



BALKANS AND BLACK SEA PERSPECTIVES 2025

Building Bridges: Defusing
Hybrid Threats For Regional
Stability

Balkans and Black Sea Perspectives 2025

Building Bridges: Defusing Hybrid Threats For Regional Stability

High-Level Conference

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NATO Defense College Foundation

In co-operation with
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NATO Defense College Foundation

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WELCOME REMARKS

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Source: NATO Defense College Foundation





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**Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo**

*President, NATO Defense College Foundation,
Rome*

WELCOME REMARKS

Ladies and gentlemen, buon pomeriggio a tutti, welcome to this conference. The NATO Defense College Foundation has been working on this region for over a decade, and we continue to do so because it is very close to our interests and values. I am speaking of South-Eastern Europe, this large and historic area that spans from the Adriatic to the Black Sea.

We believe that this region should become part of the Euro-Atlantic community, and the invasion of Ukraine has given a new sense of urgency to this objective. NATO continues to uphold its “open door” policy, and the European Union is actively implementing a policy of inclusion with strong and deep-rooted foundations.

While war and violence are still raging in Ukraine, and often outside the limelight of the major media, a crisis is also brewing in the Balkans. Serbia and Kosovo, for instance, remain locked in antagonism, and Bosnia and Herzegovina

is threatened by secessionist challenges. This is a strong reason to accompany the nations of the area and their peoples on a path from fragmentation to inclusion, from instability to long-term security, good governance and a fully established rule of law. The region is a complex one for many reasons: its history, local nationalisms, fragile economies, embattled democracies, organised crime and environmental damage.

Looking at the positive aspects, it is important to underline that in the Balkans the EU-NATO strategic partnership has proven its importance, with each organisation acting in line with its respective added value while working in the same direction. This direction is the final objective of full inclusion. NATO remains present in Kosovo through the KFOR operation, pursuing the same aim that has guided its security projection for over 24 years. We should not forget that the region is exposed both to internal strife and to external malign influence, with Russia being an actor in this respect.

Ladies and gentlemen, today the NDCF is addressing a number of issues that are highly relevant but not often at the centre of international debate. Our tradition is to promote a friendly conversation aimed at finding common and effective solutions. As always, we seek to foster an informed debate at a scientific level, in a spirit of respect, encouraged by the recognition that the region represents an international priority.

We prefer to give voice to speakers from the region itself, because they are the main actors and no one can substitute them. As I mentioned, we have focused on South-Eastern Europe for a long time: we publish a dedicated monthly journal in English, and this conference marks the tenth edition devoted to the region and its perspectives. As you can see in the programme, we are addressing a number of crucial issues of general relevance under the overarching theme of resilience, in order to accompany reform aspirations and the final inclusion into European and Euro-Atlantic institutions.

I warmly welcome the many speakers and moderators of the highest quality and recognised experience. Some of them are long-standing friends, and we continue to work together with great satisfaction. I would like to thank them sincerely for accepting our invitation to Rome, which I am convinced is a natural and privileged place for a serious discussion on this part of Europe.

I conclude by thanking the entire staff of the NDCF for their commitment and enthusiasm, as well as all those who have supported us in organising this event. Grazie per l'attenzione e buon pomeriggio a tutti.

Biography

After having served at the Italian Embassy in Washington DC and as Commercial Counsellor at the Embassy of Italy in Prague, Ambassador **Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo** worked as Head of the External Relations Office of the EEC from 1981 to 1986. In the following years, his career focused on Europe and Space Policy. In 1997 he was appointed Diplomatic Counsellor of the Minister of Defence Beniamino Andreatta, then of his successors Carlo Scognamiglio and Sergio Mattarella. In 2000, Minuto-Rizzo held the position of Italian Ambassador to the Western European Union and to the Political and

Security Committee of the EU, of which he was among the founding members. He was Deputy Secretary General of the Atlantic Alliance between 2001 and 2007. His mandate was mostly carried out in the strategic-political industrial area and in the relations with sensitive countries such as those in the Gulf and the Southern Mediterranean. He is the author of the books: *The road to Kabul* (Il Mulino-Arel, 2009); *A political journey without maps. Diversity and future in the Greater Middle East* (Rubbettino, 2013); and *NATO and the Middle East: The Making of a Partnership* (New Academia Publishing, 2018).



Catherine Bourdès

*Director Academic Plans, Policy and
Engagement, NATO Defense College, Rome*

WELCOME REMARKS

Distinguished members of the NATO Defense College Foundation, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is a great pleasure to represent the NATO Defense College this evening and to address you. Our two institutions share the same mission: to better understand the world around us and to anticipate major strategic challenges. Allow me to open this conference with a simple conviction: there are no longer any peripheries to European security.

This evening, you have chosen to discuss a topic that I believe lies at the very heart of the security and prosperity of our continent: the Western Balkans and the Black Sea are no longer marginal areas, but true security challenges for Euro-Atlantic stability.

In the Western Balkans, we are witnessing a resurgence of political and identity tensions. Renewed secessionist threats in Bosnia and Herzegovina, persistent political instability in Serbia, and the stalemate between Belgrade and Pristina

over Kosovo are alarming signs of weakened institutions, democratic fatigue, and structural vulnerability. These internal fragilities, amplified by hybrid threats (targeted disinformation, corruption, and organised crime) undermine citizens' trust and create fertile ground for external interference.

Looking further east, Russia's aggressive war against Ukraine has highlighted the strategic importance of the Black Sea for Euro-Atlantic security, Europe's energy security, and even global food security. This conflict has also reminded us that the region remains a vital crossroads connecting Europe, Central Asia, and the Eastern Mediterranean.

Today, with nearly half of the Black Sea littoral states belonging to the Alliance, these developments illustrate a fundamental principle: dynamics once thought peripheral are now at the core of the geopolitical competition between Russia and the West, and their evolution directly affects the security of the entire European continent.

It is therefore unsurprising to see the EU and NATO reaffirm the central role of the Western Balkans and the Black Sea in their strategic vision, and to revive enlargement dynamics that reflect an awareness of the need to keep these countries anchored to the Western camp, at a time when hybrid threats, internal fractures, and external interference intersect.

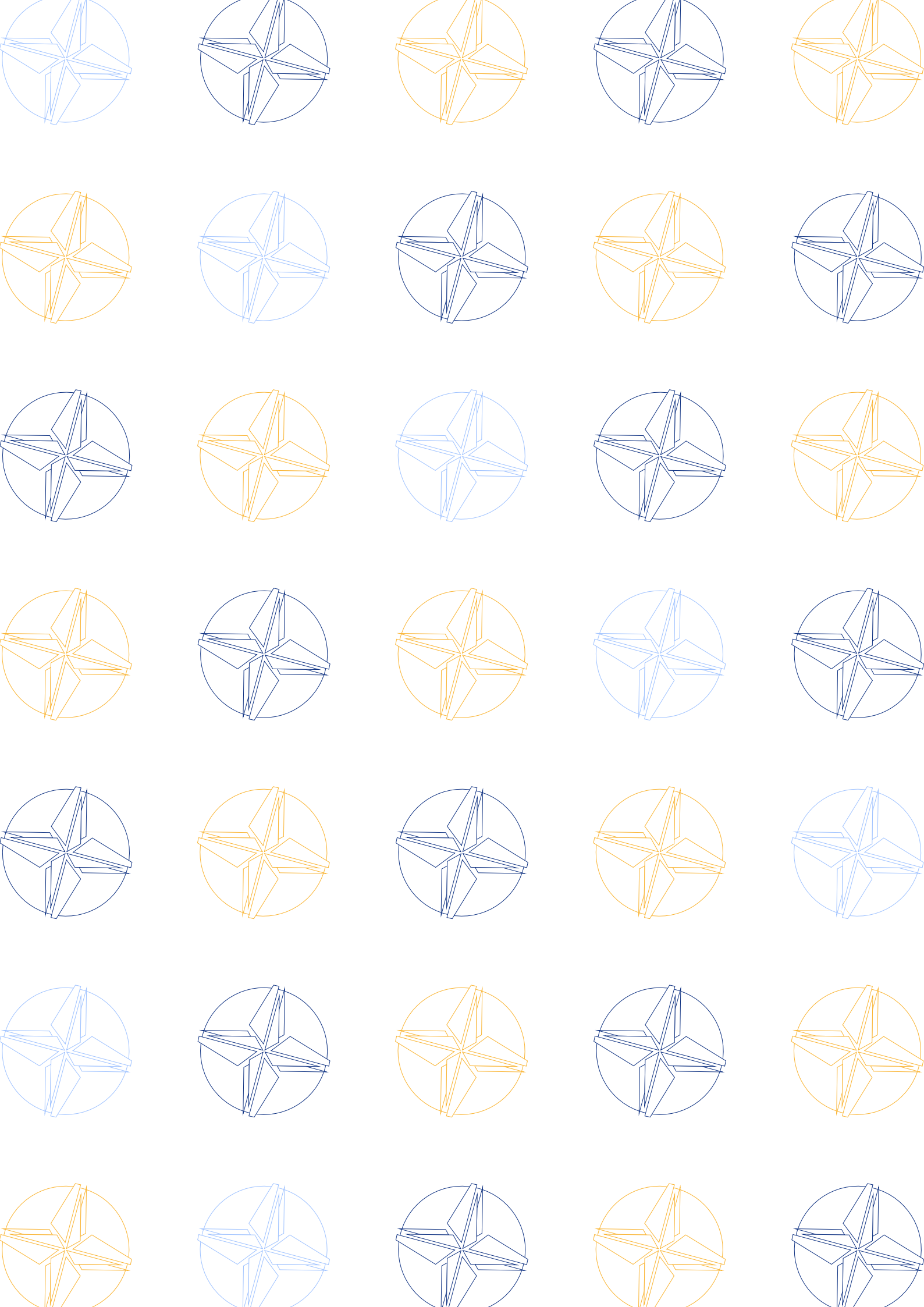
Ladies and Gentlemen, the stability of the Western Balkans and the Black Sea is not a regional issue; it is a global challenge for Euro-Atlantic security. It tests our unity, resilience, and collective determination. Preserving this space means defending freedom of navigation, state sovereignty, and peace on the continent, as well as protecting our shared values: democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. It is in this spirit that European partners act to strengthen regional cohesion, support EU and NATO accession processes, and assist littoral countries in their institutional and military modernisation.

Preserving this space is, in essence, defending the founding values of NATO.

