

## Research Article

# NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION (NATO) AND ITS ROLE FOR SECURITY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** *The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is the world's largest and most powerful collective security organisation in modern times. Membership in this organisation is the objective and effort of many countries, including most of the countries of the Western Balkans. Membership ensures collective protection, security and political stability. Since its inception, NATO has emerged as a global force for security and the spread of peace almost across the globe. Not everyone deems it as such, considering the Russian Federation sees it as its main enemy. Its military operations have been centred around protecting human rights and maintaining peace. The best example of this commitment is NATO's humanitarian intervention in Kosovo, one of the countries of the Western Balkans. Even after June 1999, NATO was present in this country and took care of the peace and security of the entire Western Balkans. The presence of this organisation in this part of the globe remained essential, as did knowing the geopolitical history of this region.*

*The Balkans still suffers from nationalist policies and interethnic divisions, which in either case remain a very important factor for security in this region. One fundamental issue of Western Balkan countries is the acceleration of economic reforms, the rule of law and the fight against corruption to achieve membership in the European Union. Instead of these important issues in the Western Balkans, clashes have continued over border changes and nationalist rhetoric, which could undermine peace and security in this region. The current problems of the Western Balkans are inherited from the dissolution of the Socialist Federation of Yugoslavia. The wars in the former Yugoslavia, despite being the cause for the establishment of new independent states, did not fulfil the ethnic expectations of these countries. Given that the Republic of Serbia,*

in the preamble of the 2006 Constitution, foresees the Republic of Kosovo as its own territory,<sup>1</sup> legal action that expresses territorial claims against a sovereign state poses a risk for new conflicts in the Balkans. A situation with conflicting tendencies is also present in the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the official policy of the Serbian Republic of Bosnia has openly shown the tendencies for secession from the Federation and union with Serbia.<sup>2</sup>

This paper deals with the role that NATO has played and continues to play with its presence in the Balkans in maintaining peace and regional security, the challenges of security and building a stable peace in this region of Europe, where nationalist tendencies dominate as well as interethnic problems, lack of political culture and deficits of democracy.

**Methods:** Combined scientific methods were used in this paper, starting with the qualitative method and literature review. The qualitative method was used to interpret the scientific theories related to security. Reviewing the literature, we managed to combine the results of other studies related to our study topic. This paper also used the analysis method, which helped us separate the elements from the totality of the study problem. The historical method has served to show the axis of the security problem in the Balkans and to explain the development of NATO.

**Results and conclusions:** As a security organisation, during the Cold War, it served as a mechanism for collective defence against the nuclear threats of the Warsaw Pact and the spread of democratic values of the Western world. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, it has served as an organisation that promotes global peace and security, democracy, human rights and the rule of law. The existence of open political issues in the Western Balkans, in particular the territorial claims of Serbia against Kosovo, the nationalist tendencies of the Serbs from Bosnia and Herzegovina for separation from the Federation, the attempts of Russia to influence this region, using history, culture and intelligence services and some other issues such as the lack of political culture in Albania and Montenegro and the issues of North Macedonia with Bulgaria have posed risks to the regional security. In this geopolitical environment called the Western Balkans, the integration of all countries in NATO and its presence in this region is essential for the future and security. In this context, the membership of Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina in NATO will have to be a priority for Western countries. The membership of these two states would serve regional peace and security.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

North Atlantic Treaty Organization, known by the abbreviation NATO (hereinafter referred to in this paper as NATO), is the most powerful security organisation in the world. It was founded in 1949 as a collective security mechanism of the Western countries in efforts to cope with the expansion of the communist system and the expansion of the Soviet Union.

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1 For more refer to: Constitution of the Republic of Serbia (2006) <<https://www.srbija.gov.rs/tekst/en/130144/constitution-of-serbia.php>> accessed 5 December 2023.

2 Gordana Knezevic, "The Politics of Fear: Referendum in Republika Srpska" (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 23 September 2016) <<https://www.rferl.org/a/politics-of-fear-referendum-in-republika-srpska-statehood-day-dodik/28009309.html>> accessed 5 December 2023.

“The Alliance’s creation was part of a broader effort to serve three purposes: deterring Soviet expansionism, forbidding the revival of nationalist militarism in Europe through a strong North American presence on the continent, and encouraging European political integration.”<sup>3</sup> Former US President, Dwight D. Eisenhower, has rightly emphasised:

*“We do not keep security establishments merely to defend property or territory or rights abroad or at sea. We keep the security forces to defend a way of life.”*<sup>4</sup>

This way of life includes ensuring peace, freedom, respect for human rights, the rule of law, economic development and social prosperity. For 45 years, until the fall of the Berlin Wall, the developed world was engaged in upholding these principles and human freedom. Today, these principles remain a guide for peace and prosperity. On this basis, efforts to spread global peace and security continue.

Since its establishment, NATO has served in several military and peace operations in the world, the most successful of which was the humanitarian intervention in Kosovo in 1999. By intervening militarily against the military targets of the former Yugoslav Federation, it stopped ethnic cleansing and serious violations of humanitarian law. The intervention, in addition to the effects of stopping the armed conflict in the areas of former Yugoslavia, brought regional stability to the entire Western Balkans. This region is known as a source of conflicts and a history of fighting between different peoples and ethnicities.

Every time the Balkans is mentioned in the context of international relations, we think of the First World War and nationalistic tendencies for borders, territorial expansion and the domination of one nation over another being reborn. This region of Europe (Western Balkans) has remained troubled by many crises, ranging from security problems, economic and social problems, and political problems. It is worth mentioning that “Western Balkans” is a geopolitical term that refers to the following countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Serbia and Montenegro.<sup>5</sup> Even now, at the beginning of the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this region has continued to face security problems as well as numerous economic, political and social issues. In this sense, István Gyarmati rightly points out, “The last two decades have brought revolutionary changes in Europe - all for the better.” At the same time, the Western Balkans is the only region in Europe where the balance is much more dubious. It is the only region where the changes were accompanied by bloody wars, in which more than a hundred thousand people were killed and millions displaced. It is the only country in post-communist

3 ‘A Short History of NATO’ (*North Atlantic Treaty Organization - NATO*, 2023) <[https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/declassified\\_139339.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/declassified_139339.htm)> accessed 30 November 2023.

4 Dwight D Eisenhower, ‘Remarks to the Committee for Economic Development (20 May 1954)’ <<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-committee-for-economic-development>> accessed 30 November 2023.

5 Marjan Gjurovski, ‘Reforms of the security system of the Republic of Macedonia’ in M Gjurovski (ed), *Security, Regional Cooperation and Reforms - Kosovo and Macedonia: Security Forum Kosovo-Macedonia 2018* (Vinsent Grafika Kconje 2018) 15.

Europe where massive ethnic cleansing took place. Researcher István Gyarmati, in his study about the security challenges in the Western Balkans emphasised, “And this is the only region that is still knocking on the doors of Europe and which is not sure whether or when they will open.”<sup>6</sup>

Western Balkans is the term used by European Union institutions to indicate the region of the Balkans, which consists of the post-communist countries (Albania, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Kosovo) which aspire to become part of the European Union.<sup>7</sup> All these states that are independent today were part of the Socialist Federation of Yugoslavia, excluding Albania. Albania was a communist country (1945-1991) led by the dictator Enver Hoxha, while former socialist Yugoslavia was led by the dictator Tito until his death in 1980. The dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s was marked by armed conflicts. Initially in Slovenia (1991), then Croatia (1991-1995), Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995) and finally Kosovo (1998-1999).<sup>8</sup> The region faced ideological problems, with a considerable lack of liberal democracy, lack of political culture, and interethnic conflicts which culminated in wars at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The problems of the Western Balkans can be categorised into several groups: political, economic, interethnic, ideological and security problems. Being the least developed region of Europe, since the beginning of the 90s, the internal political problems also fuelled by interethnic conflicts have created significant insecurity and prompted the EU and the US to be active in this area of Europe. In this aspect, the role of the USA, as the main power of NATO, is indisputable in maintaining peace and security in the Western Balkans. The nationalist tendencies of the Bosnian Serbs for secession from the Bosnian Federation and the non-recognition of the Republic of Kosovo by Serbia are two of the main security problems in the Western Balkans. In these two countries, NATO's presence has maintained peace and stability.

