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*The Balkans:  
still the “powder keg” of Europe?*

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## Abstract

The Balkan region is one of the most ethnically, linguistically, religiously complex areas of the world. In the past decade all the countries of the region have experienced a period of transition and ethnic conflict with a decline in the standard of living and a slowing of economic growth; yet they have achieved different levels of democratisation. Although, there have been several attempts by the international community to consolidate the region, they have only been partially successful. It is reasonable to think whether the region is still the “powder keg” of Europe.

**Keywords:** Balkans; security; conflicts; fragmentation; civil society; instability; regional cooperation.

## Introduction

The dissolution of the Communist regimes gave rise to new political institutions and provided a pathway for the rise of independent nation states. However, this transformation was not smooth and without obstacles. Countries of the region faced a triple transition from war to peace, from Socialism to democracy and market economy and from humanitarian aid to sustainable development. This is not comparable with any of the Central or Eastern European experience. Moreover, most of the regime changes were accompanied by serious ethnic uprisings and bloody wars.

This paper aims to provide a brief overlook about the contemporary security challenges, emerged after the collapse of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Besides the obstacles of regime changes, the security environment has often been highly unstable in the Balkan countries. The transition processes, the presence of weak states in the post-war context provided a fertile soil for organized crime networks; therefore, money laundering, trafficking of illicit goods and humans, blackmailing and corruption have been pervasive phenomena of the area. Systematic and well organized criminality is deeply rooted in weak state institutions and traditional, patriarchal familyism is another symptom of state weakness. Parallel with the non-traditional security threats, unsolved

conflicts from the past, border disputes, democratic deficits also burden already weak and ineffective governments.

Despite that on the surface all major conflicts have ended in the region and democratization attempts are constant, stability is considered to be fragile. Due to international military presence the potential of traditional armed conflicts diminished; thus non-traditional conflicts and threats are numerous. Considering its strategic importance, the Balkans are still a relevant issue in international politics also because, besides the Near-East ones, future security challenges lie surely in the Balkans. How do these threats affect the security of the region? Are there any ways out from this fragility? How should regional cooperation be boosted? What internal and external measures should be taken in order to consolidate security?

In the followings, this paper intends to explore the above mentioned challenges in depths and tries to examine the possible pathways leading Balkan countries out of depression to the desired integration to the international community.

### **What is hidden in history? - Roots of instability in the “black hole” of Europe**

The Balkan Peninsula has always had a very dynamic history. Its geopolitical position has historically resulted in being disrupted by invaders moving from Asia to Europe or vice versa. With plenty of ups and downs, wars and transformations, the area has undergone several shocks and crises. But the most important stage of history that has had a long-lasting effect on the political and social landscape of the region was the state complex called Yugoslavia.

According to the 1974 constitution the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) was a federal state comprising of six constituent republics (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Slovenia and Serbia, incorporating the two autonomous provinces of Vojvodina and Kosovo). In the history of the SFRY momentous changes began in 1989: political pluralism became evident, especially in Slovenia where the most liberal political climate prevailed. This turning point brought about political changes with awesome speed resulting in the collapse of the SFRY. This event was no way a monocausal one: it is a complex phenomenon containing several internal and also external factors that in combination formed a force destroying the SFRY. The collapse's anatomy shows an interplay of technical, economic, political, social and anthropological factors.

The interaction of politics and economics as well as the unfortunate constellation of other influences can be observed in depth in the Yugoslav case. The post-second World War Yugoslavia was based on an extensive industrialisation where quantitative goals overrode qualitative ones with the direct consequence of significant cost-inefficiencies, uncompetitive market structures and a substantial hidden unemployment that blocked the development of market reform. However, structural weaknesses were not the only problem: changes in the world economy (e.g. liberalization, privatization, deregulation etc.) also affected the region which could hardly adapt to them. This protracted economic crisis had significant impacts on the formation of the human capital, on a substantial impoverishment and decreasing educational expenses as well. The fact that there was not a common development pattern that every republic could follow made the successive post-war recovery process even harder.

The other side of the coin was that politics were the arena of main changes taking place. In the 90s republican Communist parties faced growing opposition from rival non-Communist, predominantly nationalist parties, typically within each ethnic group and generating endless internal rivalries. In 1990 the first free elections were held resulting in the eclipse of the former Communist by the nationalist ones (Radošević, 1996: 65). The region started to become Western oriented, however, the way towards the Euro-Atlantic integration was not paved for these post-Communist countries. Europe was afraid to internalise the problems of the Balkans, but actually, it was their only choice to be considered important actors in the international arena. The transition from a centrally planned system to market economy was not easy and the era of regime change represented a downturn for most of the countries. The dissolution of the SFRY brought about a loss of income, an increasing unemployment and a radical reduction of social services. Therefore, the social security dimension was endangered.

The crisis developed gradually and in the Balkans it was a long process touching politics, economy and the social sector. Due to the inappropriate handling of the transition process, structural weaknesses remained within the state fabrics, impacting negatively on regional inner insecurity and instability. In a wider context, from these weaknesses came out new security challenges, especially organized crime and corruption, that require a solid, ongoing commitment from the international community to handle this complex phenomenon and from the affected countries to reform.

## **Strategic importance, relations with the international community**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is no doubt regarding the importance of the Balkan region in geopolitical and geostrategic terms. Today's complex realities are demonstrated by the geostrategic interests of actors like the Russian Federation, Turkey, USA, NATO and EU. But why is the region important these days? What can it offer to the international community? What are the big powers' interests?

The 90s have been difficult for the states of the Balkan Peninsula as they were dominated by armed conflicts and democracy enforcement. These countries were weak and corrupt states having different identities and levels of development (Grosaru, 2012: 102). By means of internal and external efforts most of the problems were overcome and a level of relative stability has been reached. Despite the still existing instabilities and security challenges, the region undoubtedly chose to open up to the Western way of development instead of the Russian one and the Euro-Atlantic community decided to support in various ways this development.

South-Eastern Europe has a relevant strategic position: at crossroads of Europe and Asia, between Russia and the Middle-East and directly connects East to the Western Europe and the Mediterranean Sea by the Danube River (Grosaru, 2012: 102). This position, together with the crisis of the dissolution, drew the attention of the most important international actors that are now repositioning themselves at strategic level.

Among the main actors we need to mention the European Union. Its involvement, which will be detailed later, has been for a considerable time uncertain and contradictory, but certainly it contributed significantly towards the stabilisation of the region. Offering the possibility of full membership seemed to be the main tool to enhance regional security, but the coherence in using this tool was sometimes sorely missing.

Besides the EU, NATO also spent the last decade consolidating the area. During a certain period, the Alliance aimed at managing global risks getting involved in conflict prevention, crisis management, peace keeping, disaster management and humanitarian aid. It also strove to contribute to the solution of frozen conflicts, develop democracy in former Communist countries, dissolve terrorist networks and contributing indirectly to the fight against illegal trafficking and organized crime (Grosaru, 2002: 104). Some called it "Global NATO", but this was more an idea than the concrete policy of an Alliance that was rapidly adapting from the end to the bipolar order,

to a short unipolar period to a dysfunctional multi-polar transition. Consensus around national interest that became more diversified remained the mainstay of NATO's decision making.

The Russian Federation on the other hand aimed at getting recognition for its sphere of influence in the post-Soviet area. The Balkans, strictly speaking, were not part of it, but Moscow, once having lost Milosevic as important lever in the area, is fighting a rear-guard action to support Serbia and its interests in the area, keeping some countries in a fragile condition.