Biography

Brigadier General **Catherine Bourdès** joined the French Air Force in 1991 as a Legal and Finance Officer and has held senior appointments within the Air Force, in joint environments and at NATO. Her career includes postings at SHAPE and NATO Headquarters in Brussels, as well as advisory roles to

successive French Ministers of Defence. Promoted to Brigadier General in 2021, she is currently Director of Academic Plans, Policy and Engagement at the NATO Defense College in Rome. She has extensive operational experience and holds multiple Master's degrees in defence, security and international affairs.



OPENING REMARKS

NATO soldiers from the KFOR contingent in Kosovo.

Source: NATO Kosovo Force - KFOR





Charlotte Hallengren
Director, OPS, NATO HQ, Brussels



OPENING REMARKS

My name is Charlotte Hallengren, and I am the Director for Operations at NATO Headquarters in Brussels. I deeply appreciate the opportunity to share some insights with you on NATO's engagement in the Western Balkans and to give you a sense of our strategic perspective in the region.

My apologies for not being present in person today, as my schedule did not allow me to travel. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the NATO Defense College Foundation for organising this high-level conference, the topic of which could not be timelier.

The Western Balkans remains high on NATO's agenda. It is of strategic importance to the Alliance, as a secure Western Balkans means greater security across the entire Euro-Atlantic area. The region has come a long way since the 1990s, undergoing democratic transformation and progressing steadily closer to NATO and the EU. Our number one priority in the Western Balkans is *peace*

and *stability*. NATO has supported this objective for the past 30 years, enabling important economic and social development.

Yet today, we observe concerning trends that persist in the region and that require NATO's constant operational engagement, particularly in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Divisive rhetoric, political stagnation, and any opportunities for a security vacuum have significant potential to undermine the progress achieved so far. NATO's commitment remains steadfast as we continue to implement our responsibilities under two United Nations Security Council resolutions: [UNSCR 1244 of 1999](#) through the NATO-led KFOR mission and [UNSCR 1575 of 2004](#) through a NATO presence providing operational support to the [EU-led Operation Althea](#).

Alongside our direct operational commitments to ensuring a safe and secure environment in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, NATO also empowers local security institutions to take ownership of their own security through assistance, advice, and capacity-building activities. In Kosovo, NATO's commitment is spearheaded by KFOR, our longest-running and currently largest mission. For over two decades, KFOR has maintained a safe and secure environment for all people in Kosovo and ensured freedom of movement in accordance with its UN mandate, which it continues to fulfil impartially and at all times.

Over these 26 years, we have made significant progress. From entering Kosovo in 1999 with 50.000 troops, we are now at approximately 4.600. This reflects a substantial improvement in the security situation, although challenges persist. The uptick in violence in 2023, including the attacks in Banjska and Zvečan, highlighted the fragility of the security situation in Kosovo. KFOR aims to ensure that such attacks do not happen again. Security cannot be left to chance; it must be actively and prudently protected. KFOR troops demonstrated this clearly in [Zvečan on 29 May 2023](#), where their presence was crucial in preventing loss of life. Tragically, 93 KFOR soldiers were injured, some sustaining life-altering injuries.

As Assistant Secretary General Goffus has stated on numerous occasions, this is something we at NATO feel deeply and personally. NATO has made it clear to both Belgrade and Pristina that such violence must not recur and that it is paramount for all sides to refrain from uncoordinated actions. Even in the face of a more demanding situation on the ground, NATO is proactively ensuring that KFOR has all the capabilities it needs to fulfil its UN mandate impartially and at all times.

Regrettably, KFOR is actively targeted by disinformation and coercive anti-Western narratives, which are not only false but dangerous to our troops. This is why the importance of transparency and good faith can hardly be overstated,

particularly in times of crisis and rising tensions. Elsewhere in the region, calls for secession and the redrawing of borders remain a disruptive and disturbing part of the political discourse. This retrograde thinking is dangerous, divisive, and irresponsible. NATO strongly supports the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. NATO Allies are clear that we will not allow a security vacuum to emerge in Bosnia and Herzegovina or elsewhere in the Western Balkans. NATO's contribution to the EU- led Operation Althea under the Berlin Plus arrangements exemplifies this commitment.

We expect all actors to remain responsible, and we expect UN Security Council members to renew the mandate of Operation Althea for another year on 31 October. To support long-term stability, NATO is investing significantly in building the capacity of local security institutions across the Western Balkans. This ownership pillar is the cornerstone of lasting transformational change. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, we support reform efforts aimed at making the country more resilient and secure, including through a Defence Capacity-Building package.

This strengthens capabilities in areas such as crisis management, cyber defence, and counter- terrorism, and enhances the interoperability of Bosnia and Herzegovina's armed forces with NATO. This year, we expect to launch programmes of activities in several domains, including counter-terrorism, cyber defence, air evacuation, military police, and crisis management. Important steps have already been taken, with more than eight million € contributed to the dedicated trust fund by NATO Allies and partners.

In Kosovo, the NATO Advisory and Liaison Team has, for decades, provided capacity-building support to Kosovo's security organisations in areas including crisis response, natural and other disaster and emergency response, explosive ordnance disposal, and civil protection. NATO's goal is to support Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina in developing modern, transparent, and accountable security institutions, with a strong focus on civilian oversight and democratic control of the security forces. These efforts are long-term investments and will deliver long-term benefits. We can not afford to lose sight of these objectives amid crises, nor leave gaps that could undermine future reforms. The people of the Western Balkans deserve to live in peace and to freely decide their own future. This is the vision that NATO has supported and will continue to support.

Let me be clear: the Alliance and our partners will remain fully engaged in the Western Balkans to support regional stability. We are prepared to adapt, to respond, and to reinforce our presence as necessary.

Ultimately, however, lasting peace will not come from our troops on the ground alone, but from courageous and constructive political solutions. Our

core expertise is security, yet the region requires much more. That is why NATO continues to fully support the EU-led dialogue on the normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina. This is the only way to resolve outstanding issues and secure a stable future, ensuring that the rights of all communities are respected and safeguarded. To move the dialogue forward, both sides must demonstrate flexibility, make the necessary compromises, and focus on long-term gains.

Biography

Since December 2022, Ms **Charlotte Hallengren** has been Director for Operations within the Operations Division of the NATO International Staff. Prior to this appointment, she served as Deputy Political Advisor to the Supreme Allied Commander Transformation at NATO Headquarters in Brussels and worked in the Defence Policy and Planning Division of the NATO International Staff. Ms Hallengren is a former US Army Strategic Planner and Transportation Corps Officer. Her military career included assignments with the US Joint Staff J5 Strategic

Plans Division. In addition, she was a National Security Fellow at the Institute for Defense Analyses in Washington and Senior Lecturer at Burch University in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Ms Hallengren gained extensive international experience in the private defence sector, serving as Director at EH Group and later as Regional Director for Southeast Asia at Tempus Applied Solutions. She holds a Bachelor of Science degree from the United States Military Academy at West Point, as well as advanced degrees from the US Naval War College and Harvard University.



OPENING DIALOGUE SESSION - The Significance of the Dayton Accords

Slobodan Milošević, Alija Izetbegović, and Franjo Tuđman initialed the Dayton Peace Accords ending the conflict from the breakup of Yugoslavia and leading to the final signing in Paris on Dec. 14.

Source: *Wikimedia Commons*



**Milica Marinović**

*Media Adviser to the President of Montenegro,
Podgorica*

**Carl Bildt**

*Former Prime Minister and
Minister for Foreign Affairs, Stockholm*

OPENING DIALOGUE SESSION: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DAYTON ACCORDS

MM: *When reflecting on 1995, what is your first thought and memory? My first association is shaped by both academic and historical significance. At the time, I was a student of International Relations, and the Dayton Peace Accords frequently featured in my examinations. I often found myself contemplating not only the political complexity but also the personal dimension of bringing three leaders together to sign an agreement that ultimately brought an end to the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.*

CB: *First of all, it is important not to lose sight of the broader context. Although our focus today is on Bosnia, the Bosnian tragedy was part of a decade-long process marked by the dissolution of Yugoslavia. This process began with what could be described as a relatively brief skirmish in Slovenia, before escalating in Croatia, Bosnia, Kosovo, and later North Macedonia. For ten years, the international*

community initially sought to prevent the violent disintegration of the former Yugoslavia. That effort failed, it must be acknowledged. Subsequently, attention shifted towards preventing the violent breakup of Bosnia itself, which was, in many respects, a microcosm of Yugoslavia. This alone illustrates the magnitude of the challenges involved.

The year 1995 represented the final phase of the war, but it was also one of its most violent periods. The worst year was arguably 1992; nevertheless, 1995 was exceptionally severe. By then, all parties had come to realise that the conflict was approaching its end. When a war nears conclusion, actors tend to intensify military operations in order to secure the strongest possible position ahead of negotiations. This dynamic fuelled extensive military activity, widespread ethnic cleansing, and many of the atrocities witnessed during that summer.

What ultimately made peace possible in 1995 was the unprecedented alignment of the major international actors. The US, which had been internally divided in Washington, managed to consolidate its position. Transatlantic divisions between the Europeans and the Americans were overcome. Russia, initially sceptical of certain initiatives, was also brought on board. When the international community acts in unity, it wields considerable influence, and this collective diplomatic force was decisive in forging the compromise that became the Dayton Agreement.

It must be acknowledged, tragically, that the Dayton framework was not fundamentally different from diplomatic proposals that had already been on the table prior to the outbreak of the war. At that earlier stage, however, the international community lacked both unity and determination. As a result, war erupted. Eventually, the same conceptual frameworks had to be revisited in order to secure peace.

MM: *Do you have any regrets from this time?*

CB: No, I do not have regrets in the strict sense, as dwelling on them is rarely constructive. That said, if I reflect on Dayton, I recall that we spent three weeks at the United States Air Force Base in Ohio. It may sound like an unusual way to spend three weeks and indeed it was. Yet, when one considers the substance of our work, it becomes clear that the process was far more focused on dividing Bosnia than on uniting it.

This may appear paradoxical. However, nearly 80% of the effort at Dayton was devoted to drawing maps and elaborating the technical details of military implementation. During the war, there had been approximately 20,000 United Nations forces on the ground; in the transition to peace, that number rose to around 60,000. Their primary task was to separate the armies. As those present

here with NATO experience will appreciate, military planning requires attention to every single detail, no matter how minute.

