

Briefing

# Political Trends & Dynamics

## Security and Arms Control in SEE

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## POLITICAL TRENDS & DYNAMICS IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

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Peace and stability initiatives represent a decades-long cornerstone of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's work in southeastern Europe. Recent events have only reaffirmed the centrality of Southeast European stability within the broader continental security paradigm. Both democratization and socio-economic justice are intrinsic aspects of a larger progressive peace policy in the region, but so too are consistent threat assessments and efforts to prevent conflict before it erupts. Dialogue SOE aims to broaden the discourse on peace and stability in southeastern Europe and to counter the securitization of prevalent narratives by providing regular analysis that involves a comprehensive understanding of human security, including structural sources of conflict. The briefings cover fourteen countries in southeastern Europe: the seven post-Yugoslav countries and Albania, Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Romania, and Moldova.

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## EDITORIAL

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The Yugoslav Wars (1991–2001) continue to cast a long shadow over the whole of the Western Balkans. Two decades since the last of these conflicts concluded (the short-lived insurgency in North Macedonia in 2001 which grew out of the 1999 Kosovo War), security concerns permeate regional politics. The links between government and organized crime remain significant, so do the links between various militant nationalist movements and the criminal underground. In terms of trafficking of arms, of both light and heavy calibers, the region is one of the key sources of in Europe, and there were instances when the Balkan weapons turned up in war zones as far away as Syria and Iraq.

Since the onset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the specter of violence as an actual feature of regional politics has also returned. The Ukrainian situation has shown that the EU's ability to resolve actual kinetic conflicts remains as limited, if not more so, than it was in the 1990s. And that has, in turn, enticed recalcitrant elements in the region to test, once more, the waters on the use of hard power to advance their respective political interests.

In 2015, North Macedonia was roiled by the most significant fighting since 2001 when police units from the country's anti-terrorism forces stormed into the town of Kumanovo, ostensibly to apprehend members of an ethnic Albanian militia with ties to the erstwhile National Liberation Army (NLA). The resulting clashes caused the deaths of 18 people, including police officers, and significant damage to civilian infrastructure in the city. Yet the exact causes of the fighting remain unclear, and there remain credible allegations that the entire incident was, effectively, orchestrated by the then government of Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski to stoke ethnic tensions as a means of maintaining his grip on power.

In 2019, the SNSD government in Bosnia and Herzegovina's (BiH) Republika Srpska (RS) entity initiated the formation of an auxiliary police force that stoked fears in BiH and the international community that the the government in Banja Luka was taking yet another step towards its stated goal of seceding from BiH. Although hundreds of thousands of pieces of illegal arms have been destroyed by melting in the metal factory in Zenica and in the foundry in Banja Luka, there are still concerns over the illegal weapons and militarization of the existing police forces, especially given the Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik's inflammatory rhetoric and the uncertainty over his separatist plans.

In Serbia, the government has been on a dramatic, years-long push to massively increase the size of the Serbian armed forces and its arsenal, acquiring billions of dollars' worth of weapons systems mainly from Russia and China, including modern attack drones. And in recent months, the country's president, Aleksandar Vučić, has announced Serbia intends to undergo an-

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other significant expansion of its arms procurement efforts in the next nine months. Similar dynamics can be found in neighboring Croatia, however it is important to note, that although the region still struggles with the legacies of the 1990s, including the small arms in possession of different groups and individuals, a high level of violence has not been identified as a security threat in the region. Corruption on the other hand is seen as a number one security challenge in the region, as it effectively continues to undermine rule of law and the prospect for long-term prosperity of the region. The 2015 mixed migration crisis and continuing efforts of refugees and migrants to use the so-called Balkan route to reach Western Europe also presents challenges for the ailing security of the Western Balkans.

To conclude, although the region has done a great deal to demilitarize after the conflicts of the 1990s, much work still remains to be done. The region's increasingly volatile geopolitical position, one in which the capacities of both the EU and U.S. to minimize the influence of malign foreign actors has waned significantly, additionally complicates the existing security challenges. Accordingly, this edition of our Political Trends & Dynamics publication examines recent developments in the security politics of the Western Balkans, attempting to recentre the focus of European policymakers on a region whose (in)stability remains inexorably tied to the fortunes of the continent as whole.

## ARMS AND MILITARY SPENDING IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

*Alexandra Kuimova and Siemon Wezeman*

### Introduction and regional overview

This article provides a concise overview of the trends and patterns of military expenditure, arms imports and inventories of major arms for the seven Western Balkan states (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) since 2009.<sup>1</sup> During this period, the seven states have seen both significant changes and continuations in their defence efforts as measured in the size and inventory of their armed forces, state spending on military and the acquisition of arms.

Four states out of seven are now members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO): Albania and Croatia joined in 2009, Montenegro in 2017, and North Macedonia in 2020. A fifth, Bosnia-Herzegovina, has been negotiating its membership since 2008, but has yet to fulfill all of the necessary conditions needed to be extended an invitation for membership.<sup>2</sup> A sixth state Kosovo, where NATO since completing its military operation in 1999 is leading a 'peace-support operation', has announced its interest in joining NATO. However, it has many major obstacles to overcome, including the fact that several NATO members do not (yet) recognize Kosovo's independence and that it is not (yet) a United Nations



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(UN) member.<sup>3</sup> Serbia, the seventh state, has developed some ties with NATO since 2006, including joining the Partnership for Peace and various other forms of cooperation with NATO or groups of NATO members and is willing to expand such

ties. However, it has until now not announced aspirations to join the organization. While it is seeking EU membership, it continues in the defence sphere with a policy of neutrality.<sup>4</sup>

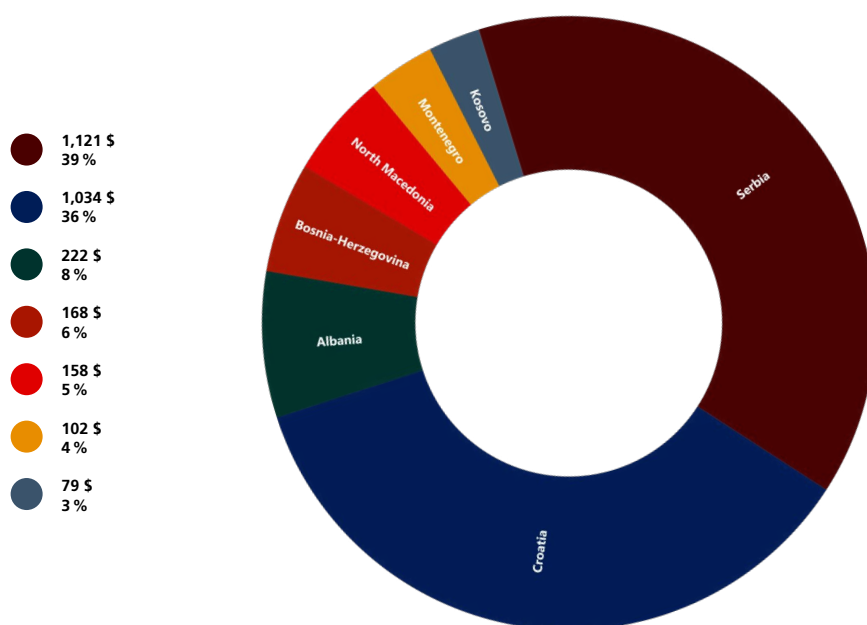
Membership of NATO or aspirations to join have an impact on the national defence policies and at least in theory, on military spending. Already since 2006, NATO members have agreed that defence spending should be at least 2 % of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and that 20 % of that spending should be on equipment. The reality is that military spending has in real terms, for most Western Balkan members and aspiring members, not significantly changed in absolute values or as share of GDP, and that five of the six have not yet reached the 2 % goal.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the 20 % share of military spending used for equipment procurement has not been reached. The average share of GDP in 2020 for Western Balkan members is only slightly lower than that for the other European members, but the average share for equipment is still substantially lower than for other NATO members.<sup>6</sup> Only Montenegro managed to reach both goals, but only for 2020, which seems to be a one-year exception. Generally, trends in the last few years seem to indicate that the four NATO

members are at least slowly increasing their military spending (see table 1). However, the negative economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic (2020-2021) may well delay further growth or even change the trend.<sup>7</sup>