From their point of view the USA has opposing interests because they are concerned about the consolidation of democracy and economic independence, fostering inter-regional cooperation as well as solving conflicts by the means of negotiations. Nevertheless if integration is important, keeping some strongholds for strategic deployment is the essential interest of Washington.

Looking at the countries of the region, we can assume that, despite they belonged to the same country (Yugoslavia), they chose evidently different development paths after the dissolution of the SFRY. Some of them were more successful, but some did not manage to overcome their past internal problems. The chart below summarises the specific issues from the dissolution of the SFRY in each country, traditionally categorized as Balkan states.

**Table 1: Main issues in the Balkan countries**

	Main issues
<i>Albania</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Undergoing democratic transition</i></li> <li>• <i>1990: multi-party system, market economy</i></li> <li>• <i>High corruption</i></li> <li>• <i>1997: political chaos, military intervention</i></li> <li>• <i>NATO member, EU oriented</i></li> </ul>
<i>Bosnia-Herzegovina</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Recognized in 1992</i></li> <li>• <i>Religious differences, fragmentation</i></li> <li>• <i>1995: Dayton Agreement, basis of the constitution</i></li> <li>• <i>Instability, international military presence</i></li> <li>• <i>Euro-Atlantic integration is a common aim</i></li> </ul>

<b><i>Bulgaria</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Relative stability</i></li> <li>• <i>Tensions between Bulgarians and the Turkish Muslim community</i></li> <li>• <i>EU and NATO member</i></li> </ul>
<b><i>Cyprus</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>1974: division between North and South, establishment of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus</i></li> <li>• <i>The Greek part is prosperous, but the Turkish part suffers from water scarcity</i></li> <li>• <i>Repeated failure of re-unification talks</i></li> </ul>
<b><i>Croatia</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Presidential and parliamentary democracy</i></li> <li>• <i>Stability</i></li> <li>• <i>EU and NATO member</i></li> </ul>
<b><i>Greece</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Capitalist economy with the largest amount of EU contributions</i></li> <li>• <i>Public debt, unemployment, structural weaknesses</i></li> <li>• <i>Lack of transparency on public accounting, insufficient reforms → 2008 financial crisis</i></li> <li>• <i>EU member</i></li> </ul>
<b><i>Kosovo</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>1998: bloody armed conflict on autonomy → humanitarian crisis</i></li> <li>• <i>2004: serious inter-ethnic clashes</i></li> <li>• <i>2013: Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue aimed at full normalisation between two countries. Significant progress but still major political hurdles</i></li> <li>• <i>2018: Border Demarcation Agreement with Montenegro, but no visa liberalisation with EU until demonstrated fight against corruption</i></li> <li>• <i>Gradually stabilising hotspot, international military presence (KFOR)</i></li> </ul>
<b><i>North Macedonia (before FYROM)</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>1991: independence with difficulties</i></li> <li>• <i>Debate on its name (an already existing Greek province) about potential territorial claims</i></li> <li>• <i>1995: compromise → FYROM changed the national flag, eliminated parts of the constitution referring to the “big Macedonia” and Greece promised not to block FYROM’s accession to the Euro-Atlantic community</i></li> <li>• <i>unemployment, black economy, political instability and scandals</i></li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>2017: change of government, quick improvement of regional relations</i></li> <li>• <i>2019: end of the dispute with Greece; North Macedonia as new name for FYROM</i></li> <li>• <i>Turkey still opposing new name (as previously opposed FYROM)</i></li> </ul>
<i>Montenegro</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>2006: independence from Serbia</i></li> <li>• <i>Seriously affected by the financial crisis</i></li> <li>• <i>Aims to increase foreign investments</i></li> <li>• <i>2017: member of NATO</i></li> </ul>
<i>Romania</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The largest in size</i></li> <li>• <i>Until the beginning of 2000s: black economy, lack of political stability, structural insufficiencies</i></li> <li>• <i>Low income levels</i></li> </ul>
<i>Serbia</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Kosovo crisis (1998)</i></li> <li>• <i>2013: Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue aimed at full normalisation between two countries. Significant progress but still major political hurdles</i></li> <li>• <i>Starting accession process to EU, but full membership impossible until Kosovo issue solved</i></li> </ul>
<i>Slovenia</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Success story</i></li> <li>• <i>Most liberal climate for the regime change</i></li> <li>• <i>EU and NATO member</i></li> </ul>

In sum, looking at the actors of interest and the countries of the region, we can say that the Balkans are strategically important for position, resources and potential risk spill-overs, which explains the open door policy of both EU and NATO. Although, after the dissolution of the SFRY almost every country went through a regime change, the region includes a still fragile area (the so called Balkan Six – Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia).



## **Changing security perceptions in the Balkans**

Most of the analysis talks about the external evaluation of the region, mainly how big powers view it. On the other hand, it is important to look at the self-perceptions of the region, because countries of the Western Balkans think differently about the role of the region in the international sphere. While Albania, for instance, treats it as a bridge between the East and the West, Croatia puts it into a multi-dimensional regional environment. Additionally, Serbia and North Macedonia worry about the instability and insecurity.

The perception of regional challenges is a lot more unified than the regarding global ones as there are some factors that are equally for all countries. On the other hand, global threats divide Balkan countries in a much deeper way. The common threats by most countries are: terrorism, organised crime, proliferation of traditional and WMD weapons, environment security and extremism.

Requested by the Swiss DCAF (Democratic Control of the Armed Forces), a comprehensive field study has been carried out in the countries of the Western Balkans concerning their security environment: in general the picture emerging is of an evolving security environment, where the positive aspects are the consolidation of peace and security in the region. For instance, after the dissolution of Serbia and Montenegro in 2006, Serbia was willing to face new realities and learned how to exist within its new borders. Another example is Albania which had far too much illusions concerning security at the time of the regime change; in the successive years the country started to have a more realistic picture of the difficulties of the transition as well as the asymmetric threats. Finally, Skopje started to pursue consistent security sector reforms in order to effectively adapt to the new environment.

The research highlighted the three most important threats, namely organized crime, corruption and terrorism. First, corruption is an evergreen problem in the region. It is a symptom and a cause for weak economies. Until structural problems are not solved and stricter laws are not passed and enforced, visible and hidden corruption will remain present. Secondly organized crime is a very serious threat, twinned and increased by corruption, while terrorism is a risk of much less gravity than the two other ones.

Neighbourhood policies are interesting to examine. Generally, relations between countries are satisfactory, but quite complex because of different national interests, often deriving from ethnic tensions. A good example is North Macedonia who cooperates with Bulgaria in the field of tobacco

trade, but had conflicts with Greece concerning the name of the country (similar to a Greek province and then generating the fear of territorial claims). For the Croatians, Bosnia and Serbia are the top priority partners. Albania has traditionally bad relationship with the Serbs and Greeks. An important finding of the study is that although countries seem to be keen on boosting regional cooperation, they mainly consider it as a compulsory obligation in order to secure their positions in the Euro-Atlantic community.

Finally, the threat perception in the Balkans has its own critical aspects. First, these countries do not differentiate between challenges, risks and threats, showing some confusion within their national security strategies. Additionally, they do not set a priority order of threats. Another problematic segment is terrorism. Theoretically, it is a high level threat, although strategies simply do not talk about it in detail; only in 2017 Kosovo started detailing under international advice a counterterrorist strategy. Some experts say that Balkan nations live in a “virtual security” environment, meaning that they have an artificial threat perceptions with unreal foreign policy goals (Centre for Strategic and Defense Studies, 2008: 36).