Consequently, the vast majority of energy at Dayton was spent on separating forces, while only about 20% was dedicated to the challenge of reuniting the country through economic, political, diplomatic, and constitutional arrangements. That, I believe, was the principal shortcoming of the process. We Europeans raised concerns at the time, although these objections were not always influential. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the negotiations were conducted by a united team.

MM: *Looking at Bosnia-Herzegovina today and what is happening, did the Dayton Accords fulfill its purpose? Do you still think that they are a framework for a functional and stable Bosnia-Herzegovina?*

CB: I would not have recommended such a constitution for Sweden. However, Sweden did not experience a civil war, nor does it face the kind of deeply divided societal structure found in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Bosnian constitution is undeniably complex. I sometimes illustrate this by placing it within a broader European spectrum.

At one extreme lies Cyprus, where the constitutional settlement has collapsed entirely. There is, in effect, no functioning constitutional order, and UN forces continue to patrol a demilitarised zone running through the centre of the capital of a EU member state. This represents a complete failure.

At the other end of the spectrum stands Belgium, a country with a highly intricate constitutional system. Each time the EU seeks to ratify an agreement, it must pass through six different parliamentary bodies in Belgium. Those currently based in Brussels will be familiar with the political dysfunction visible in places such as Place du Trône, a consequence of the prolonged inability to form a regional government, at times reminiscent of Moscow in its complexity. Yet Belgium functions, largely because it possesses relatively strong institutions, including federal-level social insurance mechanisms that provide cohesion and stability.

Bosnia and Herzegovina falls somewhere between these two cases. Its system functions, albeit imperfectly, and it could undoubtedly operate more effectively. If I were to express a regret or a wish, it would be that over the past thirty years Bosnian political leaders might have come together to improve and adapt the Dayton framework. Unfortunately, they have not succeeded in doing so.

MM: *As you reflect on these issues, drawing on your experience as the first High Representative, how do you assess the role of your successor today, Mr Schmidt? In particular, how would you evaluate his actions in recent months, as well as the*

conduct of political leaders in both the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska?

CB: One of the principles I have adhered to throughout my professional life is never to assess my successors in any position I have held. Such assessments almost inevitably imply that things were better in the past, and they were not. For that reason, I will not evaluate his performance.

When it comes to assessing the political leadership in Bosnia and Herzegovina, however, I must be rather more critical. After the war was brought to an end, the international community invested an enormous amount of resources in rebuilding the country. If one visits Sarajevo today, there are virtually no visible traces of the conflict. I can identify them because I know where to look, but for most visitors they are not apparent.

Vast sums were devoted to reconstruction. Yet many political leaders came to view peace as a continuation of war by other means. This has been particularly evident during election periods, when nationalist rhetoric resurfaces and political actors portray opponents as threats, urging voters to support them as protectors against perceived enemies. As a result, political life in Bosnia has remained deeply divisive, to the detriment of the country's long-term development.

That said, I return to Bosnia almost every year and make a deliberate effort to spend time outside Sarajevo, in order to see the country as it really is. Over the past thirty years, there has in fact been less inter-ethnic violence in Bosnia than in Sweden; indeed, virtually none.

In the immediate post-war period, considerable effort was devoted to managing the territorial division of the country, particularly along what is known as the [Inter-Entity Boundary Line](#). Tanks, troops, and other military assets were deployed to prevent clashes. Today, those of us who were involved know exactly where that boundary lies and can recognise when we cross it. For those without that knowledge, however, it is largely invisible. Apart from the occasional sign, it is not something one notices. People interact freely, and there is very little tension at the societal level.

The tension that does exist is primarily among politicians, not among ordinary citizens. This does not mean that everyone lives in harmony, people rarely do, and this is hardly unique to Bosnia. Political disagreements exist in Sweden as well, although perhaps in a less acute form. Nevertheless, people understand that there was a war, that war is destructive, and that what is now underway is the construction of peace.

If there is one development that genuinely concerns me, both in Bosnia and across the Western Balkans more broadly, it is the emigration of young people.

Bosnia's population has declined from approximately 4,5 million to around 3,5 million. Long queues outside the German embassy, with young people seeking work permits, have become a familiar sight. Regrettably, this pattern is repeated throughout much of the region.

The central challenge, therefore, is to restore confidence in the future of the country, particularly among the younger generation, so that they choose to remain and invest in that future. Bosnia and Herzegovina possesses significant assets, resources, and potential. What is required is a political environment capable of convincing its young people that their prospects lie at home.

MM: *When discussing the Western Balkans, it is clear that the region has undergone profound changes since the 1990s. Several countries are now members of the NATO Alliance, others have joined the EU, some are on the path towards accession, while others have chosen neutrality. How do you assess the Western Balkans thirty years on? And, in your view, have political leaders drawn any meaningful lessons from the Dayton Agreement?*

CB: Well, I believe that in the immediate aftermath of Dayton, some of us were advocating for a strong push towards European integration and related reforms. Unfortunately, very little came of those efforts. Then came the Kosovo War, after which there was a renewed attempt through what was then called the Stabilisation and Association process. Yet again, progress was limited. Croatia eventually joined the EU in 2013, but for much of the intervening period, Brussels largely paid lip service to enlargement without providing substantial momentum.

This had negative consequences, as the prospect of EU membership has historically been one of the region's most powerful drivers of reform and a key instrument of soft power. Its relative absence has weakened that leverage. The impact varies across different countries and regions within the Western Balkans, but the lesson is clear: more decisive action was needed from Brussels to promote integration and reform. Without that external impetus, meaningful change is unlikely to occur.

MM: *Today, we often hear a variety of voices coming from European capitals. Several countries are candidates for EU membership, including my own country, Montenegro, as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina, which we have already discussed. In Montenegro, our motto and guiding principle has been "the 28th by 2028". But is this still achievable? Do you foresee further enlargement in the coming years, particularly in light of the current global shifts in power and influence?*

CB: Yes, but the global shift has, in fact, worked in favour of the Western Balkans in this instance. What has brought enlargement back onto the agenda is Ukraine.

I recall very clearly the significant change, particularly in the French position. France had long been essentially opposed to Western Balkan enlargement and, until recently, could hardly conceive of EU expansion to include Ukraine. But the war changed everything: once France shifted its stance on Ukraine and Moldova, it became inevitable that the Western Balkans would also return to the agenda.

The strategic imperative of stabilising Eastern Europe has therefore restored attention to the Western Balkans, and now we are once again scrutinising every detail of what candidate countries are doing or failing to do. Albania and Montenegro are probably leading the pack, but substantial challenges remain. For example, the situation with North Macedonia is almost absurd: its accession is still blocked by Bulgaria for reasons that require a fairly deep knowledge of history to understand.

Meanwhile, the unresolved status of the Serbia–Kosovo conflict continues to complicate matters. The war ended without a formal peace agreement, and Kosovo is still not recognised by five UN member states, while only about half of the UN recognises it. This creates significant difficulties for the enlargement process, affecting both Serbia and Kosovo and complicating regional stability as a whole.

MM: *When you were speaking about the war in Ukraine, let me turn to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, which was held in Dayton this May. On the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Dayton Agreement, the Assembly called for deeper NATO engagement in the region, cautioning that peace in the Western Balkans remains fragile. Do you consider this to be a serious concern today?*

CB: I would not necessarily describe the situation as fragile. I am not particularly worried about Bosnia as a whole. My main concern remains the issues I mentioned earlier: the emigration of young people, insufficient focus on economic development, and politicians failing to get their act together, although, to be fair, there have been some positive steps in recent weeks that were somewhat unexpected.

In terms of fracturing or secession, however, I do not believe those fears are imminent. It is worth noting that Russia has played a somewhat stabilising role in this respect. For example, when Dodik visited Russia a few weeks ago, Lavrov held a press conference with a prominent Bosnian flag behind him. The message was clear: while Russia may disagree with many of the High Representative's actions and may view NATO negatively, it continues to support Bosnia's territorial integrity. This is important, as it helps to counter secessionist pressures.

I am more concerned about northern Kosovo and the persistent difficulties in implementing agreements, particularly those relating to the Serb minority.

Agreements have been reached, but the failure to follow through creates ongoing challenges. Similarly, the deadlock over North Macedonia remains troubling. Beyond these issues, one could list numerous smaller concerns (such as delays by Montenegrin, Albanian, or Bosnian authorities in implementing various EU directives on matters like food safety or agricultural regulations) but these are relatively minor in comparison to the broader political and security challenges.

MM: *So, aside from northern Kosovo, what would you identify as the most pressing risks facing the rest of the region?*

CB: No, it really depends on what one means by “risk”. I would say that the overarching risk for the region is stagnation, failing to make progress in terms of EU enlargement and economic development. That is not to say that these countries are performing poorly. For example, the Bosnian economy is growing at around 2%. Serbia has been doing somewhat better; if we compare key countries in the Western Balkans with the EU average in terms of GDP per capita, Bosnia stands at roughly a third of the EU average, which is low. Serbia is around 55%, Croatia approximately 75%, and Kosovo would likely fall below Bosnia.

These divergences need to be addressed, and the primary tool for doing so is economic integration. European integration can help drive this process, but it is easily complicated by political flare-ups. Northern Kosovo, for instance, remains the most obvious flashpoint and the only area where I see a tangible security risk. There are minor tensions in Bosnia if one looks carefully, but nothing that I would consider alarming or that keeps me awake at night.

MM: *What is that one piece of advice that you would give to Balkan leaders at this particular moment?*

CB: The focus must be on economic development. If the economies do not start growing, the region will continue to lose its young people, leaving behind an ageing population that places heavy demands on social systems without the vitality to sustain them. The only way to reverse this trend is to take the EU enlargement process seriously and use it as a tool to drive reform and growth. In my view, stagnation, caused by insufficient attention to economic development, is probably the single greatest long-term risk facing the Western Balkans.

MM: *If you had a chance now to rewrite some Dayton Agreement 2.0, what would you change?*

CB: Oh, I spent a great deal of time in Dayton trying to convince them to abandon the convoluted arrangements they created for Bosnia’s governance. They established a three-member presidency, alongside a position that could

not officially be called prime minister but acted as chairman of the Council of Ministers. This was largely due to Alija Izetbegović's refusal to tolerate Haris Silajdžić as prime minister, so that possibility was blocked.

The arrangements were also heavily influenced by the Yugoslav constitutional tradition, which relied on rotating presidencies. Initially, there was even a proposal for a seven-member rotating presidency, which we insisted was entirely unworkable, you simply can not run a country that way. It had not worked in Yugoslavia, and it would not work in Bosnia. Eventually, we negotiated it down to three members, which was still far from ideal in my view.

