern but as an integral part of Europe's broader security framework. EU-led initiatives have shown that Western Balkans are both willing and capable partners when included in structured mechanisms. Their engagement with international security agencies enables intelligence sharing, data exchange, and joint operations – not as a concession but as an operational imperative.

However, the challenges to regional security cooperation persist. As long as Western Balkan countries remain outside the EU, their access to key security mechanisms is restricted, leaving gaps in collective defence. Gradual integration into key EU structures and agencies is not just beneficial but necessary to strengthen security across Europe's southern flank. A fragmented approach is no longer an option. Only a coordinated, transnational strategy can effectively counter shared threats and reinforce European security as a whole.

The importance of regional security cooperation in the European integration process



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The shifting of the tectonic plates of global geopolitics has inevitably [revived the enlargement policy of the European Union \(EU\)](#) as a mechanism for crafting a security architecture on the continent. The tight coupling between geopolitical threats and EU enlargement has revived and brought to the political limelight a series of dynamics in the Western Balkans, emphasising the significance of regional cooperation across a number of domains, above all security. While the gist of the political discourse on regional security cooperation often involves a focus on hard security issues, including [military cooperation](#), the nature of the current security concerns in the Western Balkans requires a different and more holistic approach.

The notion of security can best be captured by the image of the Roman god Janus, who controlled the onset of wars and the coming of peace. Just like the mythological two-faces of the god - one looking to the inside and the other to the outside - security has two dimensions. The first one is the intuitive security of borders, of territory, of the physical survival of the sovereign state against potential external threats. The second one is perhaps less tangible and as such often overlooked. It is related to the security of society, of individuals, of values, and security of democracy. If we think about the [series of crises](#) that world has faced since the mid-2000s, including the financial crisis, migration crisis, COVID-19, Russian aggression on Ukraine, the Gaza war, all have progressively eroded security along these two dimensions. With the simultaneous weakening of the transatlantic links, and the global backsliding of democracy,

cooperation to build security – of countries, institutions, and individuals – cannot be understated.

The sum of these challenges highlights the imperative for the Western Balkan states to enhance the channels of regional cooperation on security matters, especially in view of the [renewed focus on EU enlargement](#). This imperative is precisely driven by the dual nature of security challenges in the region, created in the course of the three decades of ‘transition’ and amplified since 2022 following the Russian full-scale aggression on Ukraine. First, the core of security challenges in the Western Balkan states is the internal layer. These include the mounting nationalism and its potential impact on the stability of countries, such as [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#); the institutional erosion and its linkages with [corruption and organised crime](#); and [disempowered citizenry](#), vulnerable to misinformation and manipulation. Second, the additional layer of security challenges in the region is external, encompassing threats of aggression, terrorism, malign influence, hybrid threats. The close connection of these issues to the revived enlargement, in turn linked to European security, along with the requirements of the accession process to build democratic institutions, strengthen rule of law and the quality of governance, call for a synergetic strategic cooperation among the Western Balkan states on security matters. As security matters are not a one-way street, reinforcing the pillars regional cooperation to address both the internal and external security challenges is essential.

Regional cooperation in addressing internal security challenges

Internal political, institutional and economic stability is deeply entrenched in the process of EU accession, and regional cooperation is an important pillar of the [Stabilisation and Association Process](#) (SAP) for the Western Balkans. In the new geopolitical context, stability of the region becomes increasingly pronounced as a potential springboard for accelerating the accession dynamics. At the same time, the region’s reality suggests that achieving stable, accountable and transparent governance systems may be a challenge. Ethno-political tensions and [fragile democratic processes and weak rule of law](#), coupled with high unemployment and other [economic issues](#), have – over the past decades – provided fertile grounds for the marginalization of citizens. A regional approach would be beneficial for addressing these three interconnected challenges – mitigating ethno-political tensions and potential for conflict, ensuring institutional stability and good governance, and reinforcing societal security and democratic capacity in the Western Balkan states.

First, ever since the Yugoslav break-up, the Western Balkan region has been marred with ethno-political tensions, often leading to territorial and institutional contestation. Global

geopolitical reconfigurations had a particular reflection in Kosovo and, more recently, in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Ever since mid-2022, the situation in the [North Kosovo](#), predominantly inhabited by ethnic Serb population, has been tense. From the conflict over the expiry of the licence plates, through the Serb community's setting up of barricades, to the contestation of parallel institutions, a number of instances have posed a substantive challenge to Kosovo's stability and regional security. Recent condemnation of Serbia of the signature of a trilateral declaration on a [military alliance](#) between Albania, Croatia and Kosovo, indicates the difficulties in establishing a common regional approach to defence – a key issue in the current European political and geopolitical reality. In a similar vein, a crisis erupted in Bosnia and Herzegovina on 11 March, following the order of the Bosnian Prosecutor's Office to arrest the leader of the Bosnian Serbs Milorad Dodik for an attack on the constitutional order in the country. The decision was followed by [mounting secessionism](#) in the Republika Srpska entity, causing further instability in the region, and harming collaborative potential among the Western Balkan states, an approach that could move the region closer to the EU.