## **Contemporary security challenges - What is under the surface?**

### ***Ethnic conflicts, minority rights***

The region gives a perfect illustration of the relevance of demographic trends to security, in fact during the Ottoman domination and other empires people identified themselves mainly through their religious affiliation and their ethnic background. Nationality is of high significance in the region as it represents a natural creation that manifests a sacred essence (Kritikos, 2011: 387). This belief offers fertile ground for political mass manipulations, often through historical grievances, ending into violent conflicts.

**Figure 1: Balkan ethnic distribution**



Source: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Balkans/images-videos>

Balkan societies have been divided for long and deeply among ethnic lines; therefore with the transition from totalitarianism to democracy, old federal national identities suddenly became obsolete and put under question, and complexes of new ethnic identification schemes were forged. During that period new states underwent significant centralisation and national homogenisation facing often ethno-political problems.

The most serious culmination in ethnic conflicts during the war was certainly the Srebrenica massacre: in 1995 during the Bosnian war the town was attacked and exterminated by the Bosnian Serb militias causing the death of approximately 8.000 Bosnian Muslims.

The Albanian issue still is talked as a security risk in the region. Given that there are strong communal and family links between ethnic Albanian communities in Kosovo and actual North Macedonia, some experts consider their reunification as a real threat. The fate of Kosovo Albanians was considered very important for the leaders of the ethnic Albanian community in the then FYROM as the ethnic balance in the country seemed to depend on the issue of Kosovo's final status. In 2000-2001 the country floated to the edge of a civil war. Previous peaceful complaints from the ethnic Albanians to have equal rights served where the political starting point of a short guerrilla struggle led by the NLA (Ushtria Çlirimtare Kombëtare – National Liberation; Radoslava,

2003: 178). In 2001 the Ohrid Accords put an end to the fights (whose actors were not always clearly identified), amending the constitution to better protect ethnic Albanians' rights and giving them adequate representation. In 2015 another short clash took place in Kumanovo, but it appeared more a staged local Slavic elite political diversion operation (most of the combatants were recruited in Kosovo and never talked during and after the trial) than a real terrorist/guerrilla action undertaken by NLA fighters.

The largest Balkans minorities are the Serbs in Croatia, Greeks in Albania, Bosnians, Hungarians and Albanians in Serbia. In order to prevent ethnic conflicts most of the Western Balkan countries adopted the model of cultural autonomy, which means that the aim is to better address minorities' political demands, facilitate the self-control of the minority and therefore lower the risk of an ethnic conflict outbreak (Mus et al, 2013: 73).

On the other hand, cultural autonomy may have contradictory effects. As growing self-government in the field of education, media and use of the language involved financial contributions for minorities, rivalry among leaders within the same minority group emerged as a negative trend. Thus internal cooperation diminished and division increased. Given that small, divided groups may be more easily kept under control and can be influenced by the state authorities, the claims of bigger groups can be neutralized with the help of the smaller ones, following the old *Divide et impera* principle.

In Albania and Croatia a form of intermediary institution exists, representing minorities at state level, but at a closer level vis-à-vis central authorities. The Croatian government established the National Minorities Committee for the participation of national minorities in public life and for making suggestions concerning the exercise and protection of minority rights. Among their competencies are: give opinions on public programmes, propose the implementation of economic/social and other measures regarding minorities, request data and draft provisions regarding the promotion of minority rights (Mus et al, 2013: 80).

As a conclusion, it can be assumed that cultural autonomy is only part of the solution in order to satisfy international community, but it is far from solving the underlying issues. Since it tends to divide groups internally, making them less influential and creating internecine struggles, it does bring neither security nor stability in the region. Negative stereotypes and labelling show the undeniable

presence of fragmentation and the lack of willingness to cooperate. These two factors are two major obstacles for progress in the Balkans.

### *Kosovo - Melting pot of conflicts?*

The not yet fully solved Kosovo conflict is one of the main remaining security issues in the Balkans and stands in the centre of attention. Framed as an ethnic conflict, it has more to do with narrow elite interests, leading to still undefined borders (Serbia and Albania, after the demarcation with FYROM and Montenegro) and to insufficient international recognition for Kosovo and final admission of Serbia to the EU.

From the 1980's Albanian nationalism started to evolve in the old Yugoslavia till the first ideas of independence were proclaimed. The growing autonomy became a problem for Serbia as the two autonomous provinces (Kosovo and Vojvodina) could veto any policy from Belgrade. To the independence claims Serbia reacted with serious repressions leading to the withdrawal of Kosovo's autonomous status in 1989. Kosovar Albanians started under the leadership of Ibrahim a non-violent resistance movement with the creation of a shadow administration in the territory. Other political groups pressed for an armed insurrection and for the declaration of independence in 1991, counting on the fact that the Albanian-speaking population was the dominant majority in the land without enjoying the rights of an autonomous republic (Szamuely, 2013: 49). This unilateral proclamation involved a serious, long-lasting humanitarian catastrophe.

In 1998, already more than 300.000 Kosovars were pressed to leave their homes as Serbia's aggression seemed to be undiminished, cease fire agreements were consequently broken and negotiations were insufficient. The highest point of the Serbian repression was the Racak massacre where around 40 unarmed civilians were killed. The KVM (Kosovo Verification Mission) attributed the massacre to the Serbian government, Belgrade replied it was a UCK (Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës – Kosovo Liberation Army) manipulation and finally the ICTY (International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia) dropped the indictment against Serbian officials and officers due to lack of sufficient evidence. Successive negotiations were not fruitful and after them NATO led Operation Allied Force a 78 days airstrike against Serbian forces and targets; in the end the Serbian troops left the country and the UN Security Council UNSC 1244 Resolution put an end to the military intervention, setting the conditions to end hostilities and to manage the post-war interim period, together with a military-technical agreement between NATO forces and the Serbian ones.

Due to conflicting interests in the Security Council, this resolution is still not updated because Russia does not want to recognise the results of the Ahtisaari plan that led to Kosovo's independence declaration.

From 1999 the deployment of the KFOR (Kosovo Force) mission took place. The core functions of the mission were to demilitarise the UCK, end military actions, strengthen public security, support the international community, help people to return home, station international military forces and assisting the international community to reach a political solution for Kosovo. In 2008 its tasks widened with the establishment of the Kosovo Security Force (KSF) and the management of its civilian control. At the 2010 Istanbul Summit NATO leaders agreed on the closing of the first phase of the KFOR, and modified as a deterring force. In 19 years the force dropped from 55.000 to circa 4.000 soldiers.

Besides KFOR, the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) is also significant with the functions of co-ordinating the assistance of the international community, contributing in maintaining public order, crime prevention and training local staff. In addition, it was also responsible of managing administrative issues, organizing elections, coordinating humanitarian aids and rebuilding the infrastructure. In 2008 part of the functions of this mission (especially the police and judiciary ones) were transferred to EULEX (European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo). EULEX mandate was significantly curtailed after the start of the EU sponsored Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue 2013 and the mission has been granted a possibly final extension until June 2020.