This illustrates the broader challenge of governance: we were never able to fully break the Yugoslav mindset. Ultimately, we had to accept that this was their country. If they chose to organise it according to their own constitutional principles and traditions, who were we, whether from California, Sweden, or Bavaria, to impose an alternative structure upon them?

Biographies

Mr **Carl Bildt** has served as Sweden's Minister for Foreign Affairs since 2006. He was Prime Minister of Sweden from 1991 to 1994 and, earlier, held the position of Special Adviser for Coordination Functions in the Swedish Government from 1976 to 1978. Mr Bildt has also held prominent roles in international organisations, including Chair of the International Democratic Union from 1992 to 1999. He played a central role in addressing the conflicts in the Balkans, serving as Co-Chair of the Dayton Peace Talks on the Former Yugoslavia in 1995 and as High Representative of the International Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, overseeing reconstruction and the implementation of the peace process from 1996 to 1997. He was subsequently appointed the first Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General for the Balkans, serving from 1999 to 2001. Mr Bildt has

been a member of the Council for the Future of Europe.

Ms **Milica Marinović**, over the course of her extensive journalistic career, has worked as a correspondent for the regional television network Al Jazeera Balkans in Montenegro and as a journalist for IN Television. In the past years, Ms Marinović has held roles in public relations within the Office of the President of Montenegro, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the Ministry of Economic Development and Tourism. She has also advanced her expertise in television journalism and media through programmes at the Al Jazeera and Reuters academies. She is fluent in English and French. Ms Marinović graduated from the Faculty of Political Science in Podgorica, where she specialised in international relations.

How is NATO's
evolving regional
role shaping
coordination with the
EU to meet current
challenges?



SESSION I

NATO strategy in the Western Balkans: achievements and existing challenges

KFOR and the EU Office in Kosovo sign a Memorandum of Understanding on support and assistance in critical situations, 12 September 2025.

Source: NATO Kosovo Force – KFOR



“As one analyst put it,
a fragmented Western Balkans
weakens the broader European order
and undermines transatlantic
security objectives.”



CHAIR

Lara Jakes

*Foreign Correspondent, The New York Times,
Rome*

Biography

Ms **Lara Jakes** is a journalist specialising in military deterrence, national security and international conflict. Her reporting has taken her to Kyiv, Jerusalem, numerous Arab and European capitals, NATO headquarters and Washington, focusing on wars and diplomatic efforts to resolve them. With a career spanning over thirty years, Ms Jakes began as a political reporter before developing a particular interest in conflict reporting following early

assignments in Belfast, Jerusalem and Ramallah. She has reported from more than seventy countries, covered active combat operations in Afghanistan, and served as a war correspondent in Iraq for three years, including one year as Baghdad bureau chief for The Associated Press. She joined The New York Times in 2017, having previously worked for *Foreign Policy* magazine, *The Associated Press* and the *Albany Times Union*.

**Peter Sørensen**

*EU Special Representative for
the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue,
European External Action Service, Brussels*

PREVENTING FURTHER CRISES IN SENSITIVE COUNTRIES AND ACCELERATING ACCESSION

As Carl Bildt noted earlier, the region is indeed very important to me. I have been working on it since 1995, serving in a number of places across the Western Balkans. Over the years, I have worked in Zagreb, Sarajevo, Skopje, Pristina, and Belgrade. Since January, I have returned to working with Belgrade and Pristina. In many ways, this region has defined a large part of my professional career.

I have also been privileged to return to work on the Dialogue that has been mentioned earlier. As part of today's intervention, I have been asked to address how to prevent crises in our current operational environment, and I will begin by referring to the remarks made by NATO Operations Director Hallengren earlier about the Dialogue on normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia. This process represents one of the few areas in the region where military and civilian efforts are truly aligned. The Dialogue as a diplomatic exercise through steady negotiations and readiness to compromise delivered solutions in areas where the military alone could not.

This is where dialogue becomes essential. To understand its importance, allow me to provide a brief historical context. In 1999, NATO conducted an air campaign against Serbia, after which a United Nations administration was installed in Kosovo. The UN assumed administrative responsibility for the territory, establishing jurisdiction over Kosovo. Fast forward to 2008, Kosovo declared independence, which was challenged by Serbia. Serbia referred the matter to the International Court of Justice, which concluded in 2010 that Kosovo's declaration of independence did not violate international law. Subsequently, the UN General Assembly invited the European Union to facilitate a dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade.

This is the context in which the dialogue was born. Since then, approximately ninety agreements have been reached on practical matters, such as the management of borders/boundaries, freedom of movement and the integration of Serbian police and justice in the Kosovo system under Kosovo law. These agreements focused on making everyday life for citizens of both Kosovo and Serbia as normal as possible, without addressing the sensitive question of status. Importantly, progress was achieved through negotiation, not coercion; the parties themselves implemented the agreements.

One important lesson is that such processes take time. Political realities must be aligned with operational and administrative efforts and it requires cooperation from all actors, including the international community. NATO's KFOR contributes to the political process by providing a safe and secure environment. This combination has helped delivering agreements that once seemed unattainable.

Now, let me turn to the northern part of Kosovo: local elections were held yesterday, and participation of all, including the Kosovo Serbs, was high. This is very positive. We now have to wait to see whether mayors will be installed as agreed. This would be very positive as it would be the first step towards reintegration of Kosovo Serbs into the Kosovo system, which they left in 2022. This illustrates that progress requires time..

A follow-up question often arises concerning the 2023 Agreement on the Path to Normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia, commonly known as the "[Ohrid Agreement](#)". It is important to clarify that the 2023 Agreement consolidated previous agreements into a single overarching framework,. Unlike earlier technical agreements, this one is highly political, drawing on principles similar to the German-German approach..

As with many agreements before, implementation takes time. Both parties wish the other to act first, a common dynamic in diplomatic dialogue. Experience shows that implementing an agreement is far more challenging than reaching

it. For instance, earlier agreements on electricity provision in northern Kosovo took nine years from initial discussion to full implementation.

The 2023 Ohrid Agreement addresses political as well as technical issues. It includes provisions which require Belgrade to accept Kosovo's participation in international organisations and recognise national symbols and documents. At the same time Pristina is expected to establish arrangements and guarantees for an appropriate level of self-management of the Kosovo Serb community. These are sensitive matters, and progress will inevitably take time.

Thus, while some observers may claim that nothing is happening, implementation is underway, albeit gradually. I anticipate that over the next one or two years, we will begin to see concrete progress.

Biography

EUSR **Peter Sørensen** is a senior European diplomat with extensive experience in EU external relations, crisis management and multilateral diplomacy. Since February 2025, Ambassador Sørensen holds the position of EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue. Prior to that he served as Ambassador-at-Large and Principal Adviser and Special Envoy on Digital Diplomacy with the European External Action Service (EEAS). He previously held senior

leadership roles as EU Ambassador and Head of Delegation to the United Nations in Geneva, as well as EU Special Representative / Head of Delegation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and EU Ambassador and Head of Delegation in North Macedonia. Earlier in his career, EUSR Sørensen worked closely with the UN and the EU in the Western Balkans, including as Personal Representative of the EU High Representative. A trained lawyer, he began his professional career in Denmark and has also served as an officer in the Danish Army Reserve.



Zeynep Alemdar

*Director, Foreign Policy Programme, EDAM,
Istanbul*

THE EVOLVING ROLE OF NATO IN THE NEW SCENARIO: IMPACT ON THE BALKANS

To understand how NATO's role is changing during Trump's second term as President of the United States, and what this means for the Balkans, I will outline a framework for analysing the unfolding influence of Trump on NATO. This analysis considers both his public statements and policy actions, which have shaped NATO's direction and impacted regional dynamics. Trump's actions are well known - such as his direct negotiations with North Korea's leader and his insistence on increased NATO funding from member states, both of which exemplify his preference for bilateral engagement over multilateral diplomacy. In September 2026, during his speech at the UN, Trump declared that the US champions sovereignty and rejects globalism in front of all 192 member states. The important outcome of this period, I believe, would be that not only has the US' credibility as a stabiliser, both in the Western Balkans and globally, diminished or even eroded, but the institutions themselves are also weakening.

Trump's delegitimising discourses contribute to a complex environment that facilitates the decline in public trust in institutions, alongside increasing internal divergences. In scholarly discourse, this phenomenon is commonly described as the "thinning" of institutions. This refers to the gradual weakening of international organisations; authority and influence as member states lose faith in their effectiveness. As these institutions lose influence, new power centers begin to emerge, leading to a more multipolar world order.

The more significant point, however, is that multipolarity - a term describing the emergence of multiple influential states or blocs rather than a single dominant power - was already on the horizon since the end of the Cold War. Trump's actions have highlighted major divisions in the post-World War II order and encouraged alternative centers of power. Not only Russia and China, but also middle powers are regrouping under various institutions. Furthermore, Trump tends to disregard multilateral diplomacy in favor of leader-to-leader bilateral relations. This sidelines formal frameworks for conflict resolution, which I believe is one of the greatest challenges we currently face.

NATO leaders are fully aware of this, as our video speaker also highlighted. For instance, in March 2025, Mark Rutte visited Sarajevo and reaffirmed NATO's firm commitment to the stability of the region, as well as to the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and security of Bosnia and Herzegovina. He referenced the Dayton Peace Accords, noting that they remain a cornerstone of regional stability. Later, the Parliamentary Assembly report in September 2025 underlined that the Western Balkans is increasingly vulnerable to malign external influence, citing Russia and China, but also highlighting concerns about debt sustainability and long-term governance.

These are precisely the issues we should be thinking about more intensively in the coming years. Yet, I would suggest focusing on two specific areas.

First, NATO's definition of hybrid threats, which NATO is currently reflecting on. What exactly constitutes a hybrid threat? At what point does something become "hybrid"? According to NATO's official documents and the 2022 Strategic Concept, hybrid threats are understood as a combination of military and non-military tactics, orchestrated by state or non-state actors, aimed at undermining the security and stability of member countries. These threats often blend conventional military activities with cyber attacks, disinformation campaigns, economic pressure, and political interference. For example, hybrid tactics may involve the use of propaganda to influence public opinion, cyber operations to disrupt critical infrastructure, or economic leverage to coerce governments. NATO emphasises the importance of identifying hybrid threats early and responding through coordinated political, military, and civil means. The Alliance

recognises that clarity in defining hybrid threats is essential to ensure effective countermeasures without diluting the concept to the point where it loses operational utility. Yet, defining it too broadly risks including almost anything, from political influence to cyber operations, so we need clarity. Thus, NATO continues to refine its understanding, focusing on threats that integrate multiple domains and are deliberately designed to exploit vulnerabilities across society, not just on the battlefield.