Second, regional collaboration is crucial for addressing some of the key institutional shortcomings in the Western Balkans, including the strengthening of the rule of law, and combatting [corruption and organised crime](#). So far, through the EU's instrument for pre-accession, a number of cross-border initiatives in the domain of [justice and home affairs](#) have been established. These include police investigation and prosecution cooperation, mutual legal aid, extradition requests, and witness protection programmes. Police cooperation programmes are essential in tackling the structural problem of organised crime, especially in the domain of illicit drug and human trafficking. In 2023, with the participation of EU's agencies Europol, Eurojust and Frontex, and in collaboration with the Western Balkan states, enacted an endeavour to combat trafficking in firearms, drugs, and human beings by targeting high-risk criminal networks. As a [result of this operation](#), coordinated from North Macedonia, law enforcement authorities made over 500 arrests, seized over 300 guns, 100 forged documents, and nearly a ton of drugs. While the substantive structural problem of organised crime in the region remains, this example shows the extent and significance of regional efforts in combatting it. This, in turn, is crucial for making progress in the domain of the 'Fundamentals' for EU accession – chapters 23 (Judiciary and fundamental rights) and 24 (Justice, freedom and security).

Third, one of the key challenges of the Western Balkan states is the weak democratic capacity, and citizens [disengaged](#) from transformative democratic processes. This represents a security challenge seemingly different from those of ethno-political tensions or organised crime. However, informed and engaged citizens are the lifeblood

of democracy, because they hold their governments accountable thus preventing instances of organised crime and high-level corruption. They also are more accepting of democratic values of freedom, equality and human rights, meaning that such empowered citizens are less susceptible to manipulation and less supportive of ethnonationalist projects. Regional cooperation, especially in the domains of education and civil society can foster a circulation of ideas, capacity-building, and mutual learning at the level of individuals. Sharing knowledge, experience, and understanding beyond borders is at the heart of the European project, precisely because it reinforces the democratic capacity of states, societies, and individuals at the heart of them.

Regional cooperation in addressing external security challenges

Enhancing the resilience of states and building secure societies in them is at the core of the [EU's Global Strategy](#), and as such inextricable from the enlargement process. When the strategy was adopted back in 2016, resilience was understood as intrinsically linked to democracy, rule of law, and societal prosperity. Reforms in the security sector were intended to 'enable and enhance our partners' capacities to deliver security within the rule of law'. Nearly a decade later, this approach has gained a further layer of complexity. Resilient societies nowadays need to be capable of upholding rule of law and defending democracy from the 'soft' external threats such as misinformation or malign influence, while also being capable of providing responses to threats to their physical security. The latter is inherent in the European Commission's [ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030](#) plan of March 2025, increasing European defence spending by 800 billion euros, with the long-term goal of strengthening European security.

While the current European, and even the global focus, is on reinforcing the military capabilities of states, strengthening the core democratic resilience is as important. The reason for this is that individuals are both the providers and recipients of security. Human security-building, in the sense of consolidating democracy, empowering citizens, bringing about social justice and economic growth, requires a holistic approach, with the engagement of civil society. This is where a regional approach could be an important step forward in the context of EU integration. Joint actions to promote awareness and understanding of democratic governance, of the need to align with EU's standards of transparency and accountability, could build up grassroots pressure and scrutiny over public institutions. [Cross-border projects in media and digital literacy](#) directed to citizens strengthen resilience across the Western Balkan states against disinformation, malign influence, as well as cyber-attacks. Regional efforts in this domain, such as the documentary film '[Documentation of the Russian Influence in the Balkans](#)' produced by the Balkan Investigative Report (BIRN) Kosovo has raised awareness across the region

of the Russian propaganda narratives in a number of Western Balkan states, including Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia.

Further to centering on citizens, building the capacity of states to secure their institutions against cyber threats, and to strengthen their defence capacities overall, regional cooperation is essential. This is further emphasised by the fact that Western Balkan states are small and have limited institutional and defence capacities on their own. Following a series of cyber-attacks across the region, France and Slovenia partnered with Montenegro to establish a [Western Balkans Cyber Capacity Centre \(WB3C\)](#) as a hub for boosting the region's cyber resilience. In a similar vein, regional cooperation in the domain of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) would also be an indicator of the region's willingness to contribute to European collective security. At present, Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia are members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), whereas the issue of membership is more contentious for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia. The recent regional military alliances – such as the one between Albania, Croatia and Kosovo – have proven to be challenging, due to political tensions and the region's turbulent history. Precisely for this reason, a closer collaboration on defence among the Western Balkan states would have a [major symbolic value](#). While this scenario is unlikely in the current political climate in the region, reinforcing this dimension would be an indicator of the re-building of trust among the former belligerents, and a way for the different countries to show their commitment to 'good neighbourly relations'.

Which way forward?

In an unstable and crisis-ridden geopolitical context, the process of EU integration is bound to have an important security dimension. On the one hand, the rebooting of the dormant EU enlargement as a tool for reinforcing European security architecture is telling of an external facet of this dynamic. Securing the EU's neighbourhood by building capacities of the countries aspiring to membership to address physical and [hybrid threats](#) is a value added to the creating a comprehensive security community on the whole continent. On the other hand, security is also an important – albeit implicit – element of the EU accession process. From the protection of territories and borders to stability institutions, and empowered citizens, the internal facet of security is transversally engrained in the enlargement process.