In 2007 the so called Ahtisaari Report was adopted in Vienna stating that Kosovo should be a multi ethnic and democratic state recognized by the international community. The autonomy of the Serbian minority was guaranteed; the country could not have territorial claims but could join international treaties. However, the consolidation process did not follow the prescribed way and the Kosovar parliament declared independence in 2008 starting a long and still not closed diplomatic fight for international recognition (some 103 countries recognised the Institutions In Kosovo by 2018 and still 25 are needed to have a basis for UN recognition, excluding UNSC vetoes). Concerning international law, the International Court issued its opinion in 2010, stating that Kosovo's independence does not break international laws as it represents the will of its people.

Currently, one can talk about a frozen conflict in Kosovo. From 2015 to 2018 constant negotiations were going on in order to implement the EU sponsored Brussels Agreement which intends to



normalise the relationship between the two countries. Results have been considerable in many technical sectors, but no political breakthrough is still possible. Kosovo Albanians and Serbians live reasonably together south of the Ibar river where small Serbian enclaves survived the massive orchestrated disorders in 2004, but they are visibly more separated in the four northern Serbian majority municipalities around the city of Mitrovica. The political control of the Belgrade approved Srpska Lista party (Serbian List) over all Serbian municipalities is rather tight and enforced through considerable pressure. The Serbian president Aleksandar Vucic considered for some time in 2018 to launch a referendum to get the mention of Kosovo out of the constitution's preamble (facilitating a final modernisation), but then dropped quietly the initiative. The proclamation by the Kosovo Assembly of the transformation of the KSF into armed forces has again frozen any political dialogue and possible recognition by Serbia for a considerable time.

### ***Terrorism- A global threat in regional context***

Given that terrorism is a global international security risk, we cannot deny its existence in the Balkans.. Terrorist networks are present in the region and we can observe an increasing influence of Muslim fundamentalism.

New terrorist networks were founded during the war of dissolution of Yugoslavia when scores of mujahedeen came to Bosnia-Herzegovina and took part in the civil war. After the war a lot of “fighters of Allah” remained in the country contributing to the development of the terrorist networks connected with radical factions of Islam (Gibas-Krzak, 2013: 203). In 1971 Muslims gained the status of a separate nation but their religion had a secular character. The victory of Khomeini Iranian revolution had a direct effect to activate local Islamists (Gibas-Krzak, 2013: 207). In the Bosnian civil war mostly religious fanatics took part in the fights who tried to introduce strict moral rules. They came from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Turkey, Algeria, Afghanistan, Sudan, Syria and Iran, fighting in the name of Allah and arriving through a well-known transfer route along the Vienna-Zagreb line.

In this context emerged what at that time was dubbed the “White al-Qaeda”, a terrorist network recruiting local non-Arabs functioning in Bosnia-Herzegovina, FYROM, Kosovo, Serbia and Albania. The aim of the original al-Qaeda from the beginning of the civil war was to establish a



special base in the Balkans that would enable terrorists to find ways to Western Europe. Its coordination office was established in Sofia in 1991.

The activity of the Mujahedeen stopped around 1995 due to the counter terrorism activities of the US but it regained importance in 2003 when radical Islamic leaders adopted the “Balkans 2020” action plan prepared by the al-Qaeda Egyptian second in command Ayman al-Zawahiri.

In 2006 Abu Hamza, leader of the Bosnian Wahhabis, declared that the Balkan Islamic practices had so far been atheist and it was time to follow the real Islam. This accusation was later repeated in 2017 by Qaedist media against local Muslims, accusing them of apostasy and threatening them with the cruelest punishments, worse than against Serbian, Croats or Western countries’ soldiers. In 2011 a local policeman was severely wounded by Mevlid Jasarevic near the US embassy in Sarajevo as a revenge for killing Muammar Khadafy. Around 2013 about 3.000 armed Jihadists were estimated in the Balkans (Gibas-Krzak, 2013: 213). In October 2017 the numbers of potential terrorist shrunk significantly to 1.000-900 departing to the “Caliphate” and just 250 returning in the region, most of them thoroughly disillusioned by the reality of ISIS in the SYRAQ theatre. Between November 2016 and September 2018 at least four significant terrorist incidents: 19 Jihadists were arrested for plotting to an attack against the Israeli football team, belonging to a network directed by Lavdrim Muhaxheri, active in Albania, FYROM and Kosovo; four Kosovars arrested in Italy for plotting an attack in Venice; two jihadist arrested in Tirana for an accidental explosion of a small device; two suspected jihadists arrested in Sarajevo.

The existence of terrorist networks in the Balkans means a direct risk to Europe, but it is doubtful that these groups represent a serious continuation of the phenomenon dubbed “Balkan spiral”, that started during the civil war. Local authorities should do more in terms of CT and even more of CVE: a successful referral mechanism was started in 2017 in Kosovo, but its continuation might be uncertain. On the other hand organized crime and, to a lesser extent, espionage, subversion and interference are real threats in the region.

### *Lack of democratic traditions- An overarching deficit*

Unstable democracy has been repeatedly a soft spot of the Balkan region. The problem of parallelism was one of the big challenges, meaning that they needed to shift to liberal democracy and

market economy at the same time. This is still in progress in some countries. However, from the beginning of the 2000's stagnation can be recognized. According to the research of the Freedom House in 2013 Serbia, Croatia, FYROM and Montenegro were considered being semi-consolidated democracies; Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina are hybrid regimes, while Kosovo is a semi-consolidated authoritarian regime (Vincze, 2014: 71). In 2019 the same report classified Serbia and Montenegro as partly free regimes, together with Albania, while North Macedonia and Kosovo showed minor improvements and Bosnia - Herzegovina experienced a minor decline..

The Balkan region experienced a three-phase transition starting from building democratic political systems, through state-building to putting neighbourhood policies on new bases. Moreover, the economies should be organized on the bases of the Washington consensus that covered liberalization, privatization, macroeconomic stability and microeconomic reforms. This attempt has been blocked by structural insufficiencies, such as the lack of export oriented markets, and more recently by a wide wave of so called “populism” and “sovereignism” that swept across USA, Western and Eastern Europe.

Symptoms of weak democratic regimes generate security risks in the region. Organized crime, corruption, and trafficking are all consequences of the failure of external democracy building attempts. It is simply not enough. Although, international actors urge external democracy building through military and civilian presence and international aids the remnants of wars, lack of democratic traditions and historical heritage keep hostage the consolidation of a Western-type democracy. Projecting democracy is a noble mission, but if it does not finds roots in the particular society it will not be long lasting. Local elites and influence groups should be persuaded that democracy is a real stabilising factor and should be projected through them, but they should internalise the culture and the process.

### *Organized crime and its affiliates (trafficking, corruption)*

The transition from Communist rule to democracy, wars on the Balkans in 1990s and the presence of weak states provided a favourable environment for organized crime networks that, by the way, pre-existed underground during the Tito era (Agir et al, 2016: 46). A specific characteristic of Yugoslavia and other Communist regimes was that links between tolerated black marketers and economic operators of the secret services were quickly established, often under direct impulse from

the political top decision makers. Tito himself decided to enlist promising young criminals in his security service to perform “special tasks” and Yugoslav citizen had the possibility to travel much more freely than all their fellow-citizens of the COMECON economic block (Council for Mutual Economic assistance, then called in 1991, Organization for International Economic Cooperation). This relative freedom of movement allowed also some Yugoslav organized crime groups in the Seventies and Eighties to establish bases outside the country, in order to expand their activities and out of the strict Titoist framework. When Yugoslavia dissolved, constant instability and fights in the Balkan Peninsula resulted in weak state architectures, legal vacuum and economic deficits that allowed criminality to grow further within the political fabric and enjoying its full support. The globalization of financial markets, transportation and communication networks enabled criminal buyers and sellers to locate each other, identify common interests and establish cooperation (Curtis et al, 2002: 3).