Serbia, as a traditional ally of Russia in the latter's conflict with Ukraine, continues to maintain a neutral position and not impose sanctions on its great ally, Russia. In this respect, Serbia continues to play a double game: 1. On the one hand, it is determined for membership in the European Union; 2. On the other hand, it does not harm relations with Russia by continuing the traditional alliance with it. The Western world has made it clear that Serbia must align itself with the West to make progress towards the European Union. Serbia has also made it clear that it does not intend to become a member of NATO.<sup>9</sup>

6 István Gyarmati and Darko Stančić (eds), *Study on the Assessment of Regional Security Threats and Challenges in the Western Balkans* (DCAF 2007) 1.

7 ‘Western Balkans’ (*European Commission*, 2023) <[https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/strategy/strategy-2020-2024/europe-world/international-cooperation/regional-dialogues-and-international-organisations/western-balkans\\_en](https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/strategy/strategy-2020-2024/europe-world/international-cooperation/regional-dialogues-and-international-organisations/western-balkans_en)> accessed 5 December 2023.

8 See more: ‘The Conflicts’ (*United Nations, International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia*, 2017) <<https://www.icty.org/en/about/what-former-yugoslavia/conflicts>> accessed 5 December 2023.

9 Norbert Beckmann-Dierkes and Sladan Rankić, ‘Serbian Foreign Policy in the Wake of the War in Ukraine’ (*Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung*, 29 Juli 2022) <<https://www.kas.de/de/laenderberichte/detail/-/content/serbian-foreign-policy-in-the-wake-of-the-war-in-ukraine>> accessed 5 December 2023.

The security background in the Western Balkans consists of determining factors of nationalistic internal policies of the member countries, from the unresolved political problems, lack of democracy and political culture and low economic and social development. Currently, the Western Balkans is boiling from the tense relations between Serbia and Kosovo. The European Union facilitated dialogue with the support of the USA, which should culminate in the final legally binding Agreement to normalise relations and mutual recognition. This will not be easy to achieve in practice since the parties are in antagonistic tendencies regarding the axis of the issue. The functioning of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina remains a challenge to international stakeholders who are taking care of the Dayton Agreement not to fail. Progress has been made in North Macedonia in recognising the rights of Albanians through the implementation of the 2001 Ohrid Agreement and by changing the constitutional name. The current background of the problem in this country lies in overcoming issues with Bulgaria regarding the language and the recognition of the Bulgarian minority with the Constitution.

These countries, as a whole, considerably lack democracy as well as political culture. Albania should be mentioned in this case, which has had constant problems with the legitimacy of accepting election results, as well as Serbia and, in some cases, North Macedonia.<sup>10</sup>

The European Commission has expressed concerns that the region faces a low level of economic development, which affects the economic reforms. "The lack of convergence is a major issue for the Western Balkan region; it is currently at around 35% of the EU average level. This translates in limited revenue base to fund the accession process and related reforms, and it also contributes to large-scale outward migration."<sup>11</sup>

The membership of the Western Balkans countries in the EU is one of the main challenges not only for the improvement of democracy, political pluralism and economic development but also for the peace and security of this region.

The membership of Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina in NATO should be the priority of the member countries of this organization. The membership of these states, which have gone through difficult historical processes – initially with wars and then with state building – constitutes the axis of regional security.

The paper examines and analyses the North Atlantic Alliance, NATO, as a military and political mechanism of collective security and its role in maintaining peace and security in the world, in particular in the Western Balkans region.

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10 See more: Ljiljana Kolarski and others, 'Fraudulent electoral process: How to foster free, fair and transparent elections in the Western Balkans' (GLOBSEC Forum, 15-17 June 2021) <[https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/Policy-Proposal\\_Fraudulent-electoral-process.pdf](https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/Policy-Proposal_Fraudulent-electoral-process.pdf)> accessed 5 December 2023.

11 'New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans' (*European Commission, European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR)*, 8 November 2023) <[https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/new-growth-plan-western-balkans\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/new-growth-plan-western-balkans_en)> accessed 5 December 2023.

The paper first describes the history of its establishment, its membership and the development of its military operations. The paper deals with the concept of this organisation today in the contemporary world. The role and importance of NATO for the Western Balkans is an integral and important part of this paper.

The paper has been prepared to achieve its scientific objectives by answering two research questions: 1. Is peace and security in the Western Balkans vulnerable? 2. What is NATO's role in security in the Western Balkans?

The paper's methodological framework has faced certain limitations due to technical difficulties in collecting empirical data in the field. Another limitation was the inability to interview political stakeholders of the Western Balkan countries.

## 2 NATO ESTABLISHMENT AND EVOLUTION

Knowing that two world wars of devastating proportions and the expansion of the Soviet Union and communist ideology occurred within 30 years, the countries of Western Europe, together with the United States of America, initiated the establishment of a security organisation – a collective defence organisation. In this way, 12 sovereign states decided to establish the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

The treaty was signed on 4 April 1949 in Washington and contains the preamble and 14 articles in total.<sup>12</sup> The preamble to the establishment of NATO emphasises the commitment of Western countries to maintaining peace and security in the world:

*“The Parties to this Treaty reaffirm their faith in the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and their desire to live in peace with all peoples and all governments. They are determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilisation of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law. They seek to promote stability and well-being in the North Atlantic area. They are resolved to unite their efforts for collective defence and for the preservation of peace and security. They therefore agree to this North Atlantic Treaty.”<sup>13</sup>*

The Treaty and, as such, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) rely on the United Nations to maintain international peace and security, “The Treaty thus operates inside the Charter but outside the veto. It does not replace United Nations peace machinery; it functions only if and when that machinery breaks down.”<sup>14</sup>

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12 North Atlantic Treaty (Washington DC, 4 April 1949) <[https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_17120.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm)> accessed 5 December 2023.

13 *ibid*, preamble.

14 Richard H Heindel, Thorsten V Kaljarvi and Francis O Wilcox, ‘The North Atlantic Treaty in the United States Senate’ (1949) 43(4) *American Journal of International Law* 633, doi:10.2307/2193257.