Against this backdrop, regional cooperation on security matters in the Western Balkans is a stepping stone for meeting the accession conditions for two interrelated reasons. First, countries in the region are small and have a limited capacity to individually stand

against a major physical, environmental, or geopolitical threat. While forming military alliances may be a challenge due to the region's turbulent past, exchange of information, practices or joint ad hoc initiatives and 'coalitions of the willing' might lead to a phasing into a differentiated security community. Second, in view of the evolving technologies and economic flows, collaboration across the domains such as cybersecurity, foreign investment screening, and combatting organised crime would be complementary to the requirements of accession and could potentially lead to a smoother harmonisation with EU standards.

For these kinds of collaborative efforts to come into being, political will and true commitment to EU integration and a more secure, prosperous and democratic Western Balkan region are key. Yet, the political will to move forward with meaningful reforms has hitherto been the missing ingredient in the context of EU integration. Building it, requires a substantive effort from the civil society – to advocate for EU standards, empower citizens to seek accountability and transparency of decision-making, and provide input in the policy-making processes. For this effort to have a profound impact, a change in the Western Balkan political culture needs to happen. This change would entail awareness, participation and collaboration, rather than misleading, apathy, and confrontation within and across countries.

Regional security cooperation in the context of Berlin Process: Towards a pro-active European agenda



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Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans has produced significant results in bringing the Western Balkans Six together to address economic, political and security challenges. The Berlin Process, in particular, has been instrumental in setting a regional policy agenda which contributes not only to economic prosperity and security of the region, but also to its preparedness to join the European Union.

Some of the key areas of regional cooperation in the security area include cooperation on border management and serious crime prevention, anti-corruption fighting radicalization and countering violent extremism, cybersecurity as well as in tackling arms trafficking through the ‘Roadmap for a Sustainable Solution to Arms Control in the Western Balkans by 2024’.

Berlin Process has the merit of producing two key benefits across these areas: firstly, the creation of a ‘security community’ at the level of public administration civil servants and experts of security, working at different levels of agency/inter-agency, governmental institutions; and secondly, paving the way for closer integration of the region into European mechanisms and policies in the area of security.

However, issues falling under the political pillar of cooperation, such as unresolved bilateral disputes and various records in the rule of law reforms across the region

continue to impede security regional cooperation. In addition, non-alignment or partial alignment with EU Common Foreign and Security Policy lead to different, and at times divergent, threat perceptions and understandings of the 'security environment'.

Benefits and Limitations of Regional Security Cooperation

Regional security cooperation has helped to increasingly integrate the region into broader European security mechanisms thus enhancing collective resilience. Berlin Process, in particular, has contributed to the creation of regional frameworks of cooperation in most pressing security areas, and to linking these frameworks to European platforms. In the police sector, for example, and particularly on fighting serious crime, it has built upon work done in the context of SEECF and since 2016, it led to the creation a regional framework, developed as part of the [EU's Internal Security's External Dimension in the Western Balkans](#), bringing together three strands of regional security cooperation: Border Security Initiative, anti-corruption Initiative, and Counter Serious Crime Initiative. This integrated framework supported by the EU and initially coordinated by the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance is being coordinated by the RCC as from 2020. Furthermore, regional security cooperation has been instrumental to the implementation of the Common Regional Market Action Plan (2020-2024) across various actions, but in particular those related to the facilitation of trade and transport and cross-border mobility among the WB6 well as between WB6 and the surrounding EU member states.

As **Dr Bojana Zorić** outlines in her article in this publication, the Western Balkans have joined numerous EU-led agencies or cooperation platforms such European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training (CEPOL), European Union Agency for Law Enforcement cooperation (EUROPOL), European Union Agency for Criminal Justice (EUROJUST), European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) etc. Even though agreements of membership into these agencies and platforms have been bilateral, regional cooperation in the framework of Berlin Process has contributed to strengthening synergies and agenda setting between the EU and the WB6 and prepared these countries to collaborate within same institutional frameworks.

In addition, in areas like countering violent extremism and radicalization, Berlin Process has encouraged the alignment of national laws on terrorism, extremism, and radicalization with international standards, including harmonizing counter-terrorism

legislation, improving mechanisms for monitoring and countering radicalization in prisons, and ensuring that policies reflect human rights and international law. ²

In the area of cybersecurity, in particular, Berlin Process has facilitated the development and alignment of cybersecurity policies and frameworks across the Western Balkans, with the aim of enhancing overall regional resilience. Capacity building and training programs are a cornerstone of these efforts, focusing on enhancing technical skills and promoting best practices among cybersecurity professionals. Cooperation in this policy area has deepened particularly after the malicious attacks on Albania and Montenegro in 2022. Under RCC's coordination, national authorities in cybersecurity have recently started to share information regarding early threat alerts and improving digital and cyber security infrastructure. As part of the joint efforts to create a regional common market (CRM), WB6 parties have committed to cooperation to increase capacities to meet requirements and standards related to cybersecurity and certification framework as well to integrate the WB6 Cybersecurity Certification authorities in the European Cybersecurity Certification Group ECCG (with the status of observer).

In connection to this, regional cooperation has also contributed to enhancing the engagement of various EU member states with the region. EU member states participating in the Berlin Process have played an instrumental role in advancing regional cooperation in the security front among the countries of the Western Balkans and between the Western Balkans and the EU.