Generally the regional organized networks find their expression in the trafficking of illicit goods, cigarettes, stolen vehicles, petrol, drugs, arms and trafficking in human beings. Basically, insecurity and the lack of rule of law allowed organized crime groups (OC groups) to have direct links to high ranked politicians, military and law enforcement officials. Contemporary literature in this field often uses the term “Eurocrime”, referring to illegal acts having transnational ramifications in Europe and committed by terrorists and OC groups (Curtis et al, 2002: 3).

The Balkan region plays a central role in narcotics and arms trade. After the disintegration of Yugoslavia and Communist Albania, massive amounts of arms were left in the area and the ineffective monitoring and corruption made the stockpiles available for traffickers. Since the Dayton Agreement the war in 1995, illegal arms trade has increased. The Western and well established terrorist groups IRA and ETA for instance made their connections in Croatia through the Croat Bosnian faction, before being defeated. In some years, Croatia has become a source of illegal arms trade at transnational level.

Unfortunately, in addition to systemic OC, the region is associated with a high degree of perceived corruption affecting the political authority, the quality of government and institutional framework, the effectiveness of the judiciary, the level of competition, the structure of the public sector, the degree of economic development and the quality of the social culture. Corruption can manifest itself through several forms of bribery, fraud, extortion or nepotism (Siuossiouras et al, 2012: 92).

The presence of high unemployment, hidden economy, social inequality and degraded state institutions provides fertile ground for corruption.

Also, it is important to notice that organized crime is a complex phenomenon involving money laundering, smuggling, blackmailing and trafficking as well. The patterns of connection may vary depending on the needs and structures of the OC groups. They often build contacts with those who are not members any of the groups, as for example arms smuggling involves individuals such as high rank ministers or national security agencies. The most important routes start from the Ukraine, Moldova or Romania running through Serbia and end either in Western Europe or in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia. Although, in general terms the area is hugely affected by organized crime, the level of it may vary.

### *Croatia*

As it has already been mentioned, Croatia was involved in illegal arms trade to the terrorist organizations IRA and ETA. Besides this, the overall trend seems to be positive. In recent years, we can observe a relatively low level of organized crime. It is mainly a transit country, but only to a limited extent, except the proliferation of small weapons in which it is also a country of origin. Concerning corruption, it bears one of the best ranks among the Balkan countries. According to the Corruption Perceptions Index 2015 of the Transparency International, Croatia is at the 50<sup>th</sup> place, but three years later the perception has worsened to the 60<sup>th</sup> place. Although, there are some OC groups in the region, they are not the classical ones with strict hierarchy, but latest reports between 2015 and 2019 show that there is a brisk activity in terms of cocaine and heroine trafficking and of counterfeiting of official documents, including police ones.

### *Bosnia-Herzegovina*

Organized crime and corruption cause significant problems in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Due to the prolonged crisis in the country parallel with the collapse of the market and the lack of basic economic resources an extraordinary organized crime network evolved from the members of previous criminal groups, political elites, law enforcement officials and paramilitary units, formed on ethnic basis (Stojarová, 2007: 7)

The implementation of IFOR/SFOR has not brought any development in this field. These operations concentrated mainly on peacekeeping and arresting war criminals. The fight against organized crime was not a priority. Nowadays, there is a willingness to fight against these groups, however, the remaining reluctance of local organs and the involvement of the elite block such initiatives. According to the Corruption Perceptions Index, Bosnia-Herzegovina ended up in the 76<sup>th</sup> place in 2015 and 89<sup>th</sup> place in 2018. Nevertheless during 2018 a number of high profile trials, condemnations and arrests, particularly involving important traffickers with links to Colombia, Turkey and Afghanistan, shows that more effort is put into this issue. Politics-OC links nevertheless remain very strong especially within illiberal and opaque political entities.

### *Serbia*

Due to the politicization and militarization in public life during the Milosevic era, the level of crime, corruption and tolerance for criminal acts increased. In Serbia, the high rate of criminality was caused by veterans from the Croatian and Bosnian wars who fought in the paramilitary groups supported by the Serbian government (Stojarová, 2007: 11). These wars also interrupted the traditional trafficking route. The Balkan route had to be diverted and goods were trafficked from Macedonia through Albania to Italy. Nowadays, there are around 50 criminal groups in the country with at least 10 members each. They are horizontally organized with high level of independence. Concerning corruption, Serbia landed at the 71<sup>st</sup> place in 2015 which is a significant development comparing to 2006 when it was on the 90<sup>th</sup> place, but in 2018 it re-plummeted to the 87<sup>th</sup> place. The latest news from 2017 to 2019 are mixed at best: on the one hand president Vucic had promised new draconian laws against OC, but on the other corruption cases are frequent and at high level, only 6% of OC assassinations were investigated since 2018 and connections between OC, football hooligans and politics are well attested.

### *Kosovo*

Kosovo has been a heaven for organized crime groups for a long time. These groups are hierarchically organized, disciplined with exclusive membership. They emerged from official state structures and cooperated with the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) whose fighters stepped into

politics after the war. The Kosovo Albanian diaspora plays a huge role as they serve as an ideal basis for criminal groups. As they could not integrate to Western societies they are favourable tools to spread criminality. Some expert suggests that the recognition of independence would decrease the influence of OC groups, but to be more successful the entire party system should be restructured. Corruption is also among the highest, the country has the 103<sup>rd</sup> place according to the CPI, while in 2018 it was considered better with a 93<sup>rd</sup> place. That said, an important number of top politicians have not severed their organic links with OC, but just hide them better than before. Both Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serbian OC groups are very powerful and very busy in successfully co-operating along new and old trafficking routes. In Mitrovica, the main Serbian-speaking Kosovar city, they have a direct hidden say in local political developments (especially barricades or walls).

### *Montenegro*

In the 1990s, Serbia and Montenegro owned a strong police force. Unfortunately, its members got involved in illicit activities and after it became a paradise for all kinds of trafficking. The country is famous for importing stolen motor vehicles from Western-Europe, trafficking human beings, cigarettes, arms and narcotics. From 2003 powerful fight began against organized crime. In the framework of the new orientation, police forces were reformed based on the respect of human rights, decentralisation, accountability, effective internal control and engagement in international cooperation (Stojarová, 2007: 16). In addition, the government adopted a comprehensive strategy in 2005 with a set of new rules and regulations concerning organized crime. These measures were partly implemented because of the competition with Serbia. It is obvious that Montenegro is striving to become an EU member before the Serbs. In 2015 Montenegro held the 61<sup>st</sup> place on the CPI list, in 2018 it worsened to the 67<sup>th</sup> place. Since 2016 the situation concerning OC has not visibly improved (with the exception of Kotor, where mafias avoid shooting but have not loosened the grip in the city) while a number of corruption trials shows a less than enthusing political background.

### *North Macedonia*

North Macedonia has 10 influential OC groups on transnational level that are hierarchically structured and take part in the transit of heroin from Southeast Asia and the cocaine from South

America. Concerning the trafficking of human beings it is a country of origin, transit and destination as well. Trafficking of prostitutes via Bulgaria is a huge business. Besides humans, cigarettes and tobacco (predominantly), cars and money are also trafficked wares. Corruption is also high: it has the 66<sup>th</sup> place on the CPI list and in 2018 it got a worse 93<sup>rd</sup> place, better than 2017, but anyhow despite the sacking of the past corrupt government led by the nationalist party VMRO-DPMNE. Actually an important part of the judicial system is still engaged into corruption, political manipulation and external interference, illegal interception and nepotism of the past government, without having enough resources to fight old and new criminal groups.