Second, the economic security dimension, which has been incorporated into NATO's Strategic Concept since 2022, still receives insufficient attention. According to NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept, economic security is recognised as an essential component of the Alliance's overall security posture. The document highlights the growing risks posed by economic coercion, foreign investments in critical infrastructure, and dependencies on strategic resources, noting that adversaries may exploit these vulnerabilities to undermine member states' resilience and stability. In the Balkans, these risks are particularly acute, with external actors leveraging economic influence to gain political leverage and control over key sectors such as energy, telecommunications, and transportation. NATO has called for enhanced cooperation among Allies to address these risks, including information sharing, strengthening supply chain security, and supporting the development of robust regulatory frameworks, and the Strategic Concept emphasises the need to integrate economic security into NATO's broader deterrence and defense strategies. Yet, despite these commitments, practical implementation has lagged, and economic security risks in the Balkans must be prioritised through coordinated NATO action. Increased investment in regional resilience, and closer collaboration with partner organisations such as the EU should also be considered.

Practically, focusing on these issues also necessitates addressing ongoing tensions (ethnic divisions, territorial disputes, geopolitical polarisation, external pressures, influence operations, disinformation, military buildups, and varying alignments among countries) in a more coordinated and strategic way.

While focusing on these two issues of re-defining hybrid threats and economic security, we need to focus on two major areas: Disinformation and economic influence of non-NATO allies in the Western Balkans.

First, *disinformation*: at EDAM, for the DE-CONSPIRATOR Horizon project, we have conducted extensive research on how foreign information manipulation and interference work. NATO and the European External Action Service both work diligently on this issue, yet they do not seem to communicate enough. They do use different terminology for the same phenomena. Bridging this gap and creating common definitions for disinformation between the EU and NATO is critical.

Second, *economic influence*: Chinese investments in Serbia now match the combined investments of all 27 EU countries in Serbia, while Russia controls Serbia's energy markets. Bosnia and Herzegovina's two refineries are both Russian-owned. Strengthening economic security should therefore be a central part of NATO's strategic framework in the Balkans, even though it requires a new understanding of NATO's role and responsibility.

In conclusion, addressing the challenges facing NATO in the Western Balkans requires a sharp focus on clearly defining hybrid threats and prioritising economic security, as outlined in the 2022 Strategic Concept. Special attention should be given to countering disinformation through coordinated definitions and strategies with the EU, as well as confronting the growing economic influence of non-NATO actors like China and Russia in the region. Only through enhanced cooperation, strategic clarity, and a comprehensive approach can NATO effectively safeguard the stability and resilience of the Balkans in the evolving security environment.

Biography

Dr **Zeynep Alemdar** is Professor of International Relations and Political Science and serves as the Director of the Foreign Policy Programme at the Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies (EDAM). She has published extensively on Turkish foreign policy, Türkiye-EU relations, and gender and international security. Her books are, *Turkey's Challenges and Transformation: Politics and Society on the Centennial of the Republic* (2023 Palgrave, with Harun Arıkan) and *Turkish Civil Society and the EU: Domestic Politics Through International*

Organizations (2008, Verlag Dr.Müller). She held fellowships at The New Institute in Hamburg, Germany (2024-25), and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, in Washington D.C. (2014), named among four Euro-Atlantic security leaders under 40. She was a visiting professor at Portland State University. Dr Alemdar founded the Women in Foreign Policy Initiative and is a board member of the European Leadership Network. She holds degrees from Galatasaray University (BA), the Patterson School of Diplomacy (MA), and the University of Kentucky (PhD).

Vessela Tcherneva
*Deputy Director, European Council
on Foreign Relations, Sofia*



FACING OLD AND NEW CHALLENGES

The Balkans: a region constantly going through processes that may, to some, appear circular. Over the past couple of decades, Carl Bildt - who is, in a way, my current boss as co-chair of the ECFR - and I, worked together on the International Commission on the Balkans. At that time, we were asking how to win the peace in the Balkans, not merely how to stop the war, which was, of course, the major achievement of Dayton and the subsequent agreements. Winning the peace, however, has proved to be a far more convoluted challenge.

As has already been noted, it is not that the Balkans are about to explode tomorrow. The story of the region is fundamentally about demography and economic development; it is also, importantly, about democracy and the trajectory of democratic systems in these countries. The more disappointed societies become with their prospects of EU accession, the less likely it is that reformist forces will win public trust. Reforms are also extremely difficult to carry

out without allies, and the most important allies of reformers have traditionally been the EU and NATO.

From a NATO perspective, the Western Balkans present a mixed picture. One cannot speak of the region as a whole, since three countries are NATO members and three are not. Some act as contributors to security, while others are primarily consumers of security guarantees and arrangements. We have EUFOR and KFOR, and we all remember the Banjska incident in Kosovo, which highlighted the persistent security risks in the Western Balkans. At the same time, there is a broader movement within NATO itself.

Everything that has happened over the past year has resembled a rollercoaster, including from a NATO perspective. It began with the French President declaring NATO “brain-dead”, and now we have an American President speaking of NATO in the third person. There are diverging interests regarding Russia’s war in Ukraine, issues surrounding the state of democracy, and more. Yet in the Western Balkans, NATO’s mission appears intact and clearly defined. As Peter Sørensen also mentioned, it seems largely aligned with the EU on key points.

This brings us, on the one hand, to the question of trust: to what extent can countries and societies in the region trust NATO and the EU? On the other hand, there is the issue of how these two actors cooperate with one another. The blurred horizon of EU integration has created not only space for third actors, China among others, but also room for internal, bilateral arrangements. We have seen what are described as new “military alliances”, which are in reality political declarations. On one side, Croatia, Albania and Kosovo have expressed a desire to cooperate more closely; on the other, Serbia, Hungary and Republika Srpska have signed a programme for military cooperation. These initiatives may lack substantive military content, but they inevitably evoke older regional narratives and therefore carry negative connotations.

Finally, returning to the point raised by Zeynep Alemdar, there are the hybrid threats in the Balkans, an area the EU has struggled to address and which represents a significant blind spot. Hybrid threats have effectively become the name of the game in the region. They involve not only media manipulation and the shaping of public opinion, but also activities such as the training of operatives in Serbia to influence pro-Russian voting behaviour in Moldova. These represent a far more complex set of societal-level threats than is often acknowledged.

We must also address the elephant in the room: the state of Serbian democracy and the events currently unfolding on the streets of many Serbian towns. This is, in itself, a potential source of instability, if not broader societal change. How to respond to this, particularly given the hybrid dimensions involved, remains an open question.

To conclude, since the Black Sea was also referenced in the title of this event, if NATO assumes a greater role in the Black Sea region, as seems likely, the Western Balkans may increasingly lean towards the EU side of the equation. This means that the EU must be far better prepared to address the full range of challenges we have discussed today, including hybrid threats, democratic backsliding and security challenges more broadly.

Biography

Vessela Tcherneva is Deputy Director of the European Council on Foreign Relations. Her work focuses on EU foreign policy, with particular emphasis on the Western Balkans and the Black Sea region. Between January and July 2022, Deputy Director Tcherneva served as Foreign Policy Adviser to Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov. From 2010 to 2013, she was Spokesperson for the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a member

of Foreign Minister Nickolay Mladenov's political cabinet. Previously, she served as Secretary of the International Commission on the Balkans, chaired by former Italian Prime Minister Giuliano Amato and former German President Richard von Weizsäcker; as Supervising Editor of *Foreign Policy Bulgaria*; and as a Political Officer at the Bulgarian Embassy in Washington, DC. Deputy Director Tcherneva holds an MA in Political Science from the Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn.

KEYNOTE SPEECH

Sarajevo Security Conference 2025, focused on Euro-Atlantic integration and regional security challenges. 26-28 September 2025.

Source: NATO Allied Command Transformation



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Sarajevo Security Conference 2025, focused on Euro-Atlantic integration and regional security challenges. 26-28 September 2025.

Source: NATO Allied Command Transformation



**Lana Prlić**

*Member of Parliament of the Federation of
Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo*

KEYNOTE SPEECH

I would like to share my opinion on the Dayton Peace Agreement, because I am living within the framework it created. The Agreement brought peace and I would put a full stop there. However, after living in Bosnia and Herzegovina for the past 32 years, I must also say that it placed a straitjacket on the country. It is very hard, and sometimes almost impossible, to look ahead and remain optimistic. Nevertheless, as a young person who chose to stay in Bosnia and Herzegovina and engage in politics, it is my responsibility to remain optimistic.

I would also like to say a few words about what Mr Bildt said in the very first panel, namely that Sarajevo was rebuilt. Of course, it was rebuilt. The [Old Bridge](#) in Mostar was also rebuilt. But when you walk through Mostar you can still see the ruins. In fact, *Quo Vadis, Aida?*, a film that was made five years ago, was shot in the city centre of Mostar, because it looks as though the war stopped yesterday.

We did not have a civil war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We had aggression, and we had genocide. Even today, more than 32 years later, and 30 years after the war, many people are still looking for the remains of their loved ones in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I hear many words about reconciliation. I would ask: *with whom do I have to make peace?* I did not fight with anyone. But there are many people in Bosnia and Herzegovina who need to hear: “I am sorry. I am sorry for your loss. I am sorry for the tragedy. I am sorry for the genocide”.

That is what I did a couple of years ago, when my family member was convicted my of war crimes at the International Court of Justice in The Hague. I had nothing to do with it, I was born in 1993, but I felt it was my civilizational obligation to say “I am sorry”, and I do apologize for the crimes that were committed during the war. I did not do that for political points. I did that because I felt it was my moral responsibility to do so. Because acknowledging suffering is the minimum we owe to victims.

I would now like to return to the topic I was invited to speak about, which is Bosnia and Herzegovina’s path to NATO. When I was preparing for this panel, I had the opportunity to speak with the Head of Mission of Bosnia and Herzegovina to NATO, Vanja Filipovic, as well as with my colleague Zukan Helez, the Minister of Defence of Bosnia and Herzegovina. They are doing, and have done, a very good job in the recent period. It shows that when the right people are in the right positions, and when the interests of Bosnia and Herzegovina on the path to NATO and the EU are placed above every other political or personal interest, progress can be made.