Although NATO is a military organisation, its primary goal is peace and security, which must be ensured through peaceful mechanisms or means. This is emphasised in Article 1 of the Founding Treaty:

*“The Parties undertake, as set forth in the Charter of the United Nations, to settle any international dispute in which they may be involved by peaceful means in such a manner that international peace and security and justice are not endangered, and to refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force in any manner inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations.”<sup>15</sup>*

When peaceful resolution of disputes is not possible, then military mechanisms are not excluded. NATO has, on several occasions, shown that it is for lasting peace in the world. NATO, since its establishment, has participated in direct military operations and as a peacekeeping mission. The main operations in the form of military intervention are Iraq (1991), Bosnia and Herzegovina (1994), Kosovo (1999) and Afghanistan (2003). The first case of military intervention was “*Operation Anchor Guard*, (10 August 1990 – 9 March 1991), *Operation Ace Guard*, (3 January 1991 – 8 March 1991), Kuwait-Iraq, Operation Ocean Shield, Somalia (2009) and Military Intervention in Libya (2011).”<sup>16</sup>

After Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait, on 2 August 1990, NATO Airborne Early Warning aircraft deployed to Konya, Türkiye, to monitor the crisis and provide coverage of south-eastern Türkiye in case of an Iraqi attack during the first Gulf Crisis/War (*Operation Anchor Guard*). In response to a Turkish request for assistance to meet the threat posed by Iraq during the first Gulf Crisis/War, NATO deployed the ACE Mobile Force (Air) and air defence packages to Türkiye (*Operation Ace Guard*).<sup>17</sup>

The other military operation was carried out during the war in the territory of the former Yugoslavia, namely in Bosnia and Herzegovina. During the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the largest military conflict was in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The European Union and NATO imposed an arms embargo in response to the fighting in this country.<sup>18</sup>

It was during the monitoring of the no-fly-zone that NATO engaged in the first combat operations in its history by shooting down four Bosnian-Serb fighter bombers conducting a bombing mission on 28 February 1994. In August 1995, to compel an end to Serb-led violence in the country, UN peacekeepers requested NATO airstrikes.<sup>19</sup> Operation Deadeye began on 30 August against Bosnian-Serb air forces but failed to result in Bosnian-Serb

15 North Atlantic Treaty (n 12) art 1.

16 ‘Operations and Missions: Past and Present’ (*North Atlantic Treaty Organization - NATO*, 10 July 2023) <[https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_52060.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52060.htm)> accessed 5 December 2023.

17 *ibid.*

18 ‘EU Sanctions against Russia Following the Invasion of Ukraine’ (*European Commission, EU Solidarity with Ukraine*, 2023) <[https://eu-solidarity-ukraine.ec.europa.eu/eu-sanctions-against-russia-following-invasion-ukraine\\_en](https://eu-solidarity-ukraine.ec.europa.eu/eu-sanctions-against-russia-following-invasion-ukraine_en)> accessed 5 December 2023.

19 Operations and Missions (n 16).

compliance with the UN's demands to withdraw. This led to Operation Deliberate Force, which targeted Bosnian-Serb command and control installations and ammunition facilities. This NATO air campaign was a key factor in bringing the Serbs to the negotiating table and ending the war in Bosnia.<sup>20</sup>

The biggest and most important operation ever undertaken by NATO is the case of Kosovo in 1999. In February and March 1999, the signing of the Rambouillet agreement between Serbia and the representatives of the Kosovo Albanians failed. The agreement sponsored by the US and the EU was signed by the Kosovar side, but the Serbian side refused to sign it. As a result of the failure of this agreement, the military forces of President Slobodan Milosevic began a comprehensive campaign of ethnic cleansing of the majority population in Kosovo - the Albanians. Diplomatic means were exhausted, and NATO, without the approval of the UN Security Council, began bombing military targets on the territory of the remaining Yugoslavia on 24 March 1999. Operation Allied Force started on 24 March 1999 and was suspended on 10 June, lasting a total of 78 days. On 10 June 1999, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia accepted the withdrawal of its military, police and paramilitary forces and the deployment of an effective international civil and security presence.<sup>21</sup> The humanitarian intervention in Kosovo encouraged the debate on the use of force in cases where human rights are violated. Regarding the researcher, Thorsten Gromes, explaining the humanitarian intervention in Kosovo, he emphasised:

*“Already during and shortly after the intervention, many comments categorized NATO’s Operation Allied Force as a turning point for international reactions to grave human rights violations and for using military means.”<sup>22</sup>*

When NATO initiated its intervention named “Operation Allied Force” on 24 March 1999, Secretary General Javier Solana declared:

*“This military action is intended to support the political aims of the international community. It will be directed towards disrupting the violent attacks being committed by the Serb Army and Special Police Forces and weakening their ability to cause further humanitarian catastrophe. [...] Our objective is to prevent more human suffering and more repression and violence against the civilian population of Kosovo. [...] We must halt the violence and bring an end to the humanitarian catastrophe now unfolding in Kosovo.”<sup>23</sup>*

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20 *ibid.*

21 ‘Kosovo Air Campaign (March-June 1999): Operation Allied Force’ (*North Atlantic Treaty Organization - NATO*, 17 May 2022) <[https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_49602.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49602.htm)> accessed 5 December 2023.

22 Thorsten Gromes, *A Humanitarian Milestone?: NATO’S 1999 Intervention in Kosovo and Trends in Military Responses to Mass Violence* (PRIF Report 2, Leibniz Institut; HSFK; PRIF 2019) 1 <<https://reliefweb.int/report/serbia/humanitarian-milestone-nato-s-1999-intervention-kosovo-and-trends-military-responses>> accessed 5 December 2023.

23 Javier Solana, ‘Press Statement of 23 March 1999’ [1999] NATO Press Release 40 <<https://www.nato.int/docu/pr/1999/p99-040e.htm>> accessed 5 December 2023.



Humanitarian intervention in Kosovo stopped ethnic cleansing and violations of humanitarian law, and history has shown that military intervention was necessary and NATO was on the right side of history. Even the case of Kosovo is taken as an example of similar cases, such as the intervention in Libya, in the case of the civil war in 2011.

Since its establishment by 12 Western countries (Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, the United Kingdom and the United States), NATO has continued its expansion in several stages. In 1952, Türkiye and Greece joined the Alliance, while in 1955, Germany and in 1982, Spain. NATO continued its expansion with the first group of countries of the former communist bloc in 1999 with the membership of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland. The next expansion was achieved in 2004 with the membership of the second group of post-communist countries Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia, as well as in 2009 with Albania and Croatia. NATO expansion was halted until 2017, when Montenegro, a traditional ally of Serbia and Russia, joined the Alliance. With membership into NATO, Montenegro made the separation between Western orientation and traditional Orthodox ties. North Macedonia, along with Croatia and Albania, failed to become part of NATO in 2009 due to Greece's non-acceptance. Greece refused to sign the Macedonian accession treaty demanding the change of the constitutional name. In 2018, the Macedonian Assembly approved the constitutional name change, and it was decided to call it North Macedonia. In 2020, North Macedonia officially became the 30th member of NATO.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, after Russia's aggression against Ukraine, in 2023, Finland officially became the last country to join the Alliance. Sweden's membership process continues, and it is expected that in 2024, it will also officially join the Alliance.<sup>25</sup> The end of the war in Ukraine and the accession process of Ukraine, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina will be the main challenges in the expansion and development of NATO.

### 3 WHAT IS NATO TODAY?

Seventy-four years have passed since the establishment of NATO, and ever since, the world has taken different directions and political and military developments other than those at its establishment. In 1949, the world was divided into two hemispheres: the Western world and the Eastern world, represented by the Soviet Union. Under Soviet influence, the Warsaw Pact was founded in 1955 as a response to the NATO Alliance. After the end of the Cold War, the nature of NATO was primarily similar to a military alliance directed towards external threats. It transformed to a certain extent into a new entity, where the defence of territories, countries and nations and even the alliance as a

24 'NATO Relations' (*Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of North Macedonia*, 31 October 2022) <<https://mfa.gov.mk/en/page/7/nato-relations>> accessed 5 December 2023.

