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## **Security challenges in the Balkans**

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***Abstract:** Since the end of the "Cold War", the Balkans lost most of their geopolitical importance for great powers, while the politically fragmented Western Balkans became a notable source of insecurity spilling over to other parts of the continent. There are at present no visible external conventional military threats from outside the region to any SEE state. However, the sources of political and social instability within the region still exist but became much less relevant for European security. The extra-regional sources of conflict in, over or about the Balkans have been greatly reduced. In spite of existing problems, there have been several positive developments. The international peace-keeping and stabilization missions have tangibly contributed to regional security in the Balkans. Most importantly the Balkans ceased to be Europe's "powder keg". In spite of old and new security challenges there are reasons to hope that the Balkans will eventually become a region of stability and prosperity, contributing to and not diminishing the security in Europe.<sup>2</sup>*

**Key words:** Balkans, Europe, NATO, EU, regional security

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<sup>2</sup> Views and opinions of the author of this paper do not necessarily correspond to views of the Euro-Atlantic Council of Slovenia.



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Since the XIXth century, the Balkans has gained the distinction as the most volatile part of the European continent and remained for more than a century also one of the most virulent hotbeds of politically motivated terrorism. It became an area of competition for control among major continental powers and Europe's "powder keg", whose explosion 105 years ago ignited the First World War. Two features of the region stand out: the extraordinary ethnic, cultural and religious heterogeneity and high sensitivity to external influences. Tensions and conflicts among Balkan states, between ethnic and religious communities have punctuated the political history of the Balkans. There has been a tangible interconnection between geopolitical developments in the Euro-Atlantic area and regional security in the Balkans and wider in South Eastern Europe (SEE).<sup>3</sup> The shifts in relations among major extra-regional powers have also influenced the regional balance between conflict and cooperation. Some real or potential threats in the Balkans endanger security in other parts of Europe as well.

Since the end of the „Cold War“ the Balkans lost most of their geopolitical importance for great powers while the politically fragmented Western Balkans became a notable source of insecurity spilling over to other parts of the continent. The Balkans have won the distinction of the only region in Europe which was the theatre of several UN peace-keeping missions and of NATO's first "out-of-area" military intervention. In 1995, following unsuccessful attempts by UN, CSCE/OSCE and EEC/EU a coalition of Western powers led by USA imposed peace by force on the Western Balkans. By 2003, the end of armed violence was finally achieved and superficial tranquility reestablished in Bosnia & Herzegovina, Kosovo and Northern Macedonia.

There are at present no visible external conventional military threats from outside the region to any SEE state. The current war in Ukraine has not, so far, changed this situation. A spillover of the war into Moldova seems unlikely. However, the sources of political and social instability within the region still exist. There have been also unresolved conflicts involving SEE states, largely

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<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of this text, South Eastern Europe consists of the Balkans (from Moldova to Greece and Cyprus), Croatia and Slovenia. It excludes Southern Ukraine and Southern European Russia.



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stemming from the breakups of USSR, SFR and FR of Yugoslavia and secessions on Cyprus, in Moldova and Serbia. Tensions and conflicts have been related to full international recognition of Kosovo, the delimitation of land, sea and airspace borders, contradictory financial and property claims, energy imports, trade, the return of refugees, national minorities etc. At present the hottest tensions spoil the relations between Serbia and Kosovo (the regime of crossing the border between them) and between two entities and within one entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In 2014-2015, the SEE states between Greece and Slovenia experienced an organized mass invasion of refugees and illegal migrants. This pressure and security challenge from the Near and Middle East and Northern Africa still remains. The most recent influx of war refugees (mostly women, children and elderly) from Ukraine to Moldova represents a humanitarian and not a security issue. Security in the region has been however threatened notably by illegal traffic of narcotics from the Middle East (mostly Afghanistan) and South America. The Balkans have been also a noticeable source of organized crime and of illegal traffic of light arms and explosives to Western Europe. The best known open market place of light arms, munition and explosives is in district Brčko, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

On the European continent only in four Balkan states the Muslims constitute majorities in the populations. This residual Ottoman legacy has remained a notable ingredient in intercommunal and interstate tensions and conflicts. The Muslim – Christian confessional and cultural divide remains politically troublesome in Bosnia & Herzegovina (B&H), Kosovo, North Macedonia, Bulgaria and on Cyprus. However, the threat of Islam-related terrorism comes today primarily from Western Europe and not any more from the Balkans. Secessionist and other sources of potential intraregional conflicts still exist but their importance as a threat to wider European security has been greatly reduced. The competition for influence in the region among extraregional powers has become mostly political and economic and to a lesser extent military, ideological, cultural and religious. The main actors with different mixes of tools have been USA, Germany, Russia, Turkey, China and Saudi Arabia, followed by former principal players Great Britain, France and Italy.



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Securitywise, there has been considerable differences between Central Eastern Europe (CEE) and SEE. The expansion of NATO and EU into CEE preceded by several years and is complete today in CEE but not in SEE. There have been considerable differences between the two regions concerning the exposure to and perception of conceivable or real security threats. However, both regions face a number of common challenges with their intensity varying within and between the two regions. The official defense and security doctrines in both regions mention the challenges of terrorism, cyber and hybrid threats and the development of weapons of mass destruction close to the Euro-Atlantic area. The public in both regions has been however in varying degrees more sensitive to the challenges of social insecurity, such as poverty, unemployment, natural and industrial disasters, corruption, insufficient access to vital public services etc.