Serbia, which is the only state in the region not seeking NATO membership, has consistently had the highest GDP share – near or above the 2 % level for of the years following 2009. Since 2009, it has also managed to be one of two countries with the highest highest levels of military spending by far in the region, which accounted for 39 % of the regional total in 2020 (see figure 1). Serbian military spending is likely to continue at this high level, even moreso as Covid-19 has shown not to hit Serbia's economy as hard as that of many other states in the region.<sup>8</sup>

Arms acquisitions are also impacted as NATO policies of interoperability mean that much of the old Yugoslav equipment needs to be replaced and most acquisitions from Russia or China are ruled out. The NATO link also allows tapping into aid programmes from NATO or individual NATO members. The most important of the recent aid programmes is the European Recapitalization In-

Figure 1  
Military spending by Western Balkan states 2020 (in million US dollars)



USD values are total military spending in current values for 2020 at average USD exchange rates in 2020. Percentages are share of total military spending for all seven Western Balkan states.  
Source: SIPRI Military expenditure database, May 2021 (<https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>).

Table 1  
Military spending trends for Western Balkan states, 2009–2020

Country		2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Albania	USD millions	195	209	208	203	192	186	162	156	162	185	197	216
	Share of GDP	1.5 %	1.6 %	1.5 %	1.5 %	1.4 %	1.3 %	1.2 %	1.1 %	1.1 %	1.2 %	1.3 %	1.5 %
	Share for Equipment	11.3 %	15.7 %	13.4 %	14.4 %	16.3 %	16.7 %	8.9 %	8.0 %	7.0 %	9.4 %	16.8 %	14.5 %
Bosnia-Herzegovina	USD millions	209	195	173	170	165	161	166	164	158	164	165	166
	Share of GDP	1.4 %	1.3 %	1.1 %	1.1 %	1.1 %	1.0 %	1.0 %	0.9 %	0.9 %	0.9 %	0.8 %	0.9 %
	Share for Equipment	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Croatia	USD millions	1,000	926	959	876	837	940	935	890	945	923	1,002	1,031
	Share of GDP	1.8 %	1.7 %	1.8 %	1.7 %	1.6 %	1.8 %	1.8 %	1.6 %	1.7 %	1.6 %	1.6 %	1.8 %
	Share for Equipment	10.2 %	8.1 %	15.8 %	14.7 %	10.7 %	5.6 %	8.0 %	7.5 %	5.6 %	3.4 %	6.6 %	10.3 %
Kosovo	USD millions	26.8	38.5	45.2	40.6	43.2	47.5	53.3	55.4	59.3	61.7	65.7	77.0
	Share of GDP	0.5 %	0.7 %	0.8 %	0.7 %	0.7 %	0.7 %	0.8 %	0.8 %	0.8 %	0.8 %	0.8 %	1.1 %
	Share for Equipment	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Montenegro	USD millions	72.6	74.1	72.1	63.9	58.0	60.9	60.4	65.9	67.5	75.1	77.7	100.3
	Share of GDP	1.8 %	1.8 %	1.7 %	1.7 %	1.5 %	1.5 %	1.4 %	1.4 %	1.4 %	1.4 %	1.4 %	2.1 %
	Share for Equipment	–	–	1.7 %	4.4 %	1.3 %	7.5 %	5.4 %	4.5 %	5.0 %	11.1 %	14.8 %	20.8 %
North Macedonia	USD millions	147	125	116	110	110	108	104	109	103	114	146	154
	Share of GDP	1.7 %	1.4 %	1.3 %	1.2 %	1.2 %	1.1 %	1.0 %	1.0 %	0.9 %	0.9 %	1.2 %	1.3 %
	Share for Equipment	–	–	–	–	7.3 %	5.9 %	11.1 %	8.4 %	6.5 %	11.1 %	13.8 %	11.4 %
Serbia	USD millions	959	930	893	864	836	845	813	806	865	795	1,144	1,086
	Share of GDP	2.2 %	2.1 %	2.0 %	2.0 %	1.9 %	1.9 %	1.8 %	1.7 %	1.8 %	1.6 %	2.2 %	2.1 %
	Share for Equipment	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–

Note: USD values are used to allow comparison between states; they are at constant 2019 prices and using the 2019 average exchange rate for all years.  
Figures are for spending from the national budgets; aid is not included (it is counted as spending for the donor state). Figures in italics are SIPRI estimates. – no data available  
Sources: SIPRI Military expenditure database, May 2021 (<https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>); NATO ([https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_49198.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49198.htm)).

Table 2  
**Imports of major arms by Western Balkan states, 2001–2020**  
 (Values are SIPRI trend-indicator values in millions)

	2001–2005	2006–2010	2011–2015	2016–2020
<b>Albania</b>	9	5	36	11
<b>Bosnia-Herzegovina</b>	–	–	–	2
<b>Croatia</b>	91	134	76	40
<b>Kosovo</b>	–	–	1	1
<b>Montenegro</b>	–	–	1	17
<b>North Macedonia</b>	112	<0.5	1	<0.5
<b>Serbia</b>	27	16	<0.5	373

Source: SIPRI arms transfers database, May 2021 (<https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>).

centive Program (ERIP) of the USA, which has allocated USD 116 million since September 2018 in military aid to Western Balkan allies to buy equipment from the USA in order to replace equipment of Soviet/Russian origin.<sup>9</sup> Other US aid has come through more traditional programmes such as Foreign Military Financing (FMF).<sup>10</sup> Future US aid may be an extension of ERIP or a return to the other programmes.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, additional aid has come and is likely to continue from European NATO members on an ad-hoc basis and in the form of direct transfers of (second-hand) equipment, as well as financial aid to buy equipment from the donor's industry or generous credit arrangements for arms orders.

Acquisitions of major arms have for most Western Balkan states been very small in recent years, generally limited to small numbers of light armoured vehicles and light helicopters. Only Croatia and Serbia have acquired heavier major arms, including combat aircraft. With the exception of Serbia, none of the Western Balkan states has an arms industry of any significance. Serbia's arms industry is more substantial and produces some types of major arms, even exporting some,<sup>12</sup> but remains limited in its capabilities. For major arms, all 7 states are therefore dependent on foreign suppliers.

In general, military spending, both in absolute terms and as a percentage of the economy (GDP), arms acquisitions and acquisition plans and the share of the budget devoted to equipment procurement, have been rather limited in the last decade. Albania, Montenegro and North

Macedonia in 2020 had still the lowest military spending of all NATO members. Even with the increase in arms imports in 2016–2020, total imports for the region accounted for only 0.3 % of the global total. However, the Western Balkans states have in most cases increased their spending and arms acquisitions over the last few years based on actual decisions, plans or adopted policies, which likely to further increase in the coming few years.

## Albania

When Albania joined NATO in 2009, it had largely eliminated all major arms from its inventory. For the army there remained a handful of outdated major arms, the navy consisted of less than a dozen small ships and craft and most maritime patrol was carried out by the coast guard, while the air force had only a small number of second-hand helicopters delivered between 2003 and 2007 as aid from Italy and Germany.<sup>13</sup>

In 2020 military spending was USD 222 million, which was 1.5 % of the GDP. Since 2009, Albania's military spending has mostly remained just below that level.