25 For more on the membership process in NATO, see: 'NATO Member Countries' (*North Atlantic Treaty Organization - NATO*, 2023) <[https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_52044.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52044.htm)> accessed 2 December 2023.

whole became paramount. NATO has been transformed into an instrument defending common values. Therefore, the duties and the responsibilities of NATO, on the one hand, changed and, on the other hand, were enlarged.<sup>26</sup>

NATO today is a strategic security and defence hub that can project both military and partnership power worldwide. However, its core mission remains unchanged: to safeguard the freedom and security of its member nations through political and security means founded upon the values of democracy, liberty, rule of law and the peaceful resolution of disputes. To that end, NATO provides a strategic forum for consultations between North Americans and Europeans on security issues of common concern and the means for joint action to deal with them. Even today, an attack upon one member is an attack on all.<sup>27</sup>

One of the keys to NATO's success is its decision-making process based on consensus. There is no system of voting, and all decisions have to be unanimous. Extensive consultations and discussions are often required before an important decision can be taken. Although this system may appear slow and unwieldy to an outside observer, it has two major advantages; firstly, the sovereignty and independence of each member country are respected; and secondly, when a decision is reached, it has the full backing of all member countries and their commitment to implement it.<sup>28</sup>

In this context, it should be appreciated that even though the US plays a leading role in NATO, the decision-making mechanism includes all members with equal votes, emphasising political consensus on matters of vital interest. This creates equality of states in this security mechanism.

NATO is focused and operates in two dimensions: political and military.

*“Security in our daily lives is key to our well-being. NATO’s purpose is to guarantee the freedom and security of its members through political and military means. **POLITICAL** – NATO promotes democratic values and enables members to consult and cooperate on defence and security-related issues to solve problems, build trust and, in the long run, prevent conflict. **MILITARY** – NATO is committed to the peaceful resolution of disputes. If diplomatic efforts fail, it has the military power to undertake crisis-management operations. These are carried out under the collective defence clause of NATO’s founding treaty – Article 5 of the Washington Treaty or under a United Nations mandate, alone or in cooperation with other countries and international organisations.”<sup>29</sup>*

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26 Rudolf Logothetti, ‘The Security of the Balkan Region: The Role of NATO’ in I Tarrósy (ed), *Security Under Global Pressure* (Europe Centre PBC 2005) 71.

27 Julian Lindley-French, *The North Atlantic Treaty Organization: The Enduring Alliance* (Routledge; Global Institutions 2007) 87-8.

28 ‘Understanding NATO’ (North Atlantic Treaty Organization - NATO, 2023) 3 <<https://www.nato.int/docu/presskit/010219/004gb.pdf>> accessed 5 December 2023.

29 ‘What is NATO?’ (North Atlantic Treaty Organization - NATO, 2023) <<https://www.nato.int/nato-welcome/>> accessed 5 December 2023.

In 1994, NATO introduced the Partnership for Peace.<sup>30</sup> This is a major programme designed to assist participating countries in restructuring their armed forces to play their proper role in a democratic society. Tailored to the individual needs of each country, it offers opportunities for practical cooperation in many different fields, allowing participants to choose as much or as little from the programme as their security needs require. Activities range from military exercises and workshops to seminars and training courses. Particular emphasis is placed on making military forces more transparent and accountable to the electorate. The experience gained through Partnership for Peace has contributed significantly to the cooperation between the countries participating in peace-keeping forces such as the Stabilisation Force (SFOR) in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Kosovo Force (KFOR).<sup>31</sup>

The transformation of NATO is not complete. It is an ongoing process of adaptation and reform aimed at enabling NATO to deal effectively with new security challenges in the Euro-Atlantic area. Despite these continuing changes, however, NATO's core principles will remain the same: the principle that nations can only ensure their security by working together, and, above all, the principle that Europe and North America are a unique community of shared values and interests. Based on these fundamental principles, NATO will continue to play a key role as an effective crisis manager and as a solid framework for security cooperation across the Euro-Atlantic area.<sup>32</sup>

NATO's strategic objectives today include expanding the security range by welcoming new member countries. This expansion aims to increase political stability and security in Europe, especially in light of the growing threats posed by Russia, particularly following its military aggression in Ukraine, and the expanding influence of China.

NATO standards are the key and must remain at the core of the twenty-first century Alliance because they represent the convergence of American and European concepts of the use of force (with Canada effectively aligning with European perspectives).<sup>33</sup>

For aspiring countries, meeting NATO standards would result in state modernisation, political stability, modern armed forces, and sustainable development.

## 4 NATO RELATIONS WITH THE WESTERN BALKANS

The Western Balkans have been among the most troubled regions on the European continent and remains a troubled region, which is of increasing interest to the European Union, as well as NATO and the United States of America. Notably, "NATO and the European Union share common strategic interests. Both organisations advise and work

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30 'Partnership for Peace Programme' (*North Atlantic Treaty Organization - NATO*, 2023) <[https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_50349.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50349.htm)> accessed 5 December 2023.

31 Understanding NATO (n 28) 3.

32 *ibid.*

33 Lindley-French (n 27) 99.

together to prevent and resolve armed crises and conflicts, in a complementary spirit.”<sup>34</sup> It should also be noted that meeting the conditions for integration into the European Union and the entry of these countries into NATO undoubtedly means creating much greater security for lasting peace and stability in the region. Certainly, economic development, socio-political and genuine democratisation are the determining factors in the path to Euro-Atlantic integration of these countries.

The Western Balkans is historically a connecting point between Europe, the Caucasus and the Middle East, a region which still continues to be important due to the trade routes that connect them. The strategic importance of this region is observed, in particular in an era of widespread energy armament, the advantage offered by the Balkans for gas and oil pipeline routes coming from the Caspian Sea and destined for the Old Continent, over possible more expensive and articulated routes across the Bosphorus. The region then wedges between the eastern and southern flanks of the Atlantic Alliance, playing a key role in the overall compactness and security of the Euro-Atlantic front.<sup>35</sup>

Since 1990, the Balkan region has effectively been divided into "two Balkans": the successful Balkans in the Euro-Atlantic integration processes and the non-integrated or semi-integrated Balkans. The integrated Balkans are its eastern and southern parts, while the non-integrated Balkans are the Western Balkans, precisely that part of the region that includes Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo and North Macedonia. Thus, it is not so much the geographical position that gives a name to this region than is the need for an essential distinction of the group of countries in this part of the Balkans, to give a politically correct name to a sub-region that was no longer Yugoslavia and Albania, but not really anywhere else.<sup>36</sup>

In this context, several post-communist countries of the Balkans (Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia) became part of the EU and continued their journey towards development and prosperity. The others - those that remain under the designation "Western Balkans," are far from being part of the EU. Of the countries that are part of the Western Balkans, Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro are members of NATO, while Serbia, in its strategic policies, has refused to become a member of this security organisation. While Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo have been interested in becoming members, the membership process is complicated. In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina,

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34 Ferdinand Gjana, 'The Western Balkans and EU-NATO Relations' (International Conference on Balkan Studies (ICBS 2008) "Integration of the Western Balkans into Euro-Atlantic Structures - Future Challenges", Tirana, EPOKA University Centre for European Studies, 7-8 November 2008) 44 <<http://dspace.epoka.edu.al/handle/1/179>> accessed 5 December 2023.

35 Emanuele Panero, 'The Western Balkans into NATO: security perspectives' (CeSPI, 14 December 2023) Brief n 12, 2 <<https://www.cespi.it/en/eventi-attualita/focus-balceni/western-balkans-nato-security-perspectives>> accessed 5 December 2023.

36 Vedran Dzihic and Daniel S Hamilton (eds), *Unfinished Business: The Western Balkans and the International Community* (Center for Transatlantic Relations SAIS 2012) 3.

the internal problems related to decision-making in the Federation make it impossible to start a genuine NATO membership process. Kosovo's challenge lies in its lack of recognition by some NATO member countries.

Political elites in the Balkans have consistently demonstrated that they are not ready or cannot reach a consensus on problematic issues with common compromise and convenience. This fundamental phenomenon is evident in the long-standing Greco-Macedonian conflict over the constitutional name of Macedonia and the ongoing disputes between Serbia and Kosovo. Conflicts in the Balkans typically lead to international intervention rather than bilateral resolution within the regional framework.