In the area of cybersecurity, it was through the support and initiative of two EU member states, France and Slovenia that a regional centre of cybersecurity was established in Montenegro (Western Balkans Cyber Capacity Centre (WB3C)). [Italy, for example, has contributed significantly to the increasing gradual integration of the region into European security mechanisms and policies](#), by enhancing policy coordination on the ground, and by playing an active role in many platforms that allow cooperation between governments and their agencies, such as EUROPOL, FRONTEX, the Connectivity Agenda, Western Balkan Investment Framework. In addition, the [first attempts towards a more structured cooperation and monitoring of regional commitments on anti-corruption were initiated during the Italian chairmanship of the Berlin Process in 2017](#).

Lastly, one of the successes of regional security cooperation, namely the [“Roadmap for a Sustainable Solution to Arms Control in the Western Balkans by 2024”](#) was developed

² Interview with the General Director of the Agency for Countering Violent Extremism, Ms Ledi Dervishi, 6.4.2025 (interview conducted in written form).

by France and Germany, in consultation with the EU and other partners. This engagement of EU member states in turn, is translated into enhanced political engagement of the EU member states with the region as well as into stronger synergies between EU- and non-EU member states regarding European security. The upcoming Chairholder of the Berlin Process, United Kingdom has used proactively the security pillar of the Berlin Process to enhance its role as security provider in the region, and more broadly, in Europe. However, despite these benefits, there are also notable limitations to security cooperation which have led to significant shortcomings in the implementation of regional commitments in this area.

A reactive approach

Despite the integration of security-related themes, such as migration, anti-corruption and terrorism as early as 2015 into the Berlin Process agenda, the evolution of the security component within the initiative has followed a reactive rather than a proactive approach, mirroring developments on the shifting security environment in Europe, and often reflecting the priorities of the EU/European chairholders of the Initiative, rather than the needs and priorities of the Western Balkan parties. In fact, the first ministerial meeting dedicated specifically to security was only introduced in 2018, during the UK chairmanship.

To illustrate the reactive approach to security, the topic of migration was first discussed at the Paris Summit in 2016, prompted by the 2015 migration crisis. Alongside themes of migration and anti-corruption, the topic of terrorism and violent extremism had been introduced in December 2015, following the terrorist attack in Paris that year, and an EU-Western Balkans Counter Terrorism initiative was adopted to be coordinated by Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), as part of the Integrative Internal Security Governance process. Tackling terrorism and radicalization was also one of the thematic priorities of the [Trieste Summit Declaration \(2017\)](#) which was focused on information sharing, regional cooperation between WB6 and EU countries and institutions, and work with local communities.

However, the moment when this threat was overshadowed by more salient ones—or politically more expedient ones—like migration, the existing cooperation in other areas seems to fall on the sides, and there is limited policy continuity from one summit to the other on the issue. In this regard, limited capacities to address the multitude of the security challenges in a structured and closely coordinated way are an important impediment to sustained efforts.

Trust issues amidst diversity in the security domain

Apart from being reactive rather than proactive, cooperation in the security sector, has been hampered by lack of trust and very diverse regulatory and legal frameworks. For example, in the area of Countering Violent Extremism (C_{OBJ}VE)_{OBJ}, entrenched distrust among the parties can lead to reluctance in sharing sensitive information, resources, and best practices needed for ³_{OBJ}. Legal and regulatory diversity remain an issue across different sub-areas of the security component of the regional agenda. This is particularly pertinent in areas such as cybersecurity or countering violent extremism, but also in relation to other aspects of security related more directly to the trade and investment pillars, such as creating a secure environment for foreign direct investment. In the context of still a high degree of diversity among the national regulatory frameworks, trust to share information and exchange practices becomes a necessity, not a desirable. In addition, monitoring of implementation of commitments remains limited implementation remains limited or based on an ad-hoc basis and often, under the radar of political leadership. There are a number of commitments taken in the framework of Berlin Process to improve coordination and information exchange, yet there is no viable instrument to monitor⁴⁵

Securitization of the defence sector and geopolitical competition

So far, regional security cooperation has produced greater results in the area of internal security and where cooperation has been complimentary to progress in interlinked areas of the regional cooperation agenda, such as cross-border mobility and trade facilitation, the Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans, or the EU accession processes. As far as the 'high agenda' of security and defence is concerned, cooperation is limited and primarily bilateral, trilateral or in the framework of NATO, as the latest example of the [Joint Declaration on Defence cooperation illustrates](#). This is primarily due to the division of WB6 into NATO allies and non-allies as well as due to persistent bilateral issues between the parties.

³ Interview with Ledi Dervishi.

⁵ For example, at the London Summit in 2018, the governments of the WB6 committed to strengthening coordination and co-operation within the region in the fields of serious and organized crime, terrorism, and other security threats. To facilitate this, they called for concerted action to end forced labour, modern slavery, and human trafficking, signed the Small Arms and Light Weapons Initiative Road Map, and issued a Joint Declaration on Principles of Cooperation in the Field of Information-Exchange for Law. The second meeting of the group was held in June 2019, while European security was discussed in a separate summit preparation meeting. The last meeting of the Security Commitments Steering Group was held in January 2020 in Sofia and in the past couple of year there is no progress update. [See Djolai 2024, p. 25.](#)

Unsolved bilateral issues between Kosovo and Serbia as well as between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, primarily related to the visa regime, present significant obstacles to regional cooperation across all policy sectors, including security and defence. These create issues of mistrust among the parties, particularly as far as sharing information but also exchanges and socialization of security experts and public servants are concerned.