The security doctrines of Turkey, Greece and Cyprus state that conventional military threats emanate from within the region while the corresponding documents of Moldova and Romania stress those coming from the Russian Armed Forces and from the military buildup in the Black Sea area. On the other hand, the defense and security doctrines of Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, B&H and Northern Macedonia estimate as low to very low the probability of conventional military threats. In none of these documents the Russian Federation has been treated as a military threat. The security and defense doctrines of Balkan states pay primary attention to non-military threats and challenges, such as separatism, nationalist and religious extremism, illegal migrations, organized crime, illegal traffic in narcotics, arms, humans and human organs, energy dependence, epidemics, natural and industrial disasters, interstate border disputes etc. The relevant Albanian document states the decrease in population through outmigration and depopulation in rural areas as an important security threat. The security doctrine of Serbia emphasizes as the greatest threats to the state the forceful and illegal separation of Kosovo and possible armed insurrections, while that of B&H the illegal traffic of arms, unexploded mines, ethnic intolerance, poverty, unemployment and the malfunctioning Dayton system.



The process of EU and NATO enlargement into SEE has been often viewed and advertised as the best strategy for strengthening regional security and advancing cooperation in the region. Since 2004, there was the expansion of NATO into SEE with seven additional members. The latest newcomer was North Macedonia, bringing the total number to nine members. However, the inclusion of the entire region into EU and NATO is not around the corner and might never occur. The experience has shown that even if it happens it is unlikely to resolve all intraregional disputes and conflicts.

While public attitudes toward the European Union have been generally positive, the public opinion survey carried out in 2017 by Gallup Poll indicated greatly varying perceptions of NATO in the region. These perceptions differ substantially from the official pronouncements and positions of several respective governments, more so in South Eastern than in Central Eastern Europe.

### **Public opinion polls on the Eastern European Countries' Views of NATO in 2016/2017**

Q: Do you associate NATO with protection of your country, as a threat to your country or do you see it as neither protection nor a threat?

Answers:

	<b>Protection</b>	<b>Threat</b>	<b>Neither</b>
	%	%	%
Bosnia and Herzegovina	28	21	38
Bulgaria	28	20	34
Greece	23	19	45
Montenegro	21	29	35
Serbia	6	64	19

Vir: Gallup Poll. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/203819/nato-members-eastern-europe-protection.aspx>



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In Central Eastern Europe less than 40 percent respondents viewed NATO primarily as protector (and 19 percent as a threat) only in Slovakia, while in SEE less than 40 percent as protector and almost equally as threat in B&H, Bulgaria, Greece and Montenegro. Russia's aggression against Ukraine and current war has probably improved the public perception of NATO in most SEE states.

Since 2014, the regional security – related issues were influenced by the Russian annexation of Crimea, by strengthened Russian military power – projection and anti-access capabilities in the Black Sea, by an increase of NATO's naval and other activities in the region, as well as by Russian gas supply to SEE via Ukraine and Turkey. From February 24, 2022, the war in Ukraine became a dominant security issue on a continental scale.

However and very importantly, the extra-regional sources of conflict in, over or about the Balkans have been greatly reduced. The era of wars of religion, ideology and of redrawing state border in the region seems to be over. The main sources of instability and conflicts are today intraregional ones. There are two “frozen conflicts” in the form of self-proclaimed and internationally unrecognized parastates in the region – the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and the Moldovan Transnistrian Republic, and two half-frozen conflicts between Serbia and Kosovo and within Bosnia and Hercegovina between the two entities and within the Federation of Bosnia and Hercegovina. There is an interaction between these conflicts and the European Union's policy in the region. Economically the Western Balkans have already been trade, investment and services-wise highly integrated and dependent on the European Union. The founding and most important EU members prefer in fact the present state of association over the remaining Western Balkan states' full membership in the European Union. Their full membership would burden the EU budget, enhance the EU's heterogeneity and the exposure of its institutions to conflicts among the Balkan members. The EU leaders thus hypocritically continue repeating for already two decades the phrases about the Western Balkans' “European future”.

Inspite these problems, there have been several positive developments. Most countries in the region have undergone radical transformation of their political orders. Instead of authoritarian and among



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them also totalitarian regimes of the late 1980s the region is composed today, at least formally, of democratic political systems. Relative demilitarization in most states of the region has greatly reduced their armed forces, inventories of heavy arms and thus warfighting capabilities.

The international community's efforts to promote stability and good neighborly relations in the region has produced a web of various organizational schemes, among them the "Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe", "Council of Regional Cooperation" et. al. Compared with the early 1990s, the relations between most ex-Yugoslav states have generally improved. In security and defense area, the web of interstate cooperation has initiated and encouraged numerous multilateral and bilateral activities within the "Partnership for Peace", SECI and several other frameworks. The international peace-keeping and stabilization missions - UNFICYP on Cyprus, KFOR in Kosovo and EUFOR in B&H have tangibly contributed to regional security in the Balkans. The presence of their international military, police and civilian personnel as well as of Turkish and Russian troops on Cyprus and in Moldova has however had some contradictory effects. It has constrained the outbursts of intercommunal violence, served as superpolice, solidified intercommunal divisions, provided disincentives to local elites to resolve underlying political differences and thus contributed to perpetuating the frozen conflicts.

Most importantly, the Balkans ceased to be Europe's "powder keg". In spite old and new security challenges the present situation in the traditionally turbulent Balkans is certainly much better than it was in the 1990s. There are reasons to hope that the Balkans will eventually become a region of stability and prosperity, contributing to and not diminishing the security in Europe.



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