Imports of major arms increased soon after joining NATO but remained limited to 6 helicopters, bought new from France and Germany, 143 second-hand light armoured vehicles from the USA and 8 from Italy. The vehicles were delivered as aid. In addition, the USA agreed in 2019 to supply

Table 3  
Strength of armed forces of Western Balkan states, 2006–2020

Country		Personnel	Tanks	Other armour	Artillery over 100 mm	Combat aircraft	Helicopters
Albania	2006	11,020	40	123	938	–	10
	2011	14,425	3	6	18	–	16
	2016	8,000	–	–	12	–	26
	2020	8,000	–	151	12	–	26
Bosnia-Herzegovina	2006	11,865	194	194	375	15	21
	2011	10,577	334	347	1,595	18	45
	2016	10,500	45	80	224	–	35
	2020	10,500	45	80	224	–	35
Croatia	2006	20,800	291	158	1,098	27	46
	2011	18,600	261	193	1,094	10	40
	2016	15,550	75	499	192	9	45
	2020	15,200	75	523	167	11	55
Kosovo	2006	n. a. *	–	–	–	–	–
	2011	2,500	–	–	–	–	–
	2016	2,500	–	10	–	–	–
	2020	2,500**	–	16	–	–	–
Montenegro	2006	7,300	***	***	***	***	8
	2011	2,984	–	18	109	–	15
	2016	2,080	–	16	73	–	1
	2020	2,350	–	37	62	–	17
North Macedonia	2006	10,890	61	269	370	–	19
	2011	8,000	31	263	126	–	22
	2016	8,000	31	221	126	–	12
	2020	8,000	31	211	131	–	16
Serbia	2006	39,686	962	813	1,930	67	103
	2011	28,184	212	456	409	60	60
	2016	28,150	260	456	409	36	62
	2020	28,150	214	542	343	40	74

Note: \* Kosovo was still fully part of Serbia in 2006; \*\* Being increased to 5,000; \*\*\* no data available  
Source: IISS Military Balance; SIPRI Arms Trade Database; media sources.



3 second-hand helicopters as USD 30 million aid under the ERIP.<sup>14</sup> Additional arms supplies have come from Turkey under a military cooperation agreement signed mid-2020 that included financial aid to be used to buy Turkish military equipment.<sup>15</sup> Rifles have been delivered, but also major weapons may be supplied in the near future.<sup>16</sup>

## Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina established single state-level armed forces in the early 2000s,<sup>17</sup> but reduced its inventory significantly over the last fifteen years. By 2020, the armed forces consisted of 10,500 active personnel. However, it retained a fair number of major arms, including 45 tanks, 224 pieces of artillery and 35 helicopters, mostly inherited from Yugoslavia.

In 2020 military spending was USD 168 million, a similar level as it had been since 2011 and different from the trend of clear increases in recent years seen in other states in the region. Spending in 2020 was 0.9% of the GDP, by far the lowest in the region.

Arms imports since 2001 have been limited to 20 light armoured vehicles received as aid between 2017 and 2020 from the USA. The USA will also provide USD 30.7 million as aid for 4 helicopters under the ERIP.<sup>18</sup>

## Croatia

Since joining NATO in 2009, Croatia has significantly reduced its personnel strength and inventory. By 2020, the armed forces consisted of 15,200 personnel. Like Bosnia and Herzegovina, a fair amount of major arms, including 75 tanks and 11 combat aircraft remained. Concerning the latter, Croatia is the only state with Serbia in the region that decided to maintain that capability.

In 2020, Croatia was the second largest military spender in the Western Balkans after Serbia. In

2020 it accounted for 36 percent of the regional total. Since 2009, its military spending remained mostly just under USD 1 billion or on average 1.7% of its annual GDP. However, spending increased in 2019 and 2020 and is likely to continue to increase if only to pay for the selected new combat aircraft.

Before 2009, Russia was the largest supplier of major arms to Croatia. After joining NATO, the USA became the largest supplier of arms to Croatia. In 2013–2018, Croatia received 218 armored vehicles and 16 combat helicopters with anti-tank missiles from the USA as military aid. Additional supplies from the USA that were ordered, included 76 Bradley infantry fighting vehicles partly funded by USD 25 million of ERIP aid,<sup>19</sup> 2 helicopters and 1,703 anti-tank missiles.

Plans have been announced over the last decade for the acquisition of new major arms, including combat aircraft and armoured vehicles. While those plans have often been delayed largely for financial reasons, in mid-2021 Croatia selected 12 Rafale combat aircraft from France to replace its old combat aircraft. However, the final contract reportedly valued at

EUR 999 million – more or less the total current annual defence budget – is still to be finalized.<sup>20</sup>

## Kosovo

Since 2009, the Kosovo Security Force (KSF) has fulfilled the territorial defence role. In December 2018 Kosovo officially transformed this force into an army. Its strength of 2,500 troops was to be expanded to a maximum 5,000.<sup>21</sup> The KSF was very lightly equipped with a few light armoured vehicles as the only major arms. While some additional major arms have been acquired, the new army remains lightly equipped and there are no known plans to change that.

Kosovo's military spending in 2020 was USD 79 million. Military spending has since 2009 increased almost every year and was in 2020

### KEY TAKEAWAY

Military spending, both in absolute terms and as percentage of the economy (GDP), arms acquisitions and acquisition plans, and the share of the budget devoted to equipment procurement have been rather limited in the last decade. However, in most states they increased in the last few years and are, based on actual decisions, published plans or adopted policies, likely to increase further in the coming few years. Despite this upward trend, growth remains limited as local economies are small, military aid as provided by various states also has remained limited, and none of the states seems to perceive an urgent need to significantly and rapidly expand the capabilities of its armed forces.

187% higher than in 2009, while the share of GDP more than doubled from 0.5% to 1.1%. Slight increases were in 2020 planned for 2021 and 2022.<sup>22</sup>

The USA has supported the formation of the Kosovo armed forces.<sup>23</sup> Part of the support has been in the form of increased military aid under FMF and other US Department of Defense programmes for equipment and training: USD 2.1 was increased to USD 6 million annually in 2009 to 2017, to USD 11.3 million in 2018 and to USD 23.3 million in 2019.<sup>24</sup>

Several NATO members have supplied equipment to Kosovo in recent years. However, the only major arms supplied have been light armoured vehicles: at least 10 delivered by Turkey as aid in 2014 and between 6 and 34 by the USA in 2020, probably also as aid. With the transformation to a regular armed force and the planned expansion of troop strength, it is likely that new equipment will be acquired, including some major arms. In mid-2021 Kosovo received 5 armoured personnel carriers as aid from the USA.<sup>25</sup> Considering the fact that most NATO members did not support the formation of the armed forces, they are unlikely to supply any major arms to it. The supplies have also irritated Serbia.<sup>26</sup>

## Montenegro

The active strength of Montenegro's armed forces has been drastically reduced since its independence in 2006 to 2,350 personnel in 2020 – the smallest armed forces in the Western Balkans – with a small inventory of major arms largely inherited from Serbia and Montenegro.

In 2020, Montenegro's military spending was at USD 102 million. Spending increased slowly between 2016 and 2019 but remained during all these years at 1.4% of its GDP. However, in 2020 spending increased by 29% and jumped to 2.1% of its GDP. The increase occurred amid Montenegro's efforts to modernize its arms forces in order to ensure NATO operational readiness requirements.<sup>27</sup> A large part of the increase has been used for equipment: the share of spending for equipment increased from 5% in 2017 to 20.8% in 2020.