For instance, the recent conflicts in the Balkans triggered international military interventions by members of the United Nations Security Council (United States, United Kingdom and France) as well as Germany as a Western European country. Conflicts in the Balkans have also been on the UN Agenda, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), European Union, NATO and the Council of Europe, contributing significantly to disagreements and antagonism between the Great Powers.<sup>37</sup>

In addition, the countries of the Western Balkans have a number of tasks on the road to NATO accession, so it is rightly stated that "In the case of Western Balkan candidates, plus two non-candidates who want to improve their ties and relations with the Alliance, homework poses a range of administrative, organisational and political challenges that need to be addressed. Unfortunately, the completion of homework does not mean an automatic invitation to join NATO, as such a decision is of a political and subjective nature."<sup>38</sup>

Interstate cooperation between the Western Balkan countries is of extraordinary relevance in reducing interethnic tensions that have existed for decades and establishing economic cooperation, which would contribute to establishing security and lasting peace in the region. Certainly, it is rightly stated that "previous conflicts, resistance to relinquish part of newly acquired sovereignty, incomplete and late nation-state building (compared to most Western European countries), status issues unresolved and, above all, the problems associated with the transition to democracy, societies and market economies make regional co-operation in the Western Balkans difficult."<sup>39</sup>

The United States of America and the European Union have invested a lot in peace and security in the Western Balkans, especially since the beginning of the '90s. Other conflicts

37 Wolfgang-Uwe Friedrich, Wolfgang Ischinger and Rudolf Scharping, *The Legacy of Kosovo: German Politics and Policies in the Balkans* (German issues 22, AICGS; Johns Hopkins University 2000) 2-3.

38 Kacper Rękawek, *The Western Balkans and the Alliance: All Is Not Well on NATO's Southern Flank?* (Polisy Paper n 14, PISM 2013) 3 <[https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/165421/PISM%20Policy%20Paper%20no%2014%20\(62\).pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/165421/PISM%20Policy%20Paper%20no%2014%20(62).pdf)> accessed 5 December 2023.

39 Jelica Minić, 'A Decade of Regional Cooperation in South Eastern Europe – Sharing Guidance, Leadership and Ownership' in M Weichert and other, *Dialogues: Ownership for Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkan Countries* (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung 2009) 19-20.

in the world, especially in the Middle East, have left the Western Balkans region aside.<sup>40</sup> But American and European interest will inevitably return to the countries of the region due to the cessation of Russian and Chinese influence that has been constantly present in the region, which has fostered destabilisation rather than comfort and development. In this sense, it is a fact that “the presence of the US and Russia, as an extended arm for defence and military assistance, economic benefits and social care for the Balkan countries is in fact another attempt to secure military and economic supremacy.”<sup>41</sup>

NATO has continued to pay increasing attention to the effects and implications arising from the involvement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China in the Western Balkans, in particular by assessing the possible destabilising consequences of actions taken by Moscow and Beijing, regardless of whether these are created by malevolent intents or results.<sup>42</sup>

Russia has historically had close bilateral relations with Serbia and has strong ties with some nationalist groups in Belgrade. For instance, in 2014, personnel from the paramilitary formation called Garda Četnike (Chetnik Guard) participated in actions leading to the Russian annexation of Crimea. Following Russia's aggression against Ukraine, on 24 February 2022, some members of this organisation continued to fight alongside the Russian Armed Forces in occupied territories in eastern Ukraine.<sup>43</sup>

In addition, in the previous year and a half, there has been an intensification of operations in the Serbian information environment by the Russian Federation, with the plausible aim of consolidating a positive perception of the Kremlin in local public opinion while promoting an aversion to NATO that could dangerously degrade regional stability.<sup>44</sup>

On the other hand, China, over the last five years, has developed a comprehensive network of economic investments, in particular in the energy and infrastructure sectors, as well as

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40 Thomas E Graham and others, *Time for Action in the Western Balkans: Policy Prescriptions for American Diplomacy* (NCAFP; EastWest Institute 2018) 7.

41 Katerina Veljanoska, Oliver Andonov and Goran Shibakovski, ‘The Democratization Process in the Western Balkans in the Last 20 Years: Interethnic Relations and Security Implications’ (2014) 14(2) *Romanian Journal of European Affairs* 30.

42 Michal Szczerba, *The Western Balkans: Russia's War on Ukraine and the Region's Enduring Challenges*: Report of 19 November 2022 018 ESCTD 22 E rev. 2 fin (NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 19 January 2023) <<https://www.nato-pa.int/document/2022-western-balkans-russias-war-ukraine-and-regions-enduring-challenges-report-michal>> accessed 5 December 2023.

43 US Army Special Operations Command, ‘*Little Green Men*’: A Primer on Modern Russian Unconventional Warfare, *Ukraine 2013-2014* (Fort Bragg, NC 2015) 44 <<https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/media/16170/ocr>> accessed 5 December 2023.

44 Wouter Zweers, Niels Drost and Baptiste Henry, *Little Substance, Considerable Impact: Russian Influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro*: Clingendael Report (Clingendael 2023) <<https://www.clingendael.org/publication/russian-influence-serbia-bosnia-and-herzegovina-and-montenegro>> accessed 5 December 2023.

activities and initiatives in culture, scientific research, education and mass media, also by cooperating with local political formations and government entities.<sup>45</sup>

China's approach to the Western Balkans is implemented both through bilateral relations, among which the one with Serbia is the most longstanding and is expanding to the Defence sphere<sup>12</sup>, and concurrently with the "16 plus 1" Framework of the Cooperation Initiative between China and the Central and Eastern European Countries, launched in 2012-13, but increasingly implemented since 2021.<sup>46</sup>

In 2006, through a referendum, Montenegro finally separated from the Union of Serbia and Montenegro and created an independent state. In 2017, Montenegro formally joined NATO, marking a shift towards the West.<sup>47</sup> This NATO membership significantly reduced the influence of Russia and Serbia in Montenegro. After overcoming the constitutional name dispute with Greece and implementing the 2001 Ohrid Agreement to some extent, North Macedonia joined NATO, and the internal interethnic problems have largely been overcome. Currently, the Macedonian state faces challenges with Bulgaria, especially regarding the acceptance of the Bulgarian ethnicity as a category in their Constitution and the acceptance of the Macedonian language as a separate language from Bulgarian.<sup>48</sup> These issues are expected to be resolved as North Macedonia progresses in its European Union integration process.

In the Western Balkans, two crisis situations still affect not only the Euro-Atlantic integration processes but also peace and security: Bosnia and Herzegovina and especially Kosovo. The first is the functioning of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina according to the Dayton Agreement of 1995 and the tendencies of the Srpska Republic to secede from the Federation. On the one hand, the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo remains an insurmountable crisis. The negotiations that started in 2011 and resulted in the first agreement in 2013 are not ending, and the final result is not visible in the background. Despite the negotiations facilitated by the European Union and promoted by the United States of America, Serbia's non-recognition of Kosovo remains a dark point in the integration process of these countries towards the EU, but also represents a danger to peace and regional security. Until the reaching of a legally binding comprehensive agreement

45 Stanicek Branislav and Simona Tarpova, *China's Strategic Interests in the Western Balkans* (EPRS 2022) <[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS\\_BRI\(2022\)733558](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2022)733558)> accessed 5 December 2023.

46 Ana Krstinovska and others, *China's Influence on the Western Balkans' EU Accession Process: Synergies and Obstacles* (Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation; Wilfried Martens centre for European Studies; ESTIMA 2023).