For me, and for us in Bosnia and Herzegovina (and when I say “us”, I speak about the people I represent, especially the younger generation who chose to stay in Bosnia and Herzegovina) the NATO path and the EU path have no alternative. There is no alternative to that.

I will use this opportunity to say that it is very important to have EUFOR and EU forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina, not only to avoid a security vacuum, but also a political vacuum. We do have influence. We have Russian influence and Chinese influence, and we know how that influence comes into Bosnia and Herzegovina. It comes not only directly from Russia, but also through Hungary and Serbia, and then into Bosnia and Herzegovina, and further south.

Recent EU reports state that Albania is performing best when it comes to the EU path. Why? Because there is less Serbian and Russian influence. We must address the elephant in the room. Of course, many responsibilities lie with us, not only with the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also with its politicians.

It is up to us to be concrete in our requests to NATO, particularly when it comes to increasing the percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) allocated

to defence, and to the modernisation and reform of our armed forces. I would also like to underline that security is not only about the military. The Ministry of Defence of Bosnia and Herzegovina recently stated that security is not just about military strength, but also about building political stability and protecting democratic values. That is why NATO must be present in the Western Balkans. If not NATO, then others, those whose influence we are trying to resist, will fill that space.

Membership in NATO is not just a political goal. It does not represent only military and defence structures, but also the values that we live by and believe in.

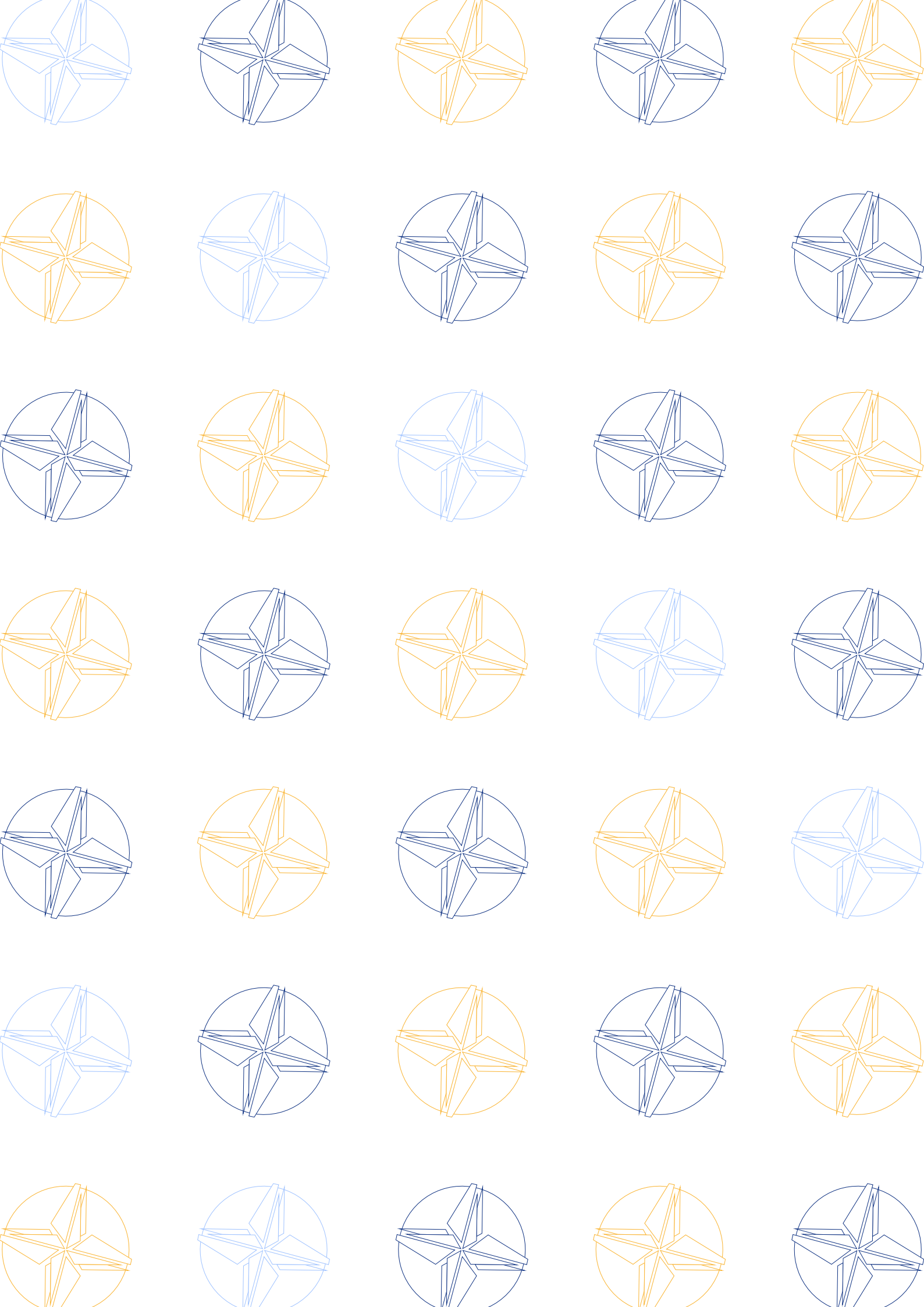
Finally, I would like to share something Radmila Šekerinska said recently in Sarajevo at the Sarajevo Security Conference, one of the most important events there. She said: “[What is broken can be rebuilt](#)”. Everything can be rebuilt. But we must also begin by looking at ourselves in the mirror and asking: what can I do, as a person, as a politician, as an ambassador, to move things forward in a positive way?

I believe that this conference is one of the ways we can move forward on the issues we all care about—and that is security. Why security? Because fear is one of the strongest emotions a person can feel. And when people live in fear, they are easily manipulated. I do not want to manipulate my people.

Biography

Minister [Lana Prlić](#) is a Member of the Parliament of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, currently serving her second term, having first been elected in 2018. She holds a Bachelor's degree in International and Public Relations and a Master's degree in International Business and Finance. She is currently a PhD candidate in Communications. At the age of 21, she was elected Vice

President of the Social Democratic Party, becoming the youngest woman to hold this position in the region. She served as Vice President until June 2025. She is also an alumna of several international programmes, including the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) and the Council of Europe School of Political Studies, among others.





How are NATO and the EU
countering **hybrid threats** from Russia
and China in the region?



SESSION II

Foreign influences in the region: hybrid threats from Russia and China

Călin Georgescu addresses journalists following the annulment of Romania's presidential election over alleged Russian interference.

Source: Atlantic Council

“Propaganda is the cheapest weapon
whose effects may potentially be
eternal poisoning for brains and hearts
of generations ahead.”



CHAIR

Solomon Passy*Founding President, Atlantic Club of Bulgaria;
Co-Chairman, Hello Space, Sofia***Biography**

Dr **Solomon Passy** is the Founding President of the Atlantic Club of Bulgaria. He served as Bulgaria's Minister of Foreign Affairs from 2001 to 2005. In August 1990 he introduced a draft bill proposing Bulgaria's accession to NATO as well as for the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact (This is may the first documented appeal by European official in that regard). As Foreign Minister, Dr Passy successfully negotiated Bulgaria to be invited

and to join NATO and EU and signed both agreements. During his political career, he also served as Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE, Chairman of the United Nations Security Council, and Chairman of the Parliamentary Committees on Defence and Foreign Affairs. He holds a PhD in Mathematical Logic and Computer Science. For their contribution to Bulgaria's Antarctic presence, Peak Passy and Atlantic Club Ridge are named after them on Livingston Island, Antarctica.



Alina Bârgăoanu

Dean, College of Communication and Public Relations, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest

THE WIDER REGION'S RESPONSES TO HYBRID WARFARE: HIGHLIGHTS FROM ROMANIA AND THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

Let me begin with some general remarks on contemporary information and cognitive warfare as part of the broader hybrid toolkit.

In my view, information and cognitive warfare, together with other tactics below the threshold of armed conflict, is part of an ongoing geopolitical influence war conducted in peacetime. It relies - overtly or covertly, simultaneously or separately – on a wide range of instruments: disinformation, propaganda, hostile influence campaigns, political and electoral interference, cyberattacks, cyber intelligence, cartographic warfare, data harvesting, the weaponisation of diasporas and migration flows.

By simply listing these tools, I want to stress that we are dealing with a new type of warfare that targets the cognitive domain and seeks to weaponise a hyper-connected, open and globalized information environment. What is emerging is a transnational hybrid industry that blends online advertising,

political campaigning, psychological operations, espionage, cyber operations, and military logic and logistics. Its objectives are to shape the information ecosystem, fracture social cohesion, undermine shared reality, manipulate social psychology, and induce paralysis – what Kristan Stoddart has termed “paralysis warfare” or “acupuncture war.”

I listened carefully to the discussion about the Dayton Accords and, in general, I hesitate to engage in counterfactual history. Yet it is worth asking whether such an agreement would have been possible in today’s hyperconnected and weaponised information environment, one saturated with coordinated inauthentic behaviour and hostile influence campaigns conducted by both state and non-state actors embedded in a globalised public sphere.

There are also shortcomings in how we discuss information and cognitive warfare.

First, the debate often narrows the issue to disinformation, overlooking the broader toolbox and the importance of attention, emotions, data, algorithms, and financial infrastructures.

Second, we tend to frame the phenomenon as something old with marginal new features, thus embodying Madeleine Albright’s warning that we “discuss 21st-century challenges in 20th-century terms and propose 19th-century solutions.”

Third, the discourse is marked by “information” and “solution” biases, the assumption that, with the right technical fixes, society will somehow move into a more “informed” phase.

Fourth, we focus excessively on individual pieces of content, while hostile actors aim to shape the entire information ecosystem and embed specific narratives into mainstream discourse. In this context, content itself is often secondary; what matters more are the emotional, cognitive, and technological infrastructures through which content continuously flows.

Finally, information and cognitive warfare is frequently treated as a lesser form of warfare or as a distraction from more “serious” security concerns. This underestimates both its strategic impact and its centrality to contemporary statecraft.

The annulled Romanian presidential elections of December 2024 illustrate these dynamics. Their implications extend beyond Romania and concern any NATO member – and indeed any democracy. The case combined foreign information manipulation with domestic political dynamics and electioneering, reinforcing each other through what might be described as digital echo effects (FIMI echoing DIMI), all against a backdrop of legitimate public dissatisfaction and anti-system sentiment.