Acquisitions of major arms have been very limited. None were delivered between 2006 and 2014 and in the last 5 years Montenegro acquired only

5 light armoured vehicles and 4 helicopters from the USA and a light armoured vehicle from Turkey. However, 62 more light armoured vehicles are to be delivered soon by the USA, explaining most of the increase in equipment spending.

## North Macedonia

When North Macedonia joined NATO in 2020, its armed forces were largely equipped with a limited number of major arms that remained from Yugoslavia, and a somewhat larger number of major arms imported just before and during the 2001 civil war with the National Liberation Army.

Military spending, which had tripled between 2000 and 2001 (from 1.9% of GDP to 6.1%), decreased in 2002 reaching an annual average of USD 109 million (an average of 1.1% of GDP) in 2011–2018. Spending increased 28% in 2019 compared to 2018, as the process of joining NATO was being finalized, and slightly more in 2020, when North Macedonia became a NATO member to USD 158 million (1.2% and 1.3% of GDP respectively).

As soon as the conflict had ended in late 2001, arms acquisitions dropped to almost nothing: only 4 small second-hand helicopters and 2 light armoured vehicles were identified to have been delivered since 2001. However, a major modernization programme for the army started in 2019. This includes 96 light armoured vehicles from the USA and 54 or 56 armoured personnel carriers from Canada (but ordered via the USA). In December 2019 North Macedonia's defence minister put a EUR 150 million price tag on the acquisitions to be spread over some 10 years of which EUR 30 million would be US aid under the ERIP.<sup>28</sup> The first light armoured vehicles were ordered late 2020 and the parliament approved all vehicles in December 2020.<sup>29</sup>

## Serbia

Serbia's armed forces were significantly reduced in size between 2006 and 2011. Since around 2011, troop strength and inventory has remained fairly stable and the largest in the Western Balkans – it has for example almost more personnel than the two next largest in the region (Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina) together, and more tanks and combat aircraft than the other six to-

gether. However, much of the equipment is becoming outdated while the country has embarked on a modernization missions that includes the acquisition of major arms domestically produced, as well as abroad.<sup>30</sup>

Serbia has with Croatia, been the by far largest military spender in the Western Balkans. While in 2018 spending was at its lowest level since 2009, spending has increased 44 % in 2019, which was then followed by a 5 % decline in 2020. Serbia's military spending in 2020 was USD 1.1 billion, just above Croatia's. Serbia's share of GDP spent on the military has consistently been the highest in the region. With a spending increase in 2019, it jumped from 1.6 % in 2018 to 2.2 % in 2019 and 2.1 % in 2020.

Between 2001 and 2015, the volume of major arms imported by Serbia was small, consisting mainly of second-hand air defence systems and aircraft from Montenegro. In the period of 2016–2020, arms imports to Serbia soared as plans for inventory modernization started to be implemented. Serbia became by far the largest arms

importer in the region, accounting for 84 % of the volume of imports of major arms. Russia was the main supplier of major arms to Serbia, accounting for 72 % of total Serbian arms imports in 2016–2020. Deliveries from Russia included 6 MiG-29 combat aircraft, 4 combat helicopters, 11 tanks and 6 mobile air defence systems. Some of these arms were supplied as military aid. Between 2016 and 2020, Serbia also imported 4 second-hand MiG-29 from Belarus as military aid, 9 armed drones from China and 6 light helicopters from Germany. Additional major arms are on order for delivery in 2021, including 4 MiG-29 from Belarus, 19 tanks from Russia – both in form of military assistance – and 50 portable surface-to-air missiles from France. Serbia has also acquired major arms from its own arms industry, which is capable of modernizing most of the existing inventory.<sup>31</sup> While ideas and plans have been proposed for the future acquisitions of new combat aircraft, air defence systems (from China or Russia), armed drones (from Turkey) and other major arms to partly replace the inventory inherited from Yugoslavia, the status of this purchase remains unclear.<sup>32</sup>

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## SHOULD WE WORRY ABOUT THE LOOMING ARMS RACE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS?

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During the last few years, the Western Balkans has faced several worrying trends. Due to prolonged enlargement fatigue, the EU has ceased to be “the only show in town”. The crisis in Ukraine has deteriorated relations between Russia and the West, turning the region into yet another zone of their open geopolitical competition. In addition to this, a host of other non-Western players have also stepped up their presence in the region, including China, Turkey and the Gulf states. To make things worse, fledgling democracies in the region have experienced serious backsliding under the pressure of growing authoritarian populism. All of this has been accompanied by heated nationalist rhetoric and occasional saber-rattling.

While a lot of ink has been spilled about different facets of the above-described regional deterioration, its military dimension has often been neglected. This is to an extent understandable as the relapse of armed conflict still doesn't seem to be in the cards despite the occasional media reporting about the looming arms race. In the rest of this article, I analyze the recent trends in defence spending and military dynamics. I argue that although there is no reason for immediate concern, the trends are worrying, and there is no reason to be complacent.

### Rhetorical arms race

An arms race can be defined as an antagonistic relationship between two or more parties who rapidly compete in the quality or quantity of their armaments.<sup>1</sup> The rhetoric of ‘arms race’ started to appear in the Western Balkans in late 2015 when the Croatian media reported about the intention of the Croatian Armed Forces to acquire a multiple rocket launcher (M270 MLRS) from the U.S.<sup>2</sup> As a system with the capacity to deliver ballistic missiles in the range of 300 km, it was immediately framed as a weapon that could dramatically change the military balance in the region.<sup>3</sup> Aleksandar Vučić, who was the Serbian Prime Minister



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at the time, immediately replied: ‘Either they will give up on it, or we will have to find an answer to that, too’.<sup>4</sup> Soon after that, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin of the Russian Federation visited Belgrade to discuss Serbia's arms acquisition. On that occasion, he brought Vučić a present: a toy model of the Russian S-300 air-defense missile system.<sup>5</sup>

Although neither M270 MLRS nor S300 was eventually acquired, in the following years, both Serbia and Croatia, as well as other states in the re-

### KEY TAKEAWAY

This article analyses the specter of an arms race which has recently re-appeared in the Western Balkans. The heated rhetoric has been accompanied by growing defense expenditure and accelerated military modernization, while often intransparent military acquisitions have raised concerns that the countries still abide by the conventional arms control regime. To avoid unwanted escalation in the future, the international community should refrain from selling the countries in the region new weapons systems that can undermine military balance, while the region should avoid inflammatory rhetoric and sensationalist media reporting.

gion have increased their investments in military modernization and either bought or received as donations new aircraft, helicopters, tanks, armored vehicles, and artillery systems. The media across the region often reported about these acquisitions in a sensationalist fashion, either touting them as a game-changer in the balance of power or as yet another reason to worry about the looming arms race.<sup>6</sup> In Serbia, the head of the Military Intelligence Agency of the Republic of Serbia, Zoran Stojković, put it even more bluntly: 'The arms race which is gaining steam in the world is reflecting on our region as well, and this is concerning for us as a neutral country'.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Croatia's discussions to potentially reintroduce obligatory military conscription<sup>8</sup> have provoked similar discussions in Serbia.<sup>9</sup> All this raised concerns in Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>10</sup> but also in Kosovo, where it was used as another justification for the long-announced transformation of the Kosovo Security Forces into the Kosovo Armed Forces.<sup>11</sup>

The temperature heated to red-hot in October 2019 when instead of the toy model, Russia brought its flagship air-defense system S-400 to Serbia for a joint military exercise. Although Serbia denied its interest in buying the long-range S-400, a contract was signed with the Russian Federation to acquire 16 batteries of the short-range Pantsir S missile system.<sup>12</sup> As a result, the U.S. Administration warned that Serbia might be affected by U.S. secondary sanctions. However, Serbian

president Vučić justified his moves by stating that he cannot allow Serbia to be a „Bambi for slaughter” while Croatia and Albania arm themselves without any restraints.<sup>13</sup>