In addition to unsolved bilateral relations, the current moment of heightened tensions between EU and the United States, set against the backdrop of the ongoing war in Ukraine, has led to a process of securitization of the defence sector across Europe. This might lead to the exacerbation of geopolitical competition among the countries in the region, as the signing of the bilateral [Agreement on Defence between Hungary and Serbia](#) just 10 days after the signing of Joint Declaration on Cooperation in Defence between Albania, Croatia and Kosovo demonstrates. This heightened sense of competition impedes cooperation based on trust and a shared understanding of threats that regional security cooperation has sought to forge.

The way forward

More mainstreaming of the EU directives in the security sector and more integration into the EU regulatory framework and security mechanisms is the best way forward to reach an operational level of regulatory and legal alignment among the WB6. Areas where cooperation can be most efficient are those which are part of the EU accession agenda. For example, in the area of anti-corruption, even though regional cooperation has been introduced early into the Agenda of the Berlin Process—a Joint Declaration against corruption was first endorsed by the leaders at the Trieste Summit in 2017 and the theme was re-visited at the London Summit in 2019—there have not been sustainable instruments of monitoring progress of implementation of commitments. In this area, as in many others connected to the rule of law, the EU has the strongest leverage to influence implementation through its enlargement policy.

Further institutionalization of Western Balkans regional networks of civil servants and experts who work in the area of security, and their embeddedness into European networks remains a prerogative for creating more trust among the WB6 as well as for preparing the WB6 public administration in this field for future accession. Similar path followed regarding the inclusion of the candidate countries in [Digital Europe programme](#), could be followed the inclusion of the WB6 into the European Cybersecurity Fund. However, there are limits to the inter-institutional and inter-agency coordination among the WB6 security administrations and their integration into European networks,

mechanisms and regulatory frameworks. As long as ‘threat assessment’ remains different among WB6 parties, the key challenges remain of political, rather than regulatory nature.

To boost a common understanding on matters of security and defence, the European Defence and Security Partnerships⁶ should be extended to the rest of WB6, in addition to Albania and North Macedonia, something that is arguably reflected in the newly published “[White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030](#)”. This would serve not only to enhancing political dialogue between the EU and the Western Balkans on security and defence issues, but also to provide the WB6 parties with a common framework of cooperation. Lastly, stronger policy continuity must be built in the processes of agenda setting of Berlin Process, EU-Western Balkans Summits, and particularly pertinent in the context of security cooperation, the European Political Community Summits. Stronger synergies must be built between these high-level political platforms, so that concerns and priorities stemming from the Western Balkans can be first deliberated on at the regional level and then, be made part of discussions at the European level meetings.

⁶ The first bilateral political dialogue between the EU and Albania was launched on April 7th. On the part of the EU, it was led by the HRVP of the European Commission, and on the part of Albania, it was jointly led by the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defense. In the case of North Macedonia, the dialogue has not been launched yet.

The Challenge of Malign External Influences and Relations with Non-EU Actors



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The Western Balkans today sits at a geopolitical crossroads. With the Ukrainian war opening new frontiers for the EU's approach to the issue of the security, and the uncertain path of the Transatlantic partnership with the USA's approach to the multilateral forums, the future of the system of international relations remains full of uncertainties, which have been felt on the regional level as well.

With most of the countries in the region pursuing truthfully EU accession, other powers have aggressively expanded and are actively expanding their foothold. Years of ethnic fragmentation, unresolved bilateral disputes, developing economies, and pervasive corruption have created "*fertile soil*" for non-EU actors to fill power vacuums. Russia, China, Turkey, and Gulf states have all sought influence through tools ranging from diplomacy and cultural outreach to direct investments that foster economic dependence. This influence surge has been enabled in part by the EU's slow enlargement process and strict conditionality, which have frustrated local aspirations and left gaps for others to exploit. However, Moscow's war in Ukraine in 2022 served as a wake-up call, spurring the EU to refocus on the Western Balkans' stability and security as a core interest.

Non-EU actors' engagement is not uniform – each pursues its aims differently. Russia leverages historical, religious, and cultural ties alongside energy dependency to

maintain relevance. China, lacking historic ties, projects power mainly via economic heft – pouring billions into infrastructure, mining, and technology. The result is a complex web of external interests challenging the region’s Euro-Atlantic trajectory. Decision-makers and civil society across the Western Balkans increasingly recognize that malign foreign influence can both widen internal divisions and undermine sovereignty. The question is how the region can unite to mitigate these risks before they further fragment an already fragile security landscape.