In my view, the foreign election interference was the culmination of a low-volume, low-intensity, and sometimes below-the-radar influence campaign

conducted through closed social media groups, encrypted messaging platforms, and offline networks. It sought to build, prime and pre-position networks and communities, inject anti-Western, anti-EU, and anti-NATO narratives into mainstream discourse, and ultimately alter the integrity of that discourse. The case demonstrates that adversaries in the information and cognitive domain do not necessarily rely on dramatic, decisive actions, but rather on sustained, cumulative processes developed over time and activated when needed. In other words, what we are dealing with have been chronic vulnerabilities that can become acute under the right social, economic, and political conditions.

Although much attention focused on the surge of a particular candidate on TikTok, the broader campaign was cross-platform and extended into mainstream media and offline settings. It relied on data harvesting, micro-targeting, influencer mobilisation, opaque digital advertising, astroturfing, and coordinated manipulation of comment sections. A particularly concerning tactic was the activation of seemingly apolitical online communities – parenting, wellness, tourism, music, or film pages – that were repurposed to promote political content, encourage mobilisation, and, after the elections were annulled, incite civil disobedience, violence against institutions, and even calls for civil war.

Turning briefly to the Republic of Moldova, let me begin with a caveat: I am not from there and, despite the geographical proximity and deep historical and cultural ties between Romania and the Republic of Moldova, I believe that deep local knowledge is essential to fully understand domestic dynamics. Nevertheless, I can refer to three lessons that I consider relevant.

Republic of Moldova's relative success in withstanding hostile geopolitical influence and electoral interference appears linked to a whole-of-government approach. While discussions often emphasise whole-of-society resilience, institutional alignment is a necessary first step. Institutional fragmentation and institutional bypassing frequently undermine effective responses. Second, enlargement fatigue can serve as a powerful vehicle for cognitive warfare, creating fertile ground for foreign influence and interference. Third, we should avoid drawing overly optimistic conclusions from favourable electoral outcomes—whether in Moldova or Romania's May 2025 rerun presidential elections. Information and cognitive warfare does not stop at national borders and certainly does not end with an electoral cycle.

Let me conclude with several broader reflections.

A complex transnational phenomenon cannot be addressed through isolated national or single-institution efforts. Responding to information and cognitive warfare is not a beauty contest about who is more or less resilient. Such framing—sometimes visible at both EU and NATO levels—can itself be counterproductive.

More cross-institutional, cross-disciplinary, and cross-national approaches are needed, as well as continuous feedback loops that inform each subsequent implementation cycle.

Finally, based on the Romanian experience, I would suggest treating information and cognitive warfare less as a series of large, decisive attacks and more as long-term, sustained, cumulative processes aimed at cultivating networks, communities, narratives, and even worldviews. We should also treat it less as a question of speech – entangling us in sometimes manufactured controversies over freedom of expression – and more as a question of organisation, platform design, systemic incentives, and the integrity of the overall information ecosystem.

Biography

Dr **Alina Bârgăoanu** is a Romanian communication scholar at the College of Communication and Public Relations, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (Bucharest); member of the “Hybrid Threats” research unit of Folke Bernadotte Academy (Sweden); member of the Diplomatic Council; member of the Advisory Board of European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) and of EDMO’s task force on the war in

Ukraine; Marcin Król Fellow at Visegrad Insight (October 2021 – September 2022); visiting fellow at Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies at Harvard University (October 2018 – March 2019); member of the High-Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation (EC, 2018); media commentator and columnist on topics related to information warfare, cyber-enabled influence operations, resilience, and the complex relationship between technology and society.



Edward P. Joseph

*Adjunct Lecturer, Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy
Institute, John Hopkins, Washington D.C.*

CHINA IN THE REGION: WHAT'S THE STRATEGY?

Actually, I have good news for you because I have answers to those excellent questions. The Macedonian ambassador and the Swiss ambassador asked: what can we do about this? What can attract Trump's attention? And I have the answer, if you will permit me.

You talk about foreign malign influence. Here is a clear picture. We have to remember that it is not just coming from the outside; Serbia is its own platform. It is a platform not just for Russia and pro-Russian narratives and for Chinese influence; it is also a platform for its own malign influence in the region. I think that is something most of us can agree on. So, what can we do about this?

My approach, published today in an article in our university journal "[SAIS Review of International Affairs](#)" is to flip the script. Instead of seeing the Balkans as a passive recipient of constant foreign malign influence, what if we were to turn the Balkans into an active agent, not to obtain, but to advance towards a ceasefire in Ukraine?

How could we do that? First, we need to understand, briefly, the primary obstacles to a ceasefire in Ukraine. Let us remember: this is our priority.

First, there is no stasis. There is no freeze on the battlefield. That is a major problem. There is a perception of Russian momentum. We do not have a mutually hurting stalemate. That is number one. *Second*, we have well-known imbalances. *Third*, we have Russian aims to affirm sovereignty over the territory it controls and ambitions for territory beyond that. I put an asterisk there because that is not the end of Russian ambitions, Ukraine as a puppet state. *Fourth*, of course, we have limited Western pressure on Russia. We can speak about my country, the Trump administration, and the fact that we have no plan. Before Dayton, there were several plans. We have no plan for a ceasefire, no truly agreed plan.

So my proposal is this: we take the modified Kosovo agreement, [UN Security Council Resolution 1244](#) and apply it to the Donbas, or whatever areas are agreed for the ceasefire in Ukraine.

There are five key elements here. *First*, territory. It would go beyond the current occupied areas, which would make it attractive to Russia. *Second*, sovereignty. This is the key point of Resolution 1244. We sidestep it; neither deny nor declare. Kosovo was not declared independent, nor was the door to independence foreclosed. That neutrality speaks to both sides. *Third*, guiding principles. After the Resolution, the Contact Group, including Russia and the US, agreed that there would be no reversion to the pre-war situation. We would do the same here. Ukraine would agree that there will be no reversion, but there would be at least three possible outcomes: partition; Russian annexation, as an agreed potential outcome; or the territory remaining Ukrainian.

Defining and formalising these three possible outcomes would be attractive to Putin. But how would the final status be determined? There would be referenda in the future, as was envisaged under 1244, the will of the people. The modalities, of course, could be deferred; not everything has to be agreed at once. As Peter Sørensen mentioned, as was the case in Kosovo, there would be third-party administration by the UN or the OSCE.

Consider the benefits. For Russia, maximal demands are preserved. We engage with Putin's consistent reference to 1244 and the Kosovo precedent, which he frequently invokes. Ultimately, the package would be ratified by the Security Council, something Russia has always wanted. For Ukraine, and this is very important and often overlooked, this would halt the active russification taking place every day in the territories occupied by Russia. Ukraine would not be forced to cede sovereignty permanently. There would be referenda. The demographics, unlike in Kosovo, are very mixed, so the outcome would not be predetermined. There would also be security guarantees, to be discussed.

To achieve this, we would need an array of pressures on Putin to accept it. Of course, that alone would not be sufficient. The question is: what would be the single most neutral point from the Balkans, the most sensitive point for the Kremlin and for Putin, that we could leverage?

I will give you the answer. It would be formalised to the US as a Serbian commitment to join NATO, as part of a White House–brokered settlement with Kosovo. Yes, Serbia joining NATO, and of course Kosovo accepting this NATO membership plan as well.

Why is this transformative? Unlike EU membership, NATO membership is incompatible with Aleksandar Vučić's multi-vector balancing. It would end the pretence of neutrality. It would be intolerable to Russia, and to China, though particularly to Russia, and would severely damage the relationship with Russia, which hinges on Kosovo. We have seen how furious Serbian officials were at some of Putin's remarks. It is incompatible with the Serbian revisionist narrative, in which the NATO bombing is central. It means acceptance of the Western order, and that transforms the region.

It is also incompatible with the isolation of Kosovo. Instead of a non-recognition campaign, this would mean Belgrade and Pristina agreeing to become allies. It would include Kosovo's signature of the statute for the Association, the long-sought agreement. Resolving Kosovo in this way would remove the leverage that Serbia currently holds.

Why would Vučić accept this? There are at least four reasons. *First*, the Trump factor. Trump is extraordinarily popular in Serbia, reportedly more popular there than anywhere else in the world. Just last week, the administration enforced sanctions on NIS, the Serbian national oil company, something Belgrade did not want at all. Anyone who thinks this is implausible under Trump should consider that. *Second*, Kosovo has effectively already been lost under Vučić's watch. In the north, Kurti has consolidated control. *Third*, there would be no immediate need for Belgrade formally to recognise Kosovo which would obtain NATO membership regardless. If Vučić were to turn this down, Kosovo would still move towards NATO. I engage with the non-recognisers; we could begin with Greece, which may be prepared to recognise. With Trump's diplomacy and the Secretary General's support, formal recognition by all would not be required immediately for the deal to function. *Fourth*, Serbia is facing a domestic crisis. With the one-year mark approaching, this could upend and reshape the situation. Vučić controls the media narrative. His base is loyal. They will follow what they are told.

Biography

Professor **Edward P. Joseph** is a conflict management specialist, as well as a lecturer and analyst in foreign policy. Over the course of twelve years working in the Balkans, he served during the wars in every conflict-affected country in the region. As a foreign policy analyst, Professor Joseph has authored more than fifty articles published in major outlets. He is a frequent live television commentator

on foreign policy issues. He served as Executive Director of the Institute of Current World Affairs in Washington and currently leads the National Council on US–Libya Relations. Professor Joseph earned his J.D. from the University of Virginia School of Law and completed his B.A. and M.A. at Johns Hopkins University and its School of Advanced International Studies, where he also teaches.



Valery Perry

*Senior Associate, Democratization Policy
Council, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina*

HOW TO PREPARE THE REGION TO BETTER ADDRESS HYBRID THREATS?

I would like to start by noting that I am based in Sarajevo, I have been living there for over 20 years, with the exception of about a year and a half in Serbia. I pay taxes there, I see what is going on on a day-to-day basis, and that really affects my perspective, even though I am originally from Buffalo, New York.

I am going to take the opportunity *first*, to offer a few big-picture reflections on what I have been hearing today; *second*, to talk a bit about this idea of hybrid operations or influence operations or, even more precise, as my colleague on this panel noted, cognitive warfare; and *finally*, to suggest some specific actions that I think could be taken, if only we could summon the political will. And the sooner NATO and the EU can do that jointly, the better.