### Military modernization and conventional arms control

All this has been followed by an increase in defense spending, mirroring trends across Eastern Europe, although not to the extent that would match the arms race rhetoric. While defense spending per capita has gone up since 2014 in most countries the increases as a percentage of GDP are not that big (Table 1). Importantly, over the observed period, most countries in the region increased the share of their defense budget used on equipment, although they still fall short of NATO 20% recommendation. Serbia, for example has gradually increased the share of its defense budget used on equipment from a mere 3.8% in 2014 to 11.8% in 2019.<sup>14</sup> However, the military modernization across the region has not yet undermined the conventional arms control regime established by the Dayton Agreement (Annex 1B, Art. 4) and the 1996 Florence Agreement. As of 2020, all the conventional forces are still well below the limits set by the Florence Treaty, which established the sub-regional conventional arms control regime and a regional military balance in the Western Balkans.<sup>15</sup>

Table 1  
Military expenditures in the Western Balkans 2014–2020

	2014		2020	
	per capita in US\$	percentage of GDP	per capita in US\$	percentage of GDP
Albania	61.5	1.30%	77.2	1.50%
Bosnia and Herzegovina	55.8	1%	51.1	0.90%
Croatia	249.9	1.80%	252.1	1.80%
Kosovo	29.4	0.70%	42.2	1.10%
Montenegro	107.8	1.50%	162.5	2.10%
North Macedonia	59.8	1.10%	75.8	1.30%
Serbia	102.6	1.90%	128.3	2.10%

Source: SIPRI

## No reason to be complacent

Although the specter of an arms race is still only rhetorical, this is no reason to be complacent.

The language of military competition, existential threats and arms races undermines trust and propel security dilemmas. This is especially problematic in a region that was struck by a vicious war only two decades ago and which still has several open wounds, most notably in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. While the sub-regional conventional arms control regime is still complied with, it does not cover the qualitative side of the equation and new categories of weaponry such as drones. For instance, Serbia has recently become the first European country to purchase Chinese military drones.<sup>16</sup> The announced transformation of the Kosovo Security Forces into the Kosovo Armed Forces was termed in Serbia as "the most direct threat to peace and stability in the region"<sup>17</sup> while the Russian officials stated that the creation of a new military

force on the territory of one of the signatories would directly violate the Dayton Peace Agreement and the Article 4 of its Annex 1B.<sup>18</sup>

To defuse a potential translation of arms race rhetoric into practice, policymakers across the region should refrain from inflammatory statements while the media should strive to avoid unnecessary sensationalism. Countries in the region have a full right to modernize their militaries, but they should make sure to make their modernization plans and arms purchases transparent and non-threatening to their neighbors, which has not always been the case. The international community should closely follow the developments in this area and refrain from supplying the Western Balkan states with new weapon systems that could change the military balance. These measures alone certainly cannot be a substitute for the political solutions to the key unresolved issues in the region. Still, they can nevertheless prevent the outburst of an unwanted escalation.

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A blue-tinted photograph of a wall. In the upper left, a white dove is painted on the wall, facing right. In the lower right, a large, colorful kite is painted on the wall, featuring various patterns and colors. The kite is also facing right. The wall has a rough, textured appearance. The overall image has a blue tint.

# POLITICAL TRENDS & DYNAMICS

## OVERVIEW

THIS SECTION AIMS TO PROVIDE A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS AND UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN SECURITY, WHICH INCLUDES STRUCTURAL SOURCES OF CONFLICT SUCH AS SOCIAL TENSIONS BROUGHT ABOUT BY UNFINISHED DEMOCRATIZATION, SOCIAL OR ECONOMIC INEQUALITIES OR ECOLOGICAL CHALLENGES, FOR INSTANCE. THE BRIEFINGS COVER FOURTEEN COUNTRIES IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE: THE SEVEN POST-YUGOSLAV COUNTRIES, ALBANIA, GREECE, TURKEY, CYPRUS, BULGARIA, ROMANIA, AND MOLDOVA.



## ELECTIONS

The second quarter of 2021 saw a number of important, if sometimes inconclusive, electoral contests.

Polling clerks are seen in front of an apartment for COVID-19 patients to cast their votes during the parliamentary elections at a polling station in Sofia, Bulgaria on April 04, 2021



**Bulgaria** held long-awaited Parliamentary elections on April 4th, amid a long-running political crisis – centered on a number of corruption scandals – engulfing the GERB-led government of former Prime Minister Boyko Borissov. Amidst a considerable amount of voter volatility, the result of the election was hard to predict. The (until then) ruling GERB came first, but secured only 25.8% of votes and 75 seats in the 240 seat Parliament, down from 32.6% of votes in the 2017 elections, resulting in a loss of exactly 20 seats. Nor did GERB's traditional rival, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) have much reason to celebrate – the party won only 14.8% of votes, losing almost half its Parliamentary seats. Arguably, the real winner of the election was the big-tent, populist party 'There is such a People' (ITN), founded in early 2020 by Bulgarian singer and TV host Slavi Trifonov, which came second with 17.4% of votes and 51 seats in the new Parliament. Democratic Bulgaria, an alliance of three smaller parties formed in 2018, also won 9.3% of votes (27 seats), while another small new grouping 'Stand Up! Mafia, Get Out!' won 4.6% of votes (14 seats). The Movement of Rights and Freedoms (DPS), largely representing the Turkish minority, won 10.4% of votes, or 30 seats. With the Bulgarian Parliament fragmented more than ever, it was clear that government formation would be no easy task. Borissov initially floated the idea of a technocratic

government, yet a government involving GERB was roundly rejected by most other parties. After GERB failed to form a government, the mandate to try to form a new government passed to Trifonov's ITN, yet Trifonov made it clear that he did not wish to try to form a government given the existing Parliamentary arithmetic. With the BSP also unable to form a ruling majority, President Rumen Radev appointed a caretaker government to run the country until a new election is held. Bulgarians are now due to go to the polls for a second time on July 11th, yet the repeated election does not seem likely to deliver a radically different result. At present, opinion polls show ITN closing the gap with GERB in terms of popular support. Yet a path towards a stable majority seems far from evident.

People arrive to cast their votes for the general elections in Tirana, Albania on April 25, 2021.



Parliamentary elections were also held in **Albania**, amidst the usual political tensions bordering on – and occasionally spilling over into – violence. The election was particularly important given that the opposition parties had abandoned the Albanian Parliament in February 2019, resigning en masse, which had been followed by an opposition boycott of local elections in the same year. Despite accusations that free and fair conditions for elections did not exist, opposition parties took part in the elections, helping to bring to a close a long-running political crisis and returning the opposition to the country's main representative and legislative institution. The result of the Parliamentary elections was perhaps most remarkable for the fact that the ruling Socialists of Prime Minister Edi Rama won almost exactly the same number of votes as in the 2017 Parlia-



mentary elections, as well as the same number of seats – 74 in the 140 seat Parliament. This ensured Rama's re-election as Prime Minister for a record third mandate. Meanwhile, the opposition Democratic Party, while losing, improved its performance significantly, winning 39.4% of votes and 59 seats, up from 28.8% in 2017. The biggest loser by far was the Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI), formerly led by Albanian President Ilir Meta, whose support collapsed from 14.3% in 2017 to just 6.8%. The party lost three-quarters of its MPs. Prime Minister Edi Rama now seems set to lead the country for another four years.

A general view is seen ahead of General Elections in Tirana, Albania on April 23, 2021.