### *Albania*

Albania provides one of the main routes for the illegal trade from West to the East; it is home to a cloud of more or less connected, violent clans, who were able to control a sizeable part of the regional human and heavy drugs market, not only through well-developed links with the Albanian diaspora, but also with regional groups through privileged connections with Kosovar, Montenegrin, Serbian and Macedonian groups, in addition to long standing relationships with the Italian Camorra, Cosa Nostra and 'ndrangheta. Together with Morocco it is the largest cannabis trafficker world wide (Stojarová, 2007: 19. In 2015 the CPI list put the country on the 88<sup>th</sup> place, while three years later it was 99<sup>th</sup>.

### *Illegal migration*

Illegal migration is the most recent emerging security challenge that directly affects many countries, but much more in an indirect way. The Balkans is a highly affected area, given that it serves as a transit rout of illegal migrants. The region has always served as a bridge between Asia Minor and the central parts of Europe. Between the IV-XIV century, it was a target of migratory flows, but during the ruling of the Ottoman-Turks generated consistent migration West-bound flows. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, major migration flows were due to the Balkan Wars, the First and the Second World Wars and the Yugoslav war. In 2015 it became especially visible when a massive migratory flow from the Near-East and North-Africa started to reach Western Europe.



Numbers of non-regular migrants transiting the Balkans reached unprecedented levels in 2015 with around 2 million illegal border crossings (Frontex, 2016: 4). It means that it is the largest migration crisis since the end of the Second World War. Illegal migrants have often used the following two routes: Turkey-Greece-North Macedonia-Serbia-Hungary or Turkey-Bulgaria-Serbia-Hungary/Croatia. However, the build up of a fence along the entire Hungarian-Serbian border shifted the flow to the Slovenian-Croatian borders.

The migratory crisis resulted from a mixture of compounding factors: prolonged war in Syria, advancing Daesh and the growing threat from Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan. Although, verifying the country of origin is highly difficult, we can say that the majority of migrants arrived from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Concerning cooperation in tackling this massive migration crisis, the region does not show a good example. Despite the fact that unfortunately not every country joined Operation Poseidon in 2014, Operation Triton in 2015 and the EU NAVFOR Med, the problem proved to be unmanageable within their own territories, too. Countries of the region (especially Croatia, Greece and Serbia) are not willing to control and register illegal border crossings, but they transfer migrants to a neighbouring country in an organized way, therefore shifting responsibilities. As a result, in 2015 the European Commission initiated an infringement procedure against Greece and Croatia for failing to implement their international commitments (Frontex, 2016: 4).

Migration involves several risks for security and stability and could contribute to increase the level of criminality in the region. The transfer of migrants is often carried out by organized crime groups and traffickers who know the transit routes very well. In addition, it may also bring about the risk of terrorism by facilitating their transfer hidden in the mass of refugees.

The European Union aims to enhance transnational cooperation in the field of migration. One of the most important initiatives that involved the Balkan states is the 17 point Action Plan, initiated in October 2015 in order to start a dialogue between the affected countries, improve cooperation, set up a consultation forum and take pragmatic operational measures to tackle the refugee crisis (European Commission, 2015: 1). The Action Plan can be divided into four parts: information exchange, reception capacity, border management and humanitarian support.

Three years later the Balkan Route showed only a trickle of illegal migrants, mainly after the EU-Turkey illegal migration agreement. Regional cooperation could be an inevitable tool here requiring

to put differences and conflicts aside. Unfortunately, the signs do not let us hope for optimistic prospects. It is clear that without external support of international organizations, the region is not able to cope with one of the most serious contemporary security challenges.

### **What can the international community do?**

Generally saying that without external support, the region would not be able to end or suspend its conflicts as well as maintaining a fragile, but still relative peace. As it has been already highlighted, it is not enough to stay on the surface. International support in itself is not enough. It is only successful when it is accompanied with inner desire for change and generates capacities in the involved countries to stand on their own feet. Active participation is needed, although independence should be taken as a top priority. Without reaching organic structural change in the region, international support remains superficial and temporary.

After the Kosovo conflict in 1999 the EU realised that its relationship to the Balkan region has to be put on another basis. Among others, one of the major tools of the EU is integration. As a first step, the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) as well as the Stabilisation and Association Agreement were born as new tools bringing consolidation and security to the countries of the region. The SAP aims to enhance institution building, economic reconstruction and regional cooperation along with the preparation for a full membership. But before the SAP was issued the EU adopted the so called “Regional Approach” establishing political and economic conditionality for the development of bilateral relations with the area (Agir et al, 2016: 49).

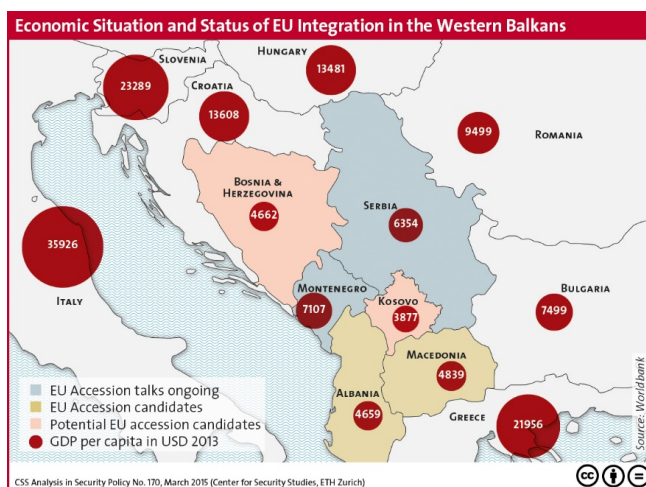
In the 2000's, the EU started to pursue a coherent and proactive Balkan policy. Due to the volatility, economic depression and insecurity of the region the EU began the establishment of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe in 1999 in order to enhance democratic rights, economic development and security. It was at the Feira European Council of 2000 that the prospect of EU membership has been extended to Western Balkans countries. Orienting the region towards the Euro-Atlantic community became a priority and one of the cornerstones of the CFSP. Building on previous experiences, the effectiveness of conflict resolution increased. In Thessaloniki in 2003 during the EU-Western Balkan Summit the Union expressed its direct responsibility towards the region. As the realisation of this commitment, the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (2006) and the European Endowment for Democracy (2012) was established. Besides these, some funding programmes were also brought to life (e.g. OBNOVA, PHARE, ECHO) in order to

provide financial support for these countries. Above all, as a comprehensive measure the Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stability (CARDS) was created in 2000 in order to support these countries' integration to the Union.

The cornerstone of enlargement policy was the spread of norms and values through which Europe can influence democratic consolidation. However, support was based on conditionality. Comparing to the countries of Eastern-Europe, Balkan states have to fulfil not only the Copenhagen criteria but also meet requirement such as supporting refugees to return to their homes, cooperating with the ICTY and taking part in regional cooperation efforts. The accession of Romania and Bulgaria showed that very strict control applies. For instance, requirements should be fulfilled before the accession talks begin, and an analysis is written at the closing of each chapters.