Vulnerabilities of Strategically Important Sectors

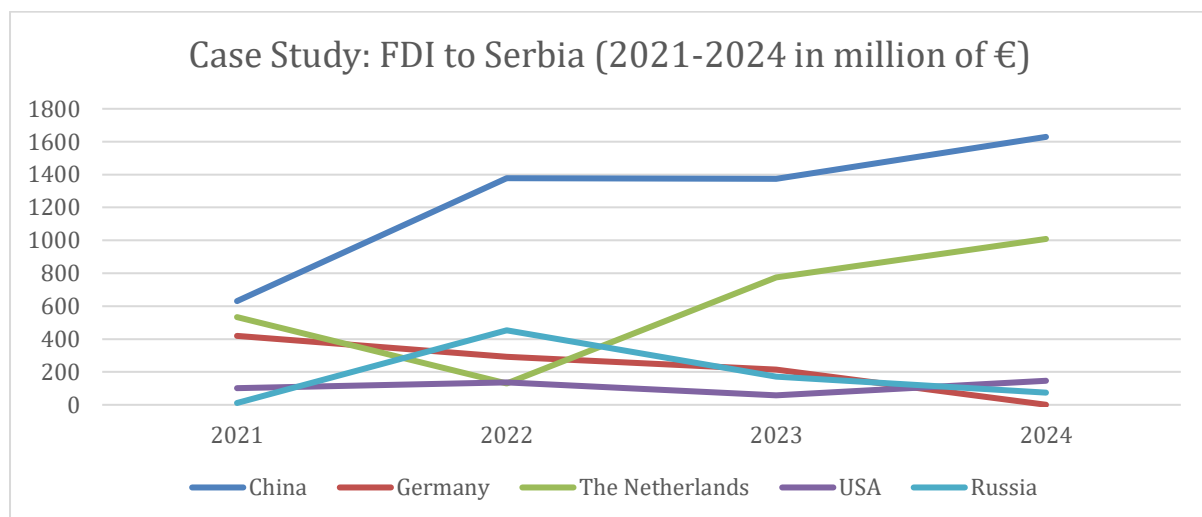
From the regional perspective, foreign influence is being quietly but steadily woven into the region’s economic foundations and political dynamics. To insert their influence in the region, foreign powers have aimed for the sectors which have special and strategic importance not only for the national-level actors and policies, but play significant role in the overall security architecture of Europe and Transatlantic community. Therefore, the most notable sectors of foreign presence in the Western Balkans region have been the ones that can be described as the sectors of strategic importance and relevance, not only to the domestic economic and political dynamics, but as security defining areas as well.

Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in energy. Russia retains a near-monopoly on natural gas supplies to the region, creating structural dependency, affecting the security architecture and providing the Kremlin with potent political leverage. This dependency persists despite clear risks of supply manipulation, particularly in times of geopolitical crisis. The change of the sent signals emerged following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Despite significant dependence on Russian gas and oil, countries such as Serbia began pursuing greater [diversification](#), aiming to build infrastructure more resilient to Russian influence. Coupled with external pressure—including [sanctions](#) imposed by the United States—these moves suggest that, although Moscow still maintains considerable influence in the region, the balance may gradually shift in the long term.

Infrastructure presents another critical vulnerability. China has become a dominant force in building and financing roads, railways, power plants, and telecommunications across the Balkans. The allure is understandable: fast loans, minimal oversight, and [promises of development](#). But these deals often come with hidden costs. Chinese state loans are frequently opaque, bypass EU procurement rules, and drive up national debt. Montenegro’s \$1 billion loan from China for a highway project serves as a cautionary tale—ballooning the country’s [debt-to-GDP ratio](#) above 100% and putting nearly 20% of its external debt in Chinese hands. The risk isn’t just economic. If countries struggle to

repay, Beijing could extract political concessions or demand stakes in strategic assets. Across the region, prestige projects of questionable economic value could turn into Trojan horses of foreign control.

In addition to financial agreements, by placing strategic investment in the region, China is on the verge of creating context which could be defined as strategic dependency on Chinese presence in certain areas. This has been obvious the most in the mining sector in Serbia. To understand this, one has to take note that China has become a sole biggest investor in Serbia in the span of the past 5 years. There is no other country that invests in Serbia as much as China does. Where the problem lies is the diversification of the investment, which can be described as strategic placement of funds that servers primarily Chinese interest. Two of the most significant sectors of investment have been [mining and automotive industry](#). Each with specific interest to Beijing, mining due to the access to natural resources (copper ores and products have been the dominant export goods from Serbia to China), and automotive industry due to the proximity of EU’s market and the opportunity to cut transportation costs to final beneficiaries – European automotive companies that are using Chinese produced parts in their own assembly lines. Rise of investment has also produced an opportunity for domestic actors to promote China as reliable actor and partner and create a context within which economic growth is almost unimaginable without Chinese presence.



Technology and defense are now emerging as additional fronts in this contest for influence. Serbia has taken the lead in embracing Chinese technology, installing more than 1,000 [Huawei surveillance cameras](#) with facial recognition in cities nationwide. Dubbed the “Safe City” project, it has raised serious concerns about privacy, authoritarianism, and Chinese access to sensitive data. Despite a [U.S.-brokered pledge](#)

in 2020 to avoid “untrusted” 5G vendors, Serbia has continued to develop cooperation with the Chinese tech-giant, making it strategic partner in the development of [the broadband internet network](#) in Serbia, becoming the regional hub for the activities undertaken by the Beijing’s darling.

At the same time, but using the different means, China and Russia continue to exploit the information space. Disinformation campaigns—amplified by both Kremlin and Beijing-linked [media](#), social media trolls, and local allies—promote anti-Western narratives, glorify Russia as a Slavic protector and China as a trusted and reliable partner, with several end goals, including the idea to promote their presence and influence in the region, facilitate current ruling majorities that are fostering mechanisms of ruling with autocratic tendencies, but in case of Russia also inflame ethnic tensions. Since the invasion of Ukraine, these efforts have intensified, particularly targeting Serbia and Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The aim is not just to undermine EU and NATO influence, but to erode democratic institutions and legitimize autocratic leaders aligned with Moscow. Together, these dynamics form a layered challenge for the Western Balkans. Without stronger safeguards, transparency, and regional coordination, foreign influence—both visible and covert—will continue to shape the region’s future from behind the scenes.