**Cyprus** also held legislative elections on May 30th, electing the 56 member of its House of Representatives. Broadly speaking, the election did not deliver many surprises. As expected, the ruling centre-right Democratic Rally emerged in first place with 27.8% of the vote and 17 seats (losing one seat overall), while the centre-left Progressive Party of Working People (AKEL) won 22.3% of the vote and 15 seats (also losing one seat). While the political centre held its ground, it was notable that the far-right, ultra-nationalist National Popular Front (ELAM) made gains, doubling its number of seats to four. The Democratic Front, a centrist new grouping, also gained four seats in the elections. Given that Cyprus has a presidential political system, where President Nicos Anastasiades of the Democratic Rally is both head of state and head of government, the result of the election will result in more 'business as usual'. On June 22nd, Anastasiades implemented a small cabinet reshuffle, replacing the health minister and the recently resigned minister of justice.

Another important election looms in **Moldova** on July 11th, when Moldovans will head to the polls to elect a new Parliament. The country has been engulfed in a political crisis since at least the November 2020 presidential election, which saw Maia Sandu of the pro-European PAS being elected President. Since then, Sandu and PAS have been trying to force an early Parliamentary election, hoping to capitalise on their support, which the formerly ruling pro-Russian PSRM has been resisting. Opinion polling suggests that Sandu's PAS is in the lead, yet the extent of that lead over the PSRM varies wildly, from 0.4% to 21.2%. Much about the country's reform prospects and future geopolitical direction hinges on the outcome of this election.

## GOVERNMENTS RISE AND SHAKE

After year of unstable and unwieldy government coalitions, which typically failed to last their full term in power, **Kosovo** finally got a stable new government under the leadership of Prime Minister Albin Kurti on March 22nd. With Kurti's Vetëvendosje Movement having won 58 seats in the 120 seat Parliament in the February 14th Parliamentary elections, there seemed little doubt as to who would form the next government. Together with parties representing Kosovo's ethnic minorities, the new Kurti Cabinet was voted in with 67 votes in the 120 seat Kosovo Parliament. The problem of how to include Kosovo Serb representatives in the government, given Kurti's sharp rhetoric directed against the Belgrade-backed Srpska Lista in the past, was also navigated, with Srpska Lista securing one ministerial post, in line with constitutional requirements. Given Vetëvendosje's large share of seats in Parliament, the Kurti Government has all the preconditions in place to see out its full term in power. Prime Minister Kurti has an ambitious domestic reform agenda, focused on fighting corruption, improving the rule of law and wider governance in Kosovo, with huge expectations among his supporters. None of these tasks will be simple, particularly for a party which is used to being in opposition – and practicing opposition politics. Yet an arguably even bigger challenge will be conducting negotiations on normalizing relations with Serbia. Kurti has made it clear that this is not a particularly pressing matter for him personally. Yet advancing



the negotiations is a priority for the international community. Indeed, in early 2020 it was largely Kurti's intransigence on this front that brought about the fall of his previous, short-lived government; if anything, it is this problem that could be the biggest threat to the longevity of Kurti's current government. A June 15th meeting between Kurti and Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic in Brussels appeared to go anything but smoothly, or constructively.

Newly elected Prime Minister of Kosovo Albin Kurti addresses members of the parliament after the parliamentary voting session in Pristina on March 22, 2021.



Vjosa Osmani was elected President by Kosovo's Parliament on April 4th, thus rounding off the process of electing the country's new leadership, following the election of the Kurti Government on March 22nd. Although Prime Minister Albin Kurti's Vetëvendosje Movement had won a near majority in the February 14th Parliamentary elections, paving the way for quick election of a new government with the support of minority parties, the election of a new President of Kosovo was a more challenging task. At a minimum, two-thirds of MPs needed to be present in the Parliamentary chamber for an ordinary majority to be able to appoint the next president. The opposition could thus have blocked the election process, but with the threat of fresh elections hanging in the air if Osmani was not voted in, the opposition Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) decided to facilitate the election of the new president.

**Montenegro's** government continued to lurch from one crisis to another. At the end of March, (now former) Minister of Justice Vladimir Leposavić got himself into hot water by apparently querying whether the massacre of Bosniak

men in Srebrenica in 1995 by Bosnia Serb forces really constituted an act of genocide or not. After sharp criticism from Western embassies, Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić proposed that Leposavić be sacked at the beginning of April; Leposavić refused to resign, despite calls for him to do so, trying to walk back his initial comments. Krivokapić's request to dismiss Leposavić was sent to Parliament, but set aside, as it became apparent that the ruling majority was divided on the issue, with the Democratic Front, the biggest grouping, rejecting the dismissal. Meanwhile, the ruling majority could not agree on the adoption of a budget for 2021 until mid-June, with the Democratic Front conditioning its support for the budget on the adoption of legal changes to the law on the public prosecution. While Parliament adopted the legal changes on May 12th, President Milo Đukanović refused to sign off on them, forcing a re-vote in Parliament. By late May, the Democratic Front was demanding a reshuffle of Krivokapić's technocratic cabinet to include more political figures from the ruling majority. The DF also severely criticized Krivokapić for failing to sign a Basic Agreement with the Serbian Orthodox Church, setting out its rights and obligations in Montenegro. All of these crises came to a head in mid-June – although the country's 2021 budget was finally adopted, the DF began a boycott of Parliament and demanded talks on a new government after Minister Vladimir Leposavić was finally ousted from office thanks to the votes of the opposition Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) and URA, the smallest grouping within the ruling coalition. It now remains to be seen whether – indeed if – the current crisis can be defused. A range of scenarios – including early elections, or a new government – appear to be in play.

The position of **Albanian** President Ilir Meta also looked rather shaky. On June 9th, the outgoing Socialist-dominated Parliament passed a motion to dismiss him for office over his actions ahead of the April 25th Parliamentary elections in the country. President Meta stands accused of violating 16 articles of the country's constitution, primarily relating to his involvement in the election campaign. Meta sought to portray himself as unphased by Parliament's move. The Albanian Constitutional Court will now need to rule on whether Meta has indeed violated the constitution and whether he should be ousted from his office.



Former Albanian Prime Minister Sali Berisha speaks to the media outside the prosecution office after he testified on an assassination attempt on deputy Tom Doshi in Tirana, Albania on March 9, 2015.



## GREEN WAVE

The wave of support for green, environmental movements that has been sweeping some corners of Europe also appears to be coming to the Balkans. Environmental protests are nothing new to the region, having sprung up over the last few years on an issue basis, often in line with the threats posed to local communities. Most prominent across the region have been protests against mini-hydroelectric plants, which are seen by many to cause significant damage to the local environment and agricultural communities for little overall benefit.

Now, green politics seems to be spilling over into the electoral arena. In **Croatia**, local elections held in two rounds during the second half of May delivered a ground-breaking result, as the country's capital Zagreb elected Tomislav Tomašević, a green-leftists candidate, as mayor. Just as remarkably, his We Can! Coalition won almost half the seats in the Zagreb City Assembly, pushing the nationally ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) into a distant second place, while the Social Democratic Party (SDP), traditionally the other pillar of the Croatian two-party political system was all but obliterated in Zagreb.

The success of Tomašević and We Can! in Zagreb, as well as the rise of the Greens in Germany, is giving many politicians and would-be politicians in the region ideas. Some grassroots movements, most visibly in **Serbia**, are contemplating entering the formal electoral arena, as the country begins the long countdown to Parliamentary, Presidential and Belgrade City elections in 2021.

In the second round of the local elections in Croatia, a member of the European Union, the new mayor of the capital Zagreb was Tomislav Tomasevic, from the We Can Do It Alliance.