47 'Relations with Montenegro' (*North Atlantic Treaty Organization - NATO*, 14 December 2017) <[https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_49736.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49736.htm)> accessed 5 December 2023.

48 Ulf Brunnbauer, 'Side Effects of "Phantom Pains": How Bulgarian Historical Mythology Derails North Macedonia's EU Accession' (2022) 70(4) *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 722, doi:10.1515/soeu-2022-0064.

between Serbia and Kosovo, the presence of NATO in Kosovo will remain a factor of peace and stability in the future.

NATO, through the KFOR (Kosovo Force) mission, as of 10 June 1999 when it was given the mandate to serve in Kosovo under the 1244 United Nations Security Council Resolution,<sup>49</sup> has served with the mission of guaranteeing peace and stability, not only in Kosovo, but also in the entire region of the Western Balkans. "Today, NATO strongly supports the Belgrade-Pristina EU-brokered Normalisation Agreement (2013). The increased tensions in the region throughout 2023 have led NATO to temporarily deploy extra troops to ensure KFOR has the forces it needs to fulfil its United Nations (UN) mandate impartially."<sup>50</sup>

## 5 NATIONALISMS AND INTERETHNIC PROBLEMS

Interethnic nationalism in the Balkans probably has its roots in the historical period of the Middle-Ages. All the peoples of the Balkans claim their antiquity in the lands where they live and oppose each other concerning their origins. The Balkans has historically been the site of the biggest clashes during the Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Habsburg and Ottoman periods. Cultures and peoples of three continents have collided and mixed, leaving traces and consequences. On the other hand, the Balkans, as a natural bridge connecting Europe with Asia, is located in the "Geostrategic heart" of the region with two key areas of the island of Crete, which controls all the maritime corridors of the Eastern Mediterranean. The second is Southern Serbia and Kosovo, which controls all the land corridors of the region. The geographical position has given this region a very special role. Historically, the main East-West and North-South communication routes have passed through the Balkans region.<sup>51</sup>

For centuries, the Balkan region had multi-ethnic heterogeneity. Under Ottoman rule, these ethnic groups coexisted peacefully for a long time. During the Ottoman period, today's ethnic groups were primarily divided according to their religions and beliefs. The long-standing mutual tolerance between peoples and religions enabled the Balkan communities to live together without conflicts. Although even before the region fell victim to nationalism, the Ottoman state was not completely free from disturbances, it managed to maintain a certain undisturbed environment where all Balkan groups coexisted for centuries under one state.<sup>52</sup>

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49 'NATO's role in Kosovo' (*North Atlantic Treaty Organization - NATO*, 20 November 2023) <[https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_48818.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_48818.htm)> accessed 5 December 2023.

50 *ibid.*

51 Abaz Lleshi, *Gjeopolitika e Ballkanit dhe Përspektivat e Sigurisë në Rajon* (Geer 2009) 12.

52 Hans Georg Majer, 'The Ottoman Heritage Revisited' in M Hacısalıhoğlu and F Aksu (eds), *Proceedings of the International Conference on Minority Issues in the Balkans and the EU*, Istanbul, Turkey, 16 May 2007 (Joint conference series, no 7, OBIV 2007) 33.



After the Balkan Wars in 1912-1914, the region was finally liberated from Ottoman control, and the Conference of Ambassadors in London redrew the new borders of the Balkans.<sup>53</sup> However, this new demarcation did not bring lasting peace to the region. Tendencies for territorial expansion continued in this region for nearly a century. After the end of the Second World War, the entire Western Balkans was oriented towards the communist ideology. The accumulation of nationalist tendencies was powerful and culminated in the wars of the '90s in the Socialist Federation of Yugoslavia.

Excessive nationalism and territorial intentions towards neighbours have been and continue to be among the most serious problems in the Balkan region. Interethnic conflicts are the main reason for the emergence of tensions and the threat to peace and security in this part of Europe. The wars in the former Yugoslavia have been a manifestation of nationalist policies within the former Yugoslavia, especially Serbian nationalist policies, and its territorial aims towards other units of the former Yugoslav federation. In this sense, Boriana Marinova-Zuber rightly points out that "internal nationalism was certainly the most important political factor throughout the existence of Yugoslavia."<sup>54</sup>

Nationalism and nationalist policies, despite the promotion of democracy by all the countries of the Western Balkans, continue to be present in this region to this day. In this regard, Jenny Nordman rightly points out that "Ethnic nationalism was a major factor in many of the tragedies the Balkan region experienced in the 1990s and a tool often used by Balkan politicians to strengthen their power. While all Balkan countries seem to have shown considerable commitment to democratic and EU-oriented reforms, tensions between ethnic groups and nationalist rhetoric among political elites nevertheless remain a feature of politics in the region."<sup>55</sup> Certainly, we should bear in mind that "due to the demographic complexity and historical turmoil in the Western Balkans region, issues related to ethnic and interethnic relations, minority and refugee rights are of critical importance, given that the denial of fundamental rights and freedoms means a grave violation of democratic values."<sup>56</sup>

The peace of the region hinges on the relations between states, with government policies and approaches playing a decisive role. Getting away from the political face of the past and creating political competition with ideas for economic development could help alleviate the lingering scars of the bloody wars of the '90s. In this regard, Lucia Vesnic-Alujevic rightly states that "The foundations of democracy, rule of law, political dialogue

53 Orhan M Çeku, *Pavarësia e Kosovës dhe Gjeopolitika e Ballkanit Perëndimor në shekullin XXI* (KISED 2023) 112.

54 Boriana Marinova-Zuber, *The Rebirth of Nationalism in the Balkans in the 1990s: Causes, Consequences and Possible Solutions* (International relations and security network, ISN; ETH Zürich 2007) 9.

55 Jenny Nordman, 'Nationalism, EU Integration, and Stability in the Western Balkans' in IFSH (ed), *OSCE Yearbook 2015* (Nomos 2016) 151.

56 'Western Balkans' Accession to the European Union: Mission (Im)Possible' (*Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, nd) 5 <<https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sofia/08091.pdf>> accessed 5 December 2023.

and human rights are still being laid in these countries. At the same time, all these are criteria set by the European Union for countries seeking membership, which is the goal of all Western Balkan countries.”<sup>57</sup>

The countries of the Western Balkans are hostage to the public discourse used by nationalist politics and relics, which have been and continue to be fuelled by hate speech against ethnic groups within these states. In this context, Lucia Vesnic-Alujevic points out that “The main problem affecting relations between the countries remains the public discourse on wars, which is still isolated according to partisan perspectives. Each side has its own ‘truth’ regarding the interpretation of the conflict, which makes it difficult to establish good relations between neighbours. “Instead, it provides the source of hatred and conflict.”<sup>58</sup>

It should be noted that during these two decades, since the end of the war in Kosovo in 1999, and the conflict in Northern Macedonia in 2001, a greater calm reigned in the Western Balkans region, but was expressed occasionally by interethnic tensions, where hatred is expressed from one group to another. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that Lucia Vesnic-Alujevic rightly points out that “The situation is much better than 10 to 15 years ago and negative feelings are slowly being overcome, public opinion polls show that national populations still consider neighbouring nations their greatest enemies. The main hatred exists between Serbs and Croats, Kosovo Serbs and Albanians and Serbs and Muslims.”<sup>59</sup>

Undoubtedly, the nationalist and pro-war policies of the 1990s led by Milosevic, which led to several wars during the break-up of the former Yugoslavia, had far-reaching consequences, one of which is the enduring legacy of such actions. “After the 1990s, when policies promoting nationalism and ethnic unity culminated in a series of wars and armed conflicts, the Western Balkan countries faced the task of creating national civil identities based on international norms of democracy and human rights and free markets. All countries in the region have created such identities within the political and economic frameworks offered by international organizations including the EU, OSCE, NATO and UN.”<sup>60</sup>

However, despite the rhetoric promoting the values championed by the organisations mentioned above, the reality has yet to be applied in practice. During the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, nationalist and populist policies continued to dominate, with pro-European and Western policies often used merely as a tool to secure votes by political parties. In this sense, Jenny Nordman aptly points out that “International organizations have identified ethnic tensions and aggressive nationalism as threats to international democracy and security, and therefore carry out activities aimed at addressing emerging conflicts, as

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57 Lucia Vesnic-Alujevic, *European Integration of Western Balkans: From Reconciliation to European Future* (CES 2012) 11-2.