Fragmented Regional Response

Despite facing common threats from external meddling, Western Balkan governments often respond in an uncoordinated or even contradictory fashion. Regional cooperation in countering foreign influence remains more the exception than the norm. One reason is differing strategic orientations: for example, Serbia continues to maintain close ties with Moscow and Beijing – partly to leverage backing on issues like principle of territorial integrity, which Serbian leaders are often referring to and seeking support in disputing the territorial status of Kosovo. Belgrade’s [reluctance to join](#) EU sanctions on Russia or distance itself from the Kremlin starkly contrasts with the approach of Montenegro, Albania, or North Macedonia, which aligned with Western sanctions and even expelled Russian diplomats. What also makes Serbian case very specific is [proclaimed military neutrality](#). Very specific stance is based on the fact that there are no intentions from the Serbian representatives to join bodies of collective defense, like NATO, but Serbia continues to pursue cooperation which includes participation in EU and UN missions, but also purchase of [military equipment](#) from China, and before the outbreak of Russian aggression in Ukraine, [military cooperation](#) with Russia.

This split undermines a possibility of unified Balkan front, and opens a possibility for external actors easily exploit such divisions. The result is an asymmetrical defense against malign influence – with some countries actively resisting it, and others inadvertently enabling it. Even when interests align, institutional coordination mechanisms are weak. There is no standing regional body solely dedicated to countering external interference. Ad-hoc efforts exist – for instance, intelligence and security officials from the region do [meet](#), for instances within the framework of Berlin process, and Western partners (EU/NATO) have encouraged more information-sharing on hybrid threats. But mistrust between some capitals (exacerbated by historical disputes) often impedes swift collective action. For example, a disinformation campaign spilling from one country into a neighbor may not trigger a joint response if political relations are strained. Additional layer and reason lie in unresolved bilateral disputes and cases of mistrust. Likewise, one government might quietly welcome an influx of foreign investment even as its neighbor sounds alarm about the same investor’s intentions. This lack of policy harmonization – say, on screening Chinese tech or managing Russian energy deals – means malign actors can engage in forum shopping, targeting the weakest link. Regional initiatives that do exist (such as the Southeast European Cooperation Process and the Berlin Process) have primarily focused on economic and diplomatic cooperation, only recently adding security and hybrid threat discussions to their agendas. Coordination is improving slowly, but the gap between rhetoric and action remains wide.

Finally, [weak transparency and accountability](#) in governance make the region an easy target. Many foreign deals are struck behind closed doors. When contracts for a new power plant or highway are not subject to open tender, they often involve sweeteners that benefit local elites while increasing national vulnerability. This lack of transparency is precisely what malign actors exploit to entrench their influence. It is here that civil society’s watchdog role becomes critical – yet civil society itself faces challenges (from political pressure to limited resources) that we explore below.

Civil Society’s Role in Countering Foreign Influence in the Western Balkans

In the struggle to counter malign foreign influence in the Western Balkans, it is often governments and international institutions that receive the spotlight. Yet, behind the scenes, a more decentralized but equally vital force has been civil society. From watchdog organizations and independent media to grassroots citizen initiatives, civil society actors have proven instrumental in identifying, exposing, and mitigating the impact of foreign interference—whether it comes through opaque investments, disinformation, or political influence operations.

However, the effectiveness of civil society in pushing back against such influence often goes unrecognized—especially by domestic institutions, limiting the possibility of constructive advocacy campaigns. Governments in the region have, in many cases, marginalized or discredited independent actors, branding them as [“foreign agents”](#) or sidelining their policy recommendations. This not only hampers democratic accountability but strengthens the malign. Because of this, the role of international actors—particularly the EU and US—cannot be overstated. Both have the resources, influence, and strategic interest to support civil society organizations in the Western Balkans. But where the international community might have made mistakes in the recent past is attempting to affect policy and decision making process, without building necessary capacities to do so. Therefore, that support must go beyond short-term project funding or aiming for immediate impact. It should include consistent political backing, legal protections, and the elevation of civil society voices in both local and international policy discussions, with the main goal to build foundation for the long term effects.

The regional dimension of this challenge also demands a coordinated response. Foreign influence does not respect borders. Disinformation campaigns are often replicated across languages and countries. Civil society must therefore act regionally, not just nationally. What has been lacking is the institutionalization of informal groups and networks mostly supported through work of international organizations, with individuals and organizations networking on premise of individual cases, without long-term planning or strategic approach. Existing mechanisms of regional cooperation and coordination need to be expanded and institutionalized. To achieve this, capacity-building support must be sustained and strategic. They need training in many different areas, including digital security, legal advocacy, and regional cooperation. Crucially, they also need political space to operate freely and safely. International actors must pressure local governments to respect the independence of civil society, refrain from smear campaigns, and uphold democratic norms. The foundation for such a regional approach already exists. Initiatives like the Berlin Process—designed to foster regional cooperation and support EU integration—provide a ready-made framework through which civil society engagement can be formalized and scaled. The Civil Society Forum, held alongside Berlin Process summits, has become a critical venue for amplifying CSO voices. These networks should be leveraged as continuous platforms for dialogue, joint research, coordinated advocacy, and capacity building on issues of foreign influence and institutional resilience.