Yet more established politicians are also trying to jump on the green bandwagon in Serbia and rebrand themselves, most clearly Nebojša Zelenović, a former mayor from the west of the country. In **North Macedonia** too, there are signs that the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), the biggest party representing the country's ethnic Albanians, is also considering a green revamp. What will become of green politics in the region remains to be seen, but with the decline of EU enlargement as a guiding motive, if not ideology, the space for new political ideas and orientations is clearly there.

## BILATERAL RELATIONS

After a June 4th Council of Europe decision to impose sanctions on **Belarus** by banning overflight of EU airspace and landing/take-off from airports within the EU for Belarussian flights of all kinds, several EU candidate countries decided to follow suit. On June 21st, Brussels announced that Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia had decided to implement the same restrictions. Belgrade's reported move was particularly surprising, given its good relations with Minsk.

**North Macedonia's** run of bad luck with its neighbours seems to continue. Hopes were running high in Skopje, perhaps unrealistically so, that April's elections in Bulgaria would somehow bring about an end to Sofia's blockade of North Macedonia's accession negotiations. Yet the inconclusive result of the elections in Bulgaria also failed to provide any resolution to the Bulgarian roadblock on Skopje's path to the EU. The caretaker govern-



ment installed to manage the affairs of state in Bulgaria until a new government is elected made it clear that it did not feel that it had the mandate to remove the Bulgarian veto. Ahead of the June meeting of the EU Council of Ministers, there had been hopes that a breakthrough might be made in the latest dispute between Sofia and Skopje centered on the question of (North) Macedonian identity. However, Skopje had no such luck, with the Bulgarian side officially backing its neighbour's EU accession ambitions, but maintaining that progress needed to be made in resolving their disagreement over Macedonian identity and history before the veto could be lifted.

Meanwhile, Skopje's relations with Athens have been cordial for the most part, even following the election of the current centre-right Mitsotakis Government in **Greece**. Yet even here, there were signs of (re)newed friction. After some possibly careless tweets by North Macedonia's Prime Minister Zoran Zaev in late June in which he referred to the national football team as being made up of 'Macedonian' players, the Mitsotakis Government appeared to leak suggestions to the Greek media that it was considering delaying several protocols to be signed with its northern neighbour as part of the implementation of the Prespa Agreement.

At the end of June the European Parliament adopted a resolution on **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, expressing strong support for the country's integration into the European Union and welcoming the country's commitment to advancing on this path. It said that the reforms in the areas of democratic functionality, rule of law, fundamental rights and public administration are crucial for that to happen.

It has been reported that the candidate of Germany, Christian Schmidt, has been elected as the new high representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina.



Some of the MEPs from **Croatia** sharply criticized the draft European Parliament report in which there is no mention of the rights of the country's constituent peoples. Željana Zovko (Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ)/European People's Party (EPP)) said during the debate at the plenary meeting of the European Parliament that the report was an attempt at erasing the constituent status of the Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

## GHOSTS OF THE PAST

On June 8th, the Mechanism for International Criminal Tribunals in The Hague confirmed Bosnian Serb military leader **Ratko Mladić's** life sentence for his role in atrocities committed during the Bosnian war. The Court's appeals chamber upheld the original verdict convicting Mladić of genocide in Srebrenica in 1995, persecution of Bosniaks and Croats throughout Bosnia, and terrorising the population of Sarajevo. With this, one of the most important cases before the ICTY was brought to an effective close. In another important case, the retrial of Serbian State Security officials Jovica Stanišić and Franko Simatović is expected to be concluded with a verdict to be delivered by June 30th. While Mladić awaits serving his sentence, Radovan Karadžić, the Bosnian Serb political leader, was transferred to begin serving his life sentence in the UK.

The ghosts of the recent past also continued to haunt present day relations between the ex-Yugoslav states. **Croatia's** President Zoran Milanović stated in mid-April that **Serbia** must help to resolve the issue of missing Croatian soldiers and civilians from the 1992-1995 war before it can hope to join the European Union. At the same time, at the end of May, Milanović himself courted heavy controversy within Croatia and the region by restoring war honours to Branimir Glavaš, a former Croatian general who has been convicted of war crimes, but is now undergoing retrial. Milanović claimed that, under the law, he had no option but to restore the honours to Glavaš, pending the end of his retrial; others begged to differ.

Back in **Serbia**, excavations at the abandoned Kizevak mine in central Serbia in the second half of May yielded the bodies of at least nine peo-

ple, suspected victims from the 1998–1999 war in Kosovo. The bodies are thought to be the remains of ethnic Albanians killed in Kosovo and later removed to central Serbia in order to cover up crimes.

Eighty years after the establishment of the biggest Second World War concentration camp in the Balkans in **Jasenovac**, Croatian officials, along with representatives of the country's Serbs, Jews, and Roma – the camps main victims – commemorated the camp's victims together on April 22nd. After several years in which representatives of Serbian, Jewish and Roma victims boycotted the official state commemoration at Jasenovac – citing lack of official efforts to deny WW2-revisionism in Croatia – the joint commemoration was seen as a positive development in many quarters in Croatia. Almost a month later, on May 13th representatives of the Serb community in the Croatian town of Glina and other antifascist activists commemorated the killing of 400 local Serb civilians by forces of the Nazi-allied Ustaša regime in the Second World War.

At the beginning of July, **Kosovo's** parliament adopted a resolution condemning the 1995 massacre of thousands of Bosnian Muslim men and boys in Srebrenica by Bosnian Serb forces, officially recognising it as genocide. The resolution, initiated by the Vakrat coalition of parties representing the Bosnian minority in Kosovo, was approved by 89 lawmakers in the 120-seat parliament. None voted against. The Srpska Lista party of Kosovo's ethnic Serbian minority boycotted the debate on the resolution and did not take part in the vote.



## PARAMILITARY GROUPS AND WEAPONS TRAFFICKING IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

*Hikmet Karčić*

The connection between state structures and organized crime in the Western Balkans was a significant feature of the break-up of Yugoslavia and the wars which followed. The most visible and well-documented cooperation of this sort was between the Serbian State Security (SDB)<sup>1</sup> and various proxy paramilitary units which it organized, trained, and directed during the Yugoslav wars, which were in turn largely composed of local criminal elements.<sup>2</sup> Similar practices were used by the Bosnian and Croatian governments<sup>3</sup> although the practice was comparably less pronounced than with their Serbian counterparts.

The post-war years in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the entire region have seen significant changes. Not least of which is the (uneven) democratization of all regional polities, and the emergence of a large-scale international presence. However, the war years have left complex legacies, and in much of the region the relationship between political elites, the security services, and organized crime and trafficking groups remains proximate.<sup>4</sup>

Paramilitaries of the sort active during the Bosnian War, for instance, no longer exist in the country, but a host of (in)formal associations with clearly militant characteristics — veterans groups, martial arts and motorcycle clubs, fraternal-nationalist organizations etc. — exist throughout the country. Security reports over the past few years have also identified private security agencies, hunting clubs, and airsoft/paintball clubs as covers for de facto paramilitary groups.

