

Europe's Overlooked Allies: Why the Western Balkans Matter for EU Defence Readiness

The latest [report](#) of the initiative **think nea – New Narratives of EU Integration** highlights how the Western Balkans (WB) can strengthen European defence readiness, both in terms of operational delivery and industrial capacity, provided they are integrated in EU's policy thinking and key existing and emerging initiatives.

1. Why This Matters for the EU and Germany

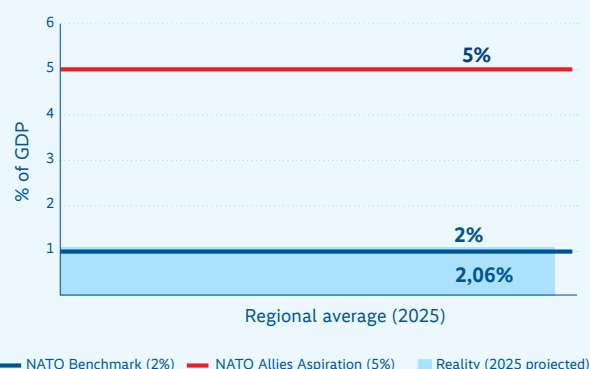
- **Neighbourhood stability:** WB stability is critical for Germany's security environment.
- **NATO interoperability:** Three WB states are NATO members; others cooperate closely with NATO.
- **Supply chain resilience:** WB defence industries can boost the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB) with cost-effective production.
- **Strategic location:** WB corridors connect NATO's eastern flank with the rest of Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean.

2. Key Defence Contributions of the Western Balkans

Defence Spending & Modernisation

- By 2025, all but Bosnia & Herzegovina exceed NATO's 2% GDP target. NATO members have committed to the new 5% target.
- Over 20% of defence budgets go to equipment & modernisation (NATO target).
- Procurement increasingly from EU suppliers (Germany, Italy, France, Austria).

**Defense Spending among the WB6:
NATO Benchmarks, Aspirations, and 2025 Projections**



The chart compares NATO's defense spending benchmark (2% of GDP) with the projected 2025 regional average of 2.06% of GDP.

Support for Ukraine

- Significant donations of tanks, helicopters, artillery, ammunition by NATO allies – given country sizes.
- Serbia and Bosnia indirectly supply large volumes of ammunition via third parties.

Participation in EU & NATO Missions

- Active in EU CSDP operations (Mali, Somalia, CAR, Atalanta, Althea), as well as NATO-led and UN peace-keeping operations, in various formats.
- Specialised roles: medical units, demining teams, trainers.
- Political willingness to participate in rapid deployment initiatives.

Defence Industry

- More than 200 companies in the WB defence sector.
- Bosnia produces up to 500,000 artillery shells/year (155mm).
- Serbia manufactures artillery systems, rockets, armoured vehicles, drones, exporting to over 50 countries.
- Smaller states developing their own industrial initiatives, drone, ammunition & explosives, often with Turkish investment.

Strategic Enablers

- Military mobility corridors connecting NATO's Eastern and Southern flanks to the rest of Europe (Corridor 8: Adriatic–Black Sea).
- Newly developed/developing NATO Kuçovë airbase and Porto Romano dual-use port (Albania), Krivolak training area – major facility (North Macedonia).
- Balkan Medical Task Force.

3. Opportunities for Germany

- **Industrial Integration:** Include WB producers in EDTIB supply chains, through joint investments and partnerships.
- **Joint Procurement:** Partner with WB states in procurements to cut costs & standardise systems.
- **Infrastructure Investment:** Help to secure funding for dual-use transport & logistics hubs.
- **Training & Exercises:** Expand joint German–WB exercises to build trust & interoperability.

- **Enlargement Linkage:** Tie defence cooperation to EU accession incentives.

4. Policy Recommendations

1. **Champion WB inclusion** in EU defence programmes (EDIP, EDF, EDA).
2. **Leverage German defence industry** to create joint production/maintenance ventures in WB.
3. **Support WB integration** into EU military mobility funding priorities.
4. **Tie cooperation to governance reforms** to ensure transparency in defence spending.
5. **Use the region's defence potential to push for enlargement.**

5. Strategic Bottom Line

The Western Balkans are shifting from security consumers to security providers. For Germany, integrating them into EU defence planning:

- Strengthens NATO's southern and eastern flanks;
- Increases affordable production capacity;
- Improves resilience of supply chains;
- Anchors the WB firmly in the EU's strategic community.

→ **German engagement now can turn the WB into a long-term asset for European and national security, while speeding up the region's EU accession.**

Disclaimer:

The report "Europe's Overlooked Allies: Why the Western Balkans Matter for EU Defence Readiness" was prepared in the framework of the initiative think nea – New Narratives of EU Integration by the Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), supported by the Open Society Foundations – Western Balkans. It explores the strategic importance of the Western Balkans in the context of the European Union's pursuit of strategic autonomy and enhanced defence readiness. The report argues that, despite not yet being EU member states, Western Balkan countries have increasingly demonstrated their value as security contributors and partners. This role is both timely and essential as the EU faces the consequences of the war in Ukraine and potential shifts in the transatlantic security relationship.

September, 2025

Weitere Informationen zum Projekt:

↗ soe.fes.de



Friedrich Ebert Stiftung e.V.

Dialogue Southeast Europe
Contact person:
Sarah Hees Kalyani
Regional Coordinator
Harun Cero
Program Manager
harun.cero@fes.de

OPEN SOCIETY
FOUNDATIONS
WESTERN BALKANS

think nea
New Narratives of EU Integration

ELIAMEP
Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy

Friedrich
Ebert
Stiftung