58 *ibid* 17.

59 *ibid* 17.

60 Nordman (n 55) 151.

well as strengthening the capacity of institutions and promoting respect for democratic values as a means of conflict prevention in the long run. For example, the OSCE plays a role in early warning and early action, particularly through the High Commissioner on National Minorities, and is also engaged in capacity building, providing training and legal aid, and institutional building. The EU calls for improvements in minority rights and good neighbourly relations, as outlined in its acquis, as well as economic and political reforms in enlargement countries as a precondition for securing the promises related to EU integration and EU membership.”<sup>61</sup>

It is easily noticed in Balkan politics that there is a lack of ideas and development projects. Therefore, more non-political language, populism and nationalism are used among Balkan politicians; in this regard, “Nationalist rhetoric has become more and more prominent in the political debate. In some cases, it has focused on internal divisions between ethnic groups, while in others, ethno-politics has shaped the priorities of foreign policy and regional relations.”<sup>62</sup>

## 6 POLITICAL CULTURE AND DEFICITS OF DEMOCRACY

The interethnic problems that culminated in the wars of the '90s in the former Yugoslavia greatly influenced the development of democracy, political pluralism and economic and social transformation. This is especially noticeable in countries such as Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Kosovo and North Macedonia.

For two decades, Serbian politics has spent extraordinary energy to create problems in Kosovo, aiming to portray it as a failed state. This strategy stems entirely from Serbia's nationalist policies and its inability to break away from its political past, which fueled the horrific wars of the 1990s – conflicts that Europe had not experienced since World War II.<sup>63</sup>

Despite the existence of political pluralism in the Western Balkans, the political culture is still far from the standards of democracy. In this regard, Dragica Vujadinović rightly emphasises when talking about the development of civil society in Serbia, Montenegro and Croatia, that “patriarchal political culture, traditionalism and orientation towards the past - with significant potential for mystification and abuse of historical memory - are the main obstacles, or the basis for all obstacles.”<sup>64</sup>

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61 ibid 151-2.

62 ibid 152.

63 Branko Milanovic, 'Why is the Serbia-Kosovo Situation Globally Serious?' (*Global Inequality and More* 3.0, 30 September 2023) <<https://branko2f7.substack.com/p/why-is-the-serbia-kosovo-situation>> accessed 5 December 2023.

64 Dragica Vujadinović, *Civilno Društvo i Političke Institucije: Srbija u vrtlogu promena* (Pravni fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu 2009) 41.

The countries of the Western Balkans have been undergoing continuous reforms for the last two decades. It should be noted that the governments of these countries “are actively engaged in building new economic (political and social) and legal institutions (and when appropriate to existing transformation) to consolidate democratic and market-oriented regimes in the European Union. In this context, extensive policy changes have been pursued in the economic, social and governance spheres, all of which aim to stimulate competition as a critical factor in generating sustainable economic growth and development.”<sup>65</sup> However, it is clear that the transition has taken longer than expected by many scholars and government leaders of these countries anticipated. In this sense, it should be noted that nationalist, corrupt and populist policies have significantly slowed the proper development of these countries, thereby prolonging their transition.

Since the deployment of NATO in Kosovo in 1999, as well as its presence in Albania and North Macedonia, the region has found much greater security and, conditionally, a strong guardian of security and peace in this part of the European continent. In this case, it is worth mentioning that studies commissioned by the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, aimed to find out how security problems in the Western Balkans are reflected in National Security or the Military Strategies of the countries of the region and to what extent these documents reflect and shape the realities on the ground. Relevant national security documents show a striking resemblance. “They all emphasize Euro-Atlantic integration - with the exception of Serbia - where NATO membership is still highly controversial and thus not reflected as a goal in national security strategies.”<sup>66</sup> Of course, this poses a sense of danger for potential conflicts, making NATO integration and presence essential for maintaining regional security and peace.

The persistent presence of interethnic hatred and intolerance that exists in this region, coupled with ongoing nationalist political discourse, underscores the region’s deep-seated challenges. As Lucia Vesnic-Alujevic points out, “Hate speech often heard during sports matches, strengthens the feeling of fear and distrust of mutual between a large part of the population. The results of opinion polls document the reality of interethnic relations and the extent to which various initiatives to promote reconciliation do not reach the citizens but remain at the level of political elites in each country. Consequently, the relationship with the past is still the main topic and an obstacle left on the road to good relations.”<sup>67</sup>

Therefore, this shows that the presence of an external force that will maintain security, such as NATO, is still necessary for a short period of time, or until the moment of integration of the region into the European Union and membership in NATO.

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65 Margo Thomas and Vesna Bojicic-Dzelilovic, *Policy Making in the Western Balkans: Case Studies of Selected Economic and Social Policy Reforms* (Springer Dordrecht 2015) 1, doi:10.1007/978-94-017-9346-9.

66 Gyarmati and Stančić (n 6) 1-2.

67 Vesnic-Alujevic (n 57) 18.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

As a collective security organisation, since its establishment, NATO has played an important role in maintaining peace and upholding democratic values in the world. It initially served as a vanguard of the communist bloc, and with the fall of communist ideology, it also undertook military operations and humanitarian interventions. One of the most significant of these was the intervention in Kosovo in 1999.

Peace and security in the Western Balkans remain vulnerable due to the open conflicts, especially the unresolved tensions between Serbia and Kosovo. The fragile functioning of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, compounded by the secessionist tendencies of the Srpska Republic from the Bosnian Federation, further destabilises the region. None of these countries – Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo – are members of NATO or the EU, which exacerbates their instability.

The situation is further complicated by external influence. Russia seeks to extend its influence in the Balkans through history and cultural ties, while China increases its presence through investments. These factors collectively contribute to the fragility of peace and security of the Western Balkans. This analysis address the first research question.

Given the security situation, NATO's presence in this region is indispensable. Since 13 June 1999, NATO has continued to be present in Kosovo, serving as a factor of peace and stability in the entire Western Balkans. As a military and political force, NATO has managed to ease conflict situations in the Balkans since its deployment. This serves to answer the second research question of this paper.

Over the past three decades, NATO's role in the Western Balkans has been extraordinary. Maintaining peace and security in this part of Europe has neither been possible nor imaginable without NATO's strong presence. The transition through wars and conflicts during the '90s, coupled with prolonged political and economic transitions, has left the region susceptible to further disruptions of regional peace and security.

Among the main challenges to maintaining peace and security in the Western Balkans region are:

- Nationalism and interethnic problems have been present for decades in this region and continue to this day to be a very pronounced factor in the emergence of problems and a threat to peace and security.
- Political culture and deficits of democracy are very important factors for the Western Balkans region in terms of maintaining regional peace and security. It should be noted that the political culture and public discourse used over the years has been entirely clothed by the pectu nacionalis, the language of interethnic hatred, and very little oriented towards development ideas and projects in the respective states.