After the war, the country saw a boom in private security agencies providing protection for various businesses and government buildings. Most of these agencies employed war veterans who were well-connected with local political elites. Additionally, the “disassembling of police and military units”<sup>5</sup> provided ample grounds for recruitment. Although such firms are involved in a host of legitimate private security endeavors, the industry as a whole is poorly regulated, and



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the activities of a few of these agencies remains particularly questionable. Some are known to take part in racketeering and debt collection, while others have been involved in counter-intelligence operations. In 2009, Raffi Gregorian, Supervisor of Brcko District, banned the work of four private security agencies located in the Bosnian Serb entity — Brčko, Pale, Bijeljina and Dobo, because they had been conducting “hostile personal and technical surveillance and investigations of OHR and Brcko Final Award Office Staff”.<sup>6</sup>

Hunting and airsoft/paintball clubs have also been identified as covers for armed groups in recent years. In both the Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, these clubs are registered as non-governmental organizations and allowed to operate without supervision by cantonal, entity or state security apparatuses. They receive weapons permits from local police or judiciaries, and in some cases have come to possess a large arsenal of weapons.<sup>7</sup>

Several other uniformed groups,<sup>8</sup> some posing as ‘humanitarian organizations’<sup>9</sup> connected to war criminals and organized crime, exist in Republika Srpska, and are endorsed by certain politicians including Milorad Dodik<sup>10</sup>, the Bosnian Serb mem-

ber of the B&H Presidency. The most infamous paramilitary groups currently active in Bosnia and Herzegovina operate under the collective title of the Četnik - Ravna Gora movement. This movement is comprised of sixteen registered organizations, all of whom promote the militaristic legacy of World War Two Serb Royalist Forces. Legally registered as non-governmental organizations, these groups operate through a structured chain of command and exhibit other militaristic features, such as uniforms. Chiefly concerned with the organization of meetings and parades across Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, Četnik – Ravna Gora organizations have also expanded their network internationally with chapters in Australia, South Africa, the United States, and Canada. Recent investigations<sup>11</sup> have shown that these organizations are connected to political elites, war criminals and extremists.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

This article argues that there is a strong connection between political elites, organized crime and paramilitaries in the Western Balkans. Fragile state institutions and corruption foster the rise of weapons trafficking and other criminal activities across the Western Balkans. This article emphasizes to European policymakers that militarized groups are connected to political elites, war criminals and extremists.

Since the end of the Bosnian war, weapons trafficking has become a main source of income for organized crime groups in the Western Balkans. Well-connected within political, military and law enforcement circles, criminal networks have profited from the surplus of weapons which resulted from the conflict. In the years following the end of the war, annual joint operations between foreign peace-implementation forces and local police units were conducted in order to collect and confiscate illegal weapons.<sup>12</sup> Although these weapons were to have been destroyed, a significant number were sold to third parties, who continue to traffic them into Western Europe.

In one such case, a supply of confiscated weapons were covertly sold by the Ministry of Interior to a private arms factory in Republika Srpska - Technical Overhaul Bratunac (*Tehnički remont Bratunac*), which then sold these weapons to state authorities in Namibia.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly enough, the President of the Steering Committee of this firm, Ljubomir Borovčanin, was also formerly the Deputy Commander of the Special Police Brigade of the Republika Srpska Ministry of Interior (MUP). Borovčanin was convicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) of aiding and abetting extermination,

murder, persecution and forcible transfer of Bosniak civilians during the Srebrenica genocide.

A 2019 report by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime identified several locations in the Balkans which are used by criminal networks for smuggling drugs, weapons, and people.<sup>14</sup> In 2010, Italian authorities discovered that members of the Italian mafia<sup>15</sup> possessed weapons illegally obtained from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Weapons from the region have also been identified among rebel fighters in Syria.<sup>16</sup> In addition to the international repercussions of the illegal arms trade, these weapons pose a major security threat<sup>17</sup> to Bosnia and Herzegovina. There have been several documented incidences in recent years, of the theft of small arms and ammunition<sup>18</sup> from the weapons caches of the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This demonstrates the fragile struc-

ture of state institutions and troubling lack of security and internal control, as well as widespread corruption among government employees.

Recent developments have shown the strong local and transnational network between political elites and paramilitary groups. One such example is the “Ukrainian icon”<sup>19</sup> scandal involving paramilitaries in Ukraine, and Bosnian Serb and Russian officials. In other cases, local militarized groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina foster an unholy alliance between political elites, convicted war criminals and extremists. With the current rise of populist and far-right extremism in the region, there is a serious threat of infiltration of extremists into the state security and defense sector in countries of the Western Balkans.

Weak state institutions, economic and political vulnerability, and historical patterns of political violence have created an ideal environment for weapons trafficking in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Western Balkans. The main challenges for the future, is for a more concrete state regulation of existing organizations and a tougher control of weapon possessions. In addition, state institutions such as the armed forces and police need to be strengthened by state authorities with the help of international organizations.



## Renewed Activity

In recent months, the region has an uptick in European and American attention.

On May 27th, the Peace Implementation Council (PIC) voted to appoint a new High Representative for Bosnia-Herzegovina. From August 1st, veteran German politician Christian Schmidt will take over the helm of the Office of the High Representative. After twelve long – and rather uneventful – years, the mandate of Valentin Inzko, the current High Representative, came to a sudden and rather unexpected end. To be sure, there had been speculation in late 2020 that Inzko's mandate would be coming to an end, but these had, in the meantime, quietened down.

Aside from the timing, Schmidt's appointment is somewhat surprising for other reasons as well. To begin with, Schmidt had few links to the Balkans until now. During his long career as a German centre-right Christian Social Union politician, Schmidt had served as German Minister of Agriculture from 2014–2018 and as Parliamentary State Secretary in the Ministry of Defence. His appointment to such a sensitive post is thus unusual, especially in light of the lack of any accompanying shift in German or EU policy in the country, and the vocal opposition of Moscow to the change in personnel.

In parallel to this, US President Joe Biden issued an expanded executive order on June 8th, which allows the US Government to ban entry to the country and freeze assets of politicians and other individuals destabilizing the Western Balkans, ei-

ther through undermining existing peace agreements, democracy, human rights or the rule of law; major corruption also appears to be a target of the expanded order. Aside from the ex-Yugoslav successor states, the order also includes Albania within its scope; undermining of the Prespa Agreement has been specifically added to the list of other peace agreements relating to the region.

The expanded order comes following the decision on May 19th by the US State Department to declare former Albanian Prime Minister Sali Berisha and members of his family *persona non grata* and ban them from entering the US precisely over their involvement in 'significant corruption'. At the beginning of June, US authorities also slapped sanctions on three prominent yet extremely controversial Bulgarian businessmen and politicians, including politician and media mogul Delyan Peevski, all for their 'extensive involvement in corruption'.

In light of this, it is safe to assume that much of the Balkan political class may be wondering who is next in the sights of the current US administration. This uneasy speculation likely, at least in part, the goal of the Biden Administration. Were the executive order to be implemented in full – particularly the clauses relating to significant corruption – it is likely that the list of sanctioned regional politicians would be rather long and exhaustive. Of course, the executive order is likely to be implemented in a selective and targeted manner, to ensure maximal effect. The real question might be how the Biden Administration plans to use it and to what end?

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## The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Southeast Europe

After more than two decades of engagement in southeastern Europe, the FES appreciates that the challenges and problems still facing this region can best be resolved through a shared regional framework. Our commitment to advancing our core interests in democratic consolidation, social and economic justice and peace through regional cooperation, has since 2015 been strengthened by establishing an infrastructure to coordinate the FES' regional work out of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina: the Regional Dialogue Southeast Europe (Dialogue SOE).

Dialogue SOE provides analysis of shared challenges in the region and develops suitable regional programs and activities in close cooperation with the twelve FES country offices across Southeast Europe. Furthermore, we integrate our regional work into joint initiatives with our colleagues in Berlin and Brussels. We aim to inform and be informed by the efforts of both local and international organizations in order to further our work in southeastern Europe as effectively as possible.

Our regional initiatives are advanced through three broad working lines:

- Social Democratic Politics and Values
- Social and Economic Justice
- Progressive Peace Policy

Our website provides information about individual projects within each of these working lines, past events, and future initiatives:  
<http://www.fes-southeasteurope.org>

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