In the Balkan case state building should also be managed by the Union. Some experts take it as a four-stage process. The first stage is the fulfilment of the requirements regarding the SAA. Secondly, there is the *benchmarking* stage in which the requirements of full membership are scheduled. The third stage is the model-role, making domestic legal systems compatible with the *acquis communautaire*. Finally, financial support is also part of the comprehensive strategy. Additionally, visa liberalisation (except Kosovo) can also be considered as the first step towards the integration. With the establishment of the so called Schengen White List, people from the Balkan countries are entitled to travel to Europe for touristic and business purposes (Vincze, 2014: 107).

**Figure 2: Economic situation and EU integration in the Western Balkans**



Source: Centre for Security Studies, Zürich [https://www.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-security-studies/charts/css\\_analysis\\_170\\_Map.jpg](https://www.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-security-studies/charts/css_analysis_170_Map.jpg)

Concerning civilian and military presence, the Union introduced a comprehensive approach to post-conflict settlement. The peak period was 2000/2001 counting approximately 65.000 boots on the ground (Vincze, 2014: 108). It was just after the Kosovo conflict. Bosnia-Herzegovina and North Macedonia serve as the primary area of concentration. The EU's first crisis management military crisis management operation entitled as Operation Concordia was conducted in FYROM in 2003. This mission lasted until 2005 under the name of EUPOL Proxima. It converted into an advisory mission from 2006, called EUPAT. In 2004 the NATO-led Stabilization Force in Bosnia-Herzegovina was replaced by the EU-led Operation EUFOR-Althea which is the largest EU crisis management mission. In addition, one of the best-known missions is the EULEX in Kosovo. Moreover, EU high representatives are also nominated to these countries.

All in all, we can say that although the EU has not been able to conduct aligned foreign policy actions, it has the will and capacity to support these countries along the way to the European integration. Its most important tool for democratization is the integration, but financial support channels as well as civilian and police missions also play a significant role.

NATO follows similar logic than the Union. It has built a strong relationship with the region, offering full memberships for Albania and Croatia. Concerning enlargement the previous approach was to take security interest into consideration first. However, due to constant instabilities in the Balkans, the Alliance puts security above interests. Similarly the EU, NATO also uses its enlargement policy as a stabilisation tool.

In the Partnership for Peace Framework Document in 1994, the Alliance identified itself as a community of democratic values. These values should be spread across the region in order to facilitate prolonged peace. On the other hand, in 2011 during the Council of Foreign Ministers in Berlin it was stated that having the same values is not a prerequisite any more, but a pragmatic, practical and flexible approach should be implemented regarding the integration (Vincze, 2014: 117).

**Figure 3: NATO membership in Europe**



Source: Andrew Korybko: NATO's Drive towards the South. *The Balkans and South Eastern Europe*, Global Research <http://www.globalresearch.ca/natos-drive-towards-the-south-the-balkans-and-south-eastern-europe/5493874>

The Alliance showed active participation during the South-Slav crisis starting from 1990. In 1992 AWACS helicopters were provided in order to control the arms embargo initiated by the UN. It also supervised the no-fly zone above Bosnia and Herzegovina. In addition, it launched its very first out of area operation in the Western Balkans. After the Dayton agreement was made in 1995, operation IFOR was launched, later transformed to SFOR that was also entitled to carry out peace enforcement measures in the territory of Bosnia. After 1995 the main aim was to preserve the trans-Atlantic unity and stability.

In the wake of 2000-2001 hostilities in FYROM, the Alliance launched two limited operations. One of them was the operation Essential Harvest, started in 2001 to eliminate weapons in FYROM after the Ohrid Accords, which consolidated an ethnic uprising between Macedonians and Albanians, entered into force. The other one started in 2003 under the name of operation Amber Fox monitoring the implementation of the Ohrid Accords.

In 1999, the KFOR mission was deployed to Kosovo and is still present there. Its mandate has not changed with the declaration of independence, but some other functions were added, like the establishment of an effective political advisory system.

The activity of international actors does not end at democracy building. Security sector reform is an integral part of peace and state building efforts and plays a huge role in the consolidation process. As NATO (and also EU) missions' activities transformed from fighting and peace-making to peacekeeping and assistance this concept got greater importance. Moreover, assisting organizations realized that prolonged peace can be guaranteed only when further reformed are carried out after the fights are over. This comprehensive approach contributed to the development of the SSR.

Within the framework of the sustainable development concept, NATO is also involved in the assistance to the defence sector, management of bodies, reform of the judiciary and support of informal security providers (Olstad Busterud, 2015: 335). Although, international organisations are there to assist, "local ownership" is one of the most important principles. It means that domestic decision makers and civil society groups are highly involved in the process and have the right to influence decisions. This way, it is not only an external action but may find roots in the particular society, too.

To summarize all the above, we can say that NATO is committed to reach stability and security in the region mainly through military presence and enlargement. Although, full membership involves the fulfilment of certain requirements and aspirants may differ from members of the Euro-Atlantic community, the Alliance is open to new member states in order to preserve international stability and guarantee peace.

### **Regional cooperation- the pathway for real changes**

As it has already been mentioned, international assistance is not solution in itself. It is necessary to keep conflicts under a certain level but, in order to achieve long-lasting peace, the region should identify common interest and problems they can cope with together. Although, they are different from various aspects, countries of the region share similar historical past and faces similar difficulties, therefore any kind of cooperation between them should enhance security and stability.

Regional cooperation in any given region is the outcome of the interplay between external/international factors and internal dynamics. The first refers to the extra-regional environment, which favours and facilitates regional cooperation. The second refers to the existence of a consensus among local actors on the importance of regional cooperation (Anastasakis, 2002: 2).



Local approach is of crucial importance which is based on the perceptions of the domestic actors involved in this, usually referred to as local elites.

In 1918 and, subsequently, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia have been the most significant attempts to create a political and economic union. In the 1930s, the Balkan Conferences focused on cooperation in low politics issues, comprising political, economic, cultural and other social matters, such as minority and border issues. In the 1970s and 1980s, further efforts concentrated on cooperation on low politics issues, culminating in the First Conference of Foreign Ministers of Balkan countries in Belgrade in 1988 (Anastasakis, 2002: 5). These attempts, however, has only limited success.

As part of the Stabilisation and Association Process the EU intends to foster regional cooperation in a form of conditionality in a wide scale of issues from border ambiguity to organized crime. One of the Union's initiatives is the Sarajevo-based Regional Cooperation Council was officially launched at the meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) in Sofia. The aim of the RCC is to support non-EU members in the fields of euro-Atlantic integration, economic and social development, energy, infrastructure, media, civil society, justice and home affairs as well as security policy. In line with its Statute and guided by the principles of all-inclusiveness, the main tasks of the RCC are to represent the region, assist the SEECP, monitor regional activities and exert leadership in regional cooperation.

Another important regional cooperation attempt is the Central-European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) which aims to reduce duties not only on services, but also involves regulations related to intellectual property rights, state support and governmental public procurements.

Nevertheless, it should be taken into consideration that regional cooperation in SEE has to overcome some serious obstacles, linked to geographic proximity and contested borders, history, external influences or developmental features. Basically, these reasons can be categorised as economic and political. Moreover, the lack of clear understanding on the geographical borders of the Balkans makes it difficult to talk about regionalism. Actually, a clear definition of the Balkans should be given first.