Therefore, regional peace and security require special attention and continuous assistance from the European Union in terms of economic growth, interethnic reconciliation, raising the level of political culture and hence the level of democracy, and strengthening the state of rights that is needed for all the states of this region.

Concrete recommendations for regional peace and security in the Western Balkans include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Dialogue and reconciliation: Achieving a legally binding comprehensive agreement between Kosovo and Serbia, with mutual recognition, should be achieved with the facilitation of the European Union and the USA. Reaching an agreement and reconciling between these two nations would reduce tensions and "provocative rhetoric" in the entire Western Balkans region.
- Regional cooperation: Increased cooperation between the Western Balkan countries and confidence-building measures between these countries through joint economic initiatives, cultural exchanges and regional security agreements.
- Rule of law and minority rights: The EU should strongly support measures to strengthen order and the rule of law in this region, in particular to fight corruption, increase the independence and effectiveness of judicial institutions, and efficiently implement standards for minority rights.
- Empowerment of Civil Society: Civil society should be empowered and actively involved in activities and initiatives for peacebuilding and conflict prevention, as it plays a crucial role in advocating for peace, human rights and democratic values.
- Sustainable economic development: Increasing economic-financial assistance for the entire Western Balkans region, contributing to sustainable economic development to address socio-economic challenges, reducing unemployment and preventing population migration.
- Modernisation and reform of the Security Sector: NATO should support the reforms and modernisation of the armed forces of the countries of the region. Building professional, responsible security forces that respect human rights standards and contribute to regional security cooperation should be a priority for the countries of the Western Balkans.
- Euro-Atlantic integration: The membership of Serbia, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina in NATO, and the acceleration of EU membership for the countries of this region. Membership in NATO and the EU would constitute the region's final step towards lasting peace and political and economic stability.

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**Competing interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

**Disclaimer:** The authors declare that their opinions and views expressed in this manuscript are free of any impact of any organizations.

## ABOUT THIS ARTICLE

### Cite this article

Kutllovci S and Çeku O, 'North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and its Role for Security in the Western Balkans' (2024) 7(3) Access to Justice in Eastern Europe 115-42 <<https://doi.org/10.33327/AJEE-18-7.3-a000308>>

Submitted on 14 Dec 2023 / Revised 28 Feb 2024/ Approved 10 Apr 2024

Published ONLINE: 05 Jun 2024 / Last Published: 05 Aug 2024

DOI <https://doi.org/10.33327/AJEE-18-7.3-a000308>

**Managing editor** – Mag. Yuliia Hartman. **Assistant Editor** – Bohdana Zahrebelna.  
**English Editor** – Julie Bold.

**Summary:** 1. Introduction. – 2. NATO Establishment and Evolution. – 3. What is NATO Today? – 4. NATO Relations with the Western Balkans. – 5. Nationalisms and Interethnic Problems. – 6. Political Culture and Deficits of Democracy. – 7. Conclusions.

**Keywords:** NATO, Alliance, Western Balkans, Security, Interethnic Relations, Security Challenges.

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## АНОТАЦІЯ УКРАЇНСЬКОЮ МОВОЮ

Дослідницька стаття

### ПІВНІЧНОАТЛАНТИЧНИЙ АЛЬЯНС (НАТО) ТА ЙОГО РОЛЬ У ЗАБЕЗПЕЧЕННІ БЕЗПЕКИ НА ЗАХІДНИХ БАЛКАНАХ

**Шекір Кутлловці та Орхан Чеку\***

АНОТАЦІЯ

**Вступ.** Північноатлантичний альянс (НАТО) є найбільшою та найпотужнішою у світі організацією колективної безпеки сучасності. Членство в цій організації є метою та зусиллями багатьох країн, у тому числі більшості країн Західних Балкан. Членство

забезпечує колективний захист, безпеку та політичну стабільність. З моменту свого заснування НАТО стало глобальною силою безпеки та поширення миру майже по всій земній кулі. Не всі з цим погоджуються, хоча РФ бачить у ньому головного ворога. Його військові операції були зосереджені навколо захисту прав людини та підтримки миру. Найкращим прикладом цього зобов'язання є гуманітарна інтервенція НАТО в Косові, одній із країн Західних Балкан. Навіть після червня 1999 року НАТО було присутнє в цій країні і дбало про мир і безпеку на всіх Західних Балканах. Присутність цієї організації в цій частині земної кулі залишалася важливою, як і знання геополітичної історії цього регіону.

Балкани все ще страждають від націоналістичної політики та міжетнічних розбіжностей, які в будь-якому випадку залишаються дуже важливим фактором безпеки в цьому регіоні. Одними із фундаментальних питань країн Західних Балкан є прискорення економічних реформ, верховенство права та боротьба з корупцією для досягнення членства в Європейському Союзі. Замість вирішення цих важливих питань на Західних Балканах тривають зіткнення через зміни кордонів і націоналістичну риторичку, яка може підірвати мир і безпеку в цьому регіоні. Нинішні проблеми Західних Балкан успадковані від розпаду Соціалістичної Федерації Югославії. Війни в колишній Югославії, хоч і стали причиною створення нових незалежних держав, не виправдали етнічних очікувань цих країн. З огляду на те, що Республіка Сербія в преамбулі Конституції 2006 року передбачає Республіку Косово як власну територію, подібні дії, які виражають територіальні претензії проти суверенної держави, становлять ризик нових конфліктів на Балканах. Ситуація з суперечливими тенденціями спостерігається і в Республіці Боснія і Герцеговина, де в офіційній політиці Сербської Республіки щодо Боснії відкрито демонструються тенденції до відокремлення від Федерації та об'єднання з Сербією.

У цій статті розглядається роль, яку відіграло і продовжує відігравати НАТО завдяки своїй присутності на Балканах у підтримці миру та безпеки, в цьому регіоні Європи, де домінують націоналістичні тенденції, а також міжетнічні проблеми, брак політичної культури та дефіцит демократії.

**Методи.** У цій статті використовувалися комбіновані наукові методи, включно з якісним методом та оглядом літератури. Якісний метод використовувався для інтерпретації наукових теорій, пов'язаних з безпекою. Вивчивши літературу, нам вдалося об'єднати результати інших досліджень, пов'язаних з темою нашої наукової розвідки. У цій роботі також використовувався метод аналізу, який допоміг нам виокремити елементи від загальної проблеми цієї праці. Історичний метод показав вісь проблеми безпеки на Балканах і пояснив розвиток НАТО.

**Результати та висновки.** Як організація, що гарантує безпеку, під час холодної війни вона слугувала механізмом колективного захисту від ядерної загрози згідно з Варшавським договором та поширення демократичних цінностей західного світу. Після падіння «залізної завіси» вона стала організацією, яка сприяє глобальному миру та безпеці, демократії, правам людини та верховенству права. Наявність відкритих політичних питань на Західних Балканах, зокрема територіальні претензії Сербії до Косова, націоналістичні тенденції сербів з Боснії та Герцеговини до відокремлення від Федерації, спроби Росії вплинути на цей регіон, використовуючи історію, культуру і розвідувальні

служби, а також деякі інші проблеми, такі як відсутність політичної культури в Албанії та Чорногорії та проблеми Північної Македонії з Болгарією, створюють ризики для регіональної безпеки. У цьому геополітичному середовищі, яке називається Західними Балканами, інтеграція всіх країн до НАТО та її присутність у цьому регіоні мають важливе значення для майбутнього та безпеки. У цьому контексті членство Косова, а також Боснії та Герцеговини в НАТО має стати пріоритетом для західних країн. Членство цих двох держав сприятиме регіональному миру та безпеці.

**Ключові слова:** НАТО, Альянс, Західні Балкани, безпека, міжетнічні відносини, гарантії безпеки.