In places where malign influence thrives on weak institutions, non-transparent governance, and media capture, civil society can often go where the state cannot—or will not. That recognition needs to be reflected in both domestic political culture and international policy. Without strong and connected civil societies, the region will remain vulnerable to malign influence. With them, it stands a much better chance of building democratic resilience, safeguarding sovereignty, and moving forward toward European integration. This work aligns directly with the European integration agenda and national reform agenda tasks within the EU’s Growth Plan efforts. By helping build these democratic capacities, whether by monitoring procurement processes, advancing media literacy, or advocating for judicial independence, civil society contributes to a deeper, more sustainable form of EU alignment. In this way, their work is complementary to governmental efforts and essential to their success.

For governments in the *Western Balkans*, *the message should be clear*: civil society is not a threat, but a strategic partner. Integrating CSOs into national strategies to combat foreign interference is not a concession to donors and foreign presence, it is an investment in democratic sovereignty. The EU and its member states have the responsibility to go beyond rhetoric. That means sustained funding, structured engagement, and political backing when civil society actors face pressure. Governments are the ones that must be resilient. But they will not get there alone. A robust, regionally connected, and internationally supported civil society is not a luxury—it is one of the strongest defenses the Western Balkans can build.

The Western Balkans stand at a pivotal moment. The region’s exposure to malign foreign influence—rooted in institutional weaknesses, strategic ambiguity, and fragmented responses—cannot be addressed through symbolic gestures or isolated reforms. If sovereignty, stability, and democratic progress are to be protected, a coordinated and sustained effort must come from within the region and be supported from outside it. Ultimately, building resilience in the Western Balkans is not just about countering influence—it’s about asserting democratic agency. Governments, international partners, and civil society must act in concert to ensure external actors do not determine the region’s future, but by its own democratic choices.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The case for regional security cooperation in the Western Balkans is neither new nor contested—but the urgency behind it has never been greater. As the EU redefines/reshapes enlargement policy through the lens of strategic resilience, the Western Balkans must demonstrate that it can act as a coherent, credible, and secure region—not a loose constellation of small, divided states.

Progress has been made in the Western Balkans. Joint operations have dismantled transnational criminal networks. Regional dialogues have begun to align threat perceptions. Civil society actors continue to expose corrosive external influences. But these gains remain fragile. Cooperation is too often reactive, driven by external crises or donor incentives, and easily undermined by political volatility and unresolved disputes.

The real test now is not conceptual, it is operational and political. Can the region embed cooperation into institutions, budgets, and political culture? Can it reconcile security imperatives with democratic values? Can it move from fragmented responses to integrated strategy?

The answers will define not only the pace of European integration of the Western Balkans but the region's sovereignty and resilience in the decade ahead. Insecurity may be the condition of our time—but collective agency is still possible. For the Western Balkans, that agency lies in cooperation.

To Western Balkan Governments:

1. **Institutionalize Security Dialogue:** Establish a permanent regional security council or working group to align threat assessments, share intelligence, and coordinate crisis responses.
2. **Harmonize Legal and Regulatory Frameworks:** Prioritize convergence on cybersecurity, counter-terrorism, and foreign investment screening aligned with EU standards.
3. **Depoliticize Security Institutions:** Strengthen the autonomy of law enforcement and judiciary bodies through regional peer-review mechanisms and anti-corruption protocols.

4. **Integrate Civil Society:** Formalize the role of civil society organizations in national and regional security strategies, ensuring transparency and independent oversight.
5. **Regional governments** must lead by example. This means institutionalizing cooperation across borders, particularly in critical sectors like energy, infrastructure, and information security. Transparent governance must replace opaque dealmaking, and civil society should be seen not as a threat but as a strategic partner in strengthening democratic resilience. National interests will only be safeguarded through regional unity, not fragmentation or selective neutrality.

To the European Union and International Partners:

1. **Embed the WB6 into EU Security Architecture.** Gradually include Western Balkan countries in EU security mechanisms—such as the European Cybersecurity Certification Group and the European Defence and Security Partnership—through structured observer or phased membership arrangements.
2. **Link Security Cooperation to Enlargement Metrics:** Use security sector progress (e.g., joint operations, data-sharing, institutional interoperability) as a measurable benchmark for EU accession.
3. **Sustain Civil Society as a Security Actor:** Provide long-term, core funding and political support for independent watchdogs, investigative media, and civic tech initiatives focused on transparency and countering malign influence.
4. **The international community** must recalibrate its approach. Reinvigorating the EU enlargement process, providing credible alternatives to authoritarian financing, and building long-term partnerships with democratic actors is key. Support to civil society must go beyond short-term grants—offering political protection, legal support, and access to policymaking processes. Hybrid threats require hybrid responses: coordinated, sustained, and values-driven

To Civil Society Organizations:

1. **Build Regional Networks:** Create institutionalized coalitions for cross-border research, monitoring, and advocacy on hybrid threats, disinformation, and foreign influence.

2. **Engage in Policy Co-creation:** Move beyond critique—develop actionable policy proposals and engage governments and EU bodies through structured dialogue platforms.
3. **Prioritize Strategic Communication:** Counter polarizing narratives by investing in public education, strategic messaging, and local storytelling that reinforces the link between security, democracy, and regional cooperation
4. **Civil society organizations** must embrace a more strategic and regional approach. Rather than working in isolation, they should build formalized cross-border networks for joint monitoring, research, and advocacy. Strengthening internal capacities, particularly in digital security, legal oversight, and strategic communication—is critical. As frontline defenders of democratic norms, NGOs must shape public discourse, push for transparency, and hold institutions accountable.