Among the economic obstacles we should mention the low level of intra-regional trade, incomplete trade liberalisation, discriminatory rules, high unemployment rates, unsustainable fiscal deficits and institutional weaknesses. Political factors, however, are far more complex. Starting from illiberal



democratic regimes, the lack of rule of law and transparency, inappropriate institutional frameworks, ethnic nationalism as well as autocratic elites with communist and extremist affiliations hinder cooperation attempts.

**Table 2: Participation of SEE countries in regional formations**

Country	Adriatic-Ionian Initiative (AII)	Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC)	Central European Initiative (CEI)	Central European Free Trade Area (CEFTA)	Royaumont Process (RP)	Southeast Europe Cooperative Initiative (SECI)	South East European Cooperation Process (SEECP)	Stability Pact for SEE (SP)
Albania	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	+
Bosnia-Herzegovina	+	-	+	-	+	+	+	+
Bulgaria	-	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Croatia	+	-	+	-	+	+	Observer	+
FYROM	-	-	+	-	+	+	+	+
Romania	-	+	+	+	+	+	+	+

*Source: Othon Anastasakis & Vesna Bojic-Dzelilovic (2002): Balkan Regional Cooperation & European Integration. The Hellenic Observatory, The London School of Economics and Political Science, 52.*

Generally, it seems that there is no clear understanding of the importance of regional cooperation. There is a shared view that regional initiatives are to the benefit of some of the elites, while their impact on economic, social and political processes in member countries has been limited (Anastasakis, 2002: 54.). In order to boost the effectiveness of such cooperation, clear goals, road maps and benefits should be determined to pursue local elites to get involved in these initiatives. Most important, it has to be linked constructively to the process of European integration in order to create a more positive perception of the Balkan region.

### **The role of non-state actors and civil society**

One of the major challenges to consolidate democracy in the Balkans is to overcome the gap between politics and civil society. Although, civil society organizations (CSOs) have been engaged in several projects in the last few years, a constructive dialogue should be started to bring together different actors in a transparent and well-organized manner.

Civil Society Organisations and party political actors both play essential roles in a democratic system: while CSOs represent societal group interests, draw public attention to shortcomings and the needs

of society, launch civic initiatives, contribute to decision-making processes, hold party political actors to account and thereby influence politics, political parties are responsible for directly shaping the political process (ENoP, 2015: 8). CSOs in the Balkans face several obstacles as they need to carry out activities in a non-supportive environment. Despite the judicial, financial, administrative and legal difficulties, these organizations often lack crucial knowledge and skills to be effective.

Today, there is a wide landscape of civil society initiatives. Hereby, only the most significant non-state actors are listed.

**European Movement Albania (EMA)** is a think tank exploring political, economic and social challenges that Albania and the Western Balkans are facing on their road toward EU membership. It is devoted to making the policymaking process transparent and accountable. EMA's work is organised around four programme areas: promotion of European values and European Integration process of Albania, democracy and good governance, economic and social dimensions of EU integration, and regional cooperation.

**Think Tank Populari** is an independent, non-governmental and non-profit research centre, based in Sarajevo, but operating throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina. Founded in 2007, Populari seeks to provide credible research and analysis, offer solutions and advocate change. Combining in-depth desk and extensive field research, Populari's team is focusing on EU integration, good governance and democratisation policies.

**Centre for Security Studies (CSS)** is an independent research, educational and training enterprise dedicated to encouraging informed debate on security matters and to promoting and sustaining democratic structures and processes in foreign and security policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region.

**Vaša Prava Bosnia and Herzegovina** is a Bosnian NGO that provides legal assistance on civil matters to refugees, displaced people, and other poor and disadvantaged Bosnians. Vaša Prava's core mission is to promote civil, socio-economic, cultural and human rights and to provide fair access to justice to ensure those rights.

**Kosovar Civil Society Foundation (KCSF)** established in 1999, is an independent, not-profit organisation focused on supporting local civil initiatives that lead to a strong civil society.

**NGO AKTIV** was founded in the divided city of Mitrovica. Since its inception in 2009, AKTIV has successfully implemented an array of projects and has become an active part of local civil society.

**Civil Rights Program in Kosovo (CRP/K)** was founded by The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) in 1999. As of 2002, it acts as an independent nongovernmental human rights-based organisation.

**Macedonian Young Lawyers Association (MYLA)** is a non-profit professional organisation of lawyers established in 2003 in Skopje, FYROM. Over the years, MYLA has transformed itself into a unique organisation that actively protects human rights.

**Centre for Regional Policy Research and Cooperation “Studiorum”** (founded in 2002) is a non-governmental think-tank based in Skopje, FYROM, working on economic and social aspects of EU and NATO integration and globalisation processes that are still of essential importance to the Republic of North Macedonia and the countries of Southeast Europe.

**Institute Alternative (IA)** is an NGO established in 2007. The institute functions as a think tank and research centre focused on the overarching areas of good governance, transparency and accountability.

**Center for Monitoring and Research (CeMI)** is an NGO whose main goal is to provide infrastructure and expert support for continuous monitoring of the process of transition in Montenegro.

**Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (CEDEM)** was founded in July 1998 as a think-tank with a main goal of strengthening civil society and spreading awareness of the democratic transition of the country.

**Group 484** is an NGO from Serbia, established in 1995, with broad experience in the field of migration.

Non-state actors can significantly contribute to sustainable peace in the Balkans. It is a constant critic that the region lacks democratic traditions. By empowering civil society to be engaged actively in projects and issues regarding democracy and prosperity democratic roots can be established and inherited by the next generation. This inspired the idea of the “Civil Society Forum of the Western Balkans Summit Series” as a joint initiative of the European Fund for the Balkans, ERSTE Foundation, and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and European Alternatives. The next summit took place in

Skopje, FYROM on the 24-26<sup>th</sup> of November 2016, with the vision to encourage a culture of constructive dialogue and increase the visibility of civic activism.

## **Conclusion**

As it can be seen from the above detailed analysis, the Balkan region is a highly complex geopolitical area. The collapse of the communist regime brought about an opportunity for independent nation states to emerge. However, transitions were bloody and involved several harmful consequences that are still present.

In the 1990s Balkan countries needed to redefine their national characters, values and geopolitical place. However, due to inner weaknesses like high unemployment, the presence of black economy, lack of democratic traditions and rule of law, parallel institutions started to emerge besides governmental ones and proper soil was provided for the flowering of criminality.

The Balkan region is still affected by numerous non-traditional security challenges that combined with the inner problems make the region quite instable. The biggest problem is organized crime and until the dissolution of such networks there are no positive prospects for economic and political prosperity. In addition, fragmentation also hinders stability and development. Regional development could be the only realistic way out from the current situation but unfortunately, countries hardly show willingness to cooperate, or only on the surface as historical past and hidden conflicts burden their relationships that stop them to reach common interests.

In order to stabilise the area, several international organizations are present and try to provide support to rebuild the countries and preserve security. However, one must take it into consideration that despite substantial international presence, until organic changes do not take place, relative peace in the Balkan region remains to be fragile. Therefore, this paper underlines the importance of non-state actors and civil society to get involved in maintaining stability. The active engagement of civilians plays a key role in consolidating functioning democracies.

Peace is just on the surface. The importance of the region lies in fragility and uncertainty, two things that are the biggest enemies of our modern world. We do not know what to cope with until we hear the news of another war, ethnic uprising or terrorist case. Do not wait for that moment. It is the responsibility of the international community to take action and find the sufficient measures to build

long-lasting security in the region, otherwise, the Balkans is still undoubtedly a powder keg of Europe. It should not be that of the world.



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