One thing that I think has really been missing from discussions about these threats in general is the idea that the best way to resist hybrid threats and this transactionalism is through a return to comprehensive security. There was a time

when we believed that the liberal peace, the democratic peace, was the best way to ensure growth, economic development, and the protection of human rights. It is now very rare to hear anyone talking about that. I was glad to hear a few people mention values today, but it is increasingly rare.

A second point I want to raise is that, although we have mentioned a few elephants in the room, I think the biggest one is this: *what is NATO without a reliable US?* If you cannot rely on the US as a NATO partner, if the US' domestic and international posture is eroding to the point that I do not believe we can trust in Article 5, what does that look like? What does the transatlantic relationship look like in the absence of the US, and are we prepared to have that conversation?

Earlier, there were a few comments along the lines of: we just wish that politicians in the Western Balkans region would work harder and do something. But that assumes that they want to. It assumes that they believe they can get a better deal within the EU and NATO than what they already have. This shows that there is still a fundamental misunderstanding of the political economy in the region, and a failure to recognise that corruption and state capture are security threats. They are not just deviations. They are not just harmless bribes. They are security threats, and much has been written about that.

I was glad to hear the word *resilience* mentioned earlier. I would just note that I think people in the Balkans, particularly in the Western Balkans, are very resilient because they have learned how to survive through more than 30 years of bad governance, war, dysfunction, and times with basic services such as water being turned off. They are extremely resilient. The issue, however, is that there is both positive and negative resilience, and we need to ensure that any work undertaken by NATO and within the Euro-Atlantic relationship supports a more positive form of resilience, one that restores dignity and power to people.

Very briefly, on the issue of influence operations, special measures, active measures, or cognitive warfare: we cannot afford to discount the role of disinformation and the way it is used to undercut the idea that things can improve. What we are seeing now, in terms of messaging entering countries in the region and beyond, is a deliberate effort to sow distrust and create the impression that progress is impossible. I was glad to hear someone in the first panel mention that after [Euromaidan](#), Moscow needed to ensure that Ukraine did not demonstrate a different future, because if Ukraine were able to move westwards, people in Russia might start asking, "What about us?" I think we can see similar dynamics in the Western Balkans.

There are different ways to address this, both in terms of the supply of information and the demand, or consumption, of it. At the same time, when it seems that the liberal West is lacking confidence and vision, we must recognise

that in a race to the bottom, the West will lose. The greatest competitive advantage that the EU and the NATO Alliance, with or without the US, possess lies precisely in their values.

There is a reason we do not see people in Sarajevo queuing for visas to go to Russia or China. They are queuing to go to Europe, because that is where they want their children to live. I sometimes worry that Europe feels it needs to shift slightly to the right, whether for domestic political reasons or otherwise, but its only real advantage offering a vision based on comprehensive security - must be grounded in its values. Sure, China can build infrastructure more quickly because it is willing to cut corners and strike the necessary deals. But that will ultimately harm the societies in question.

In terms of what should be done, I believe there needs to be a fundamental rethink of the political economy based on corruption, which has become embedded and calcified in significant ways over the past 15 to 25 years. This is a difficult conversation, because the EU, NATO, and diplomats more generally prefer to deal with elites. They prefer to treat the elites in the room as partners. That is why they meet them. But again, those elites do not necessarily share the same vision and values.

What we have seen in Serbia represents a tremendous missed opportunity. The people of Serbia, at considerable personal risk, have taken to the streets to demonstrate the values and the future they want. Unfortunately, the European Union in particular has been relatively silent. It has not welcomed or encouraged them with the open arms that many young people in Serbia expected.

One very concrete way to adopt a whole-of-society or whole-of-institutions approach to development, and to prepare the region for a future in the EU, would be a complete rethink of how critical raw materials are being handled in the Western Balkans. At present, the argument from many in the West is: if we do not secure the lithium, the nickel, etc., then China will. But there is another option. There is a way to engage in Serbia and Bosnia, and to potentially benefit from these minerals without exploiting the people in these communities through a new form of colonialism.

There is a way for these resources to be developed in consultation with affected communities, with genuine environmental consideration and, perhaps most importantly, in a way that supports education and economic development. Instead of simply exporting raw materials to Switzerland, Germany, and elsewhere, some processing could take place within the region, which has a strong history of industrial engineering and manufacturing.

Many will say this is unrealistic. They will argue that jobs must be brought back to Germany. But if that is our mindset, then we have already lost the battle.

This is an opportunity to provide people with the dignity of work, the dignity of participation, and the dignity of (re)building their own countries.

I would close by saying that, although it may appear that the West is currently losing ground while anti-democratic and autocratic leaders around the world coordinate, align their messaging, and work together, the question is this: why is the democratic alternative not doing the same? Why is there not the same urgency around values and spreading effective narratives? And what is preventing that from happening? Returning to the concept of comprehensive security helps us recognise that this is not an idealistic fantasy, but something directly linked to ensuring our security for decades to come.

Biography

Dr **Valery Perry** is a practitioner and academic who has worked on issues related to conflict analysis, democratic governance, corruption, extremism, democratic threats and comprehensive security since the 1990s. In addition to living in Sarajevo for over two decades, she lived and worked in Serbia for 18 months, and has traveled extensively throughout the region. She has conducted research and worked for organizations including the Democratization Policy Council

(DPC), the European Center for Minority Issues (ECMI), the Public International Law and Policy Group (PILPG), the NATO Stabilization Force (SFOR), the OSCE and several NGOs. She has edited three books, published numerous articles and book chapters, has spoken at conferences and policy events in the United States and throughout Europe, has testified at the U.S. Congress, and directed and produced a documentary film about the Dayton peace agreement that ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. She is based in Sarajevo.

CLOSING REMARKS

Major General Maurizio Fronda assumes command of the EU mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 21 January 2026.

Source: *Ministero della Difesa*





**Andrea Romussi**

*Minister Plenipotentiary, Office for NATO,
Security and Political-Military Strategic Issues,
Ministry of Foreign Affairs and
International Cooperation, Rome*

CLOSING REMARKS

The Western Balkans and the Black Sea region, and I quote from paragraph 45 of the latest NATO Strategic Concept, are of strategic importance to the Alliance. “We will continue to support the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of interested countries in these regions. We will enhance our efforts to bolster their capability to address the distinct threats and challenges they face, and boost their resilience against malign third-party interference and coercion”. End of quote.

During today’s conference, we listened to a great deal of analysis and many forward-looking proposals. At the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we fully value the contribution of scholars and practitioners. Allow me to highlight a few key points.

The region continues to be affected by various tensions that undermine its stability. Ongoing difficulties in dialogue are slowing down reconciliation and regional integration processes, as well as the European perspective. Italy remains actively engaged in the region, strongly supporting its EU accession path.

From a security standpoint, our country provides a key contribution through several military missions. First and foremost, KFOR, where Italy is the leading

country in terms of personnel and has held command fourteen times since 1999. Italy also holds the command of the [NATO Advisory and Liaison Team](#) (NALT) in Kosovo and is ready to assume the command of the [EUFOR Althea mission](#) in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2026.

Starting with Bosnia and Herzegovina, nearly three decades after the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement, the country continues to be marked by internal divisions along ethnic lines among the constituent peoples. It is highly decentralised, with most competences assigned to the two entities. It also remains under the authority of the High Representative, endowed with executive powers, the so-called [Bonn Powers](#), which override those of the Bosnian authorities.

The country is currently facing a serious crisis that has paralysed its institutions and triggered intense political confrontations. The judicial authorities have initiated proceedings against the President of the Republika Srpska for failing to comply with certain decisions of the High Representative, Mr Christian Schmidt. The first-instance conviction provoked a strong reaction from the authorities in Banja Luka, who adopted measures to reject and effectively boycott the institutional framework established by the 1995 Dayton Agreement.

The ruling has now become final, and the President was officially removed from office. Presidential elections are scheduled for 23 November 2025. In recent days, however, encouraging signals have emerged from the Republika Srpska authorities, and the former President has implicitly accepted his removal from office. It also appears likely that he will abandon the planned referendum on the decision of the Central Election Commission. These signs of de-escalation have allowed the tripartite Presidency to approve the Reform Agenda, a necessary step for Sarajevo to access the benefits under the [EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans](#). Until now, Bosnia and Herzegovina had been the only Western Balkans country not to have submitted its agenda to the Commission.

Turning to Serbia and Kosovo, Italy, within the UN and NATO frameworks, pays special attention to the development of the EU-facilitated Belgrade–Pristina Dialogue, a process that NATO steadfastly supports, but which unfortunately is not advancing at the desired pace. The normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo is a cornerstone of stability for the entire Balkan region. It is also an indispensable condition for the EU integration prospects of both countries, closely linked to the Brussels and Ohrid [Agreements](#) of 2023.

Yet neither party has taken concrete steps towards implementation. New momentum in the EU-led dialogue and in the implementation of the related agreements is therefore needed. We believe that both parties should adopt a concrete and pragmatic approach based on compromise, setting aside ideological positions. KFOR's role is to maintain a safe and secure environment

that promotes peaceful inter-ethnic coexistence and more fruitful political engagement between Pristina and Belgrade.

As for North Macedonia, the current government, in office since 2024, has created some friction with Bulgaria and Greece over issues related to the country's constitutional name and identity matters. The Prime Minister maintains an ambiguous stance on these issues, affecting relations with neighbouring countries and consequently slowing the country's EU path. While tensions with Athens over the name dispute have eased, relations with Sofia remain strained due to long-standing controversies related to minority rights, historical disputes and national identity.

As far as Montenegro is concerned, the summer 2024 government reshuffle, which brought the Bosniak Party and a pro-Serbian minority coalition into the executive, has so far not delayed the country's EU integration path, which continues with determination. Several issues remain unresolved, however.

In December 2024, Zagreb vetoed the opening of EU accession negotiations with Montenegro on Chapter 31, the so-called [Common Foreign and Security Policy](#). Recently, however, both countries have adopted a constructive approach, initiating technical consultations in January.

Lastly, Albania. The legislative elections last May resulted in a clear victory for the Socialist Party of Prime Minister Rama, which obtained 52% of the national vote, a strong increase compared to the 2021 elections. Mr Rama has thus secured his fourth consecutive term as Prime Minister. The new government includes numerous changes compared to the previous cabinet, with a focus on reforms.

These are our recent evaluations of the situation, the facts. But let me now offer some broader reflections.

At the Symposium on Partnership in the Age of Hybrid Challenges held last autumn in Sarajevo, it became clear that partnership is essential for Euro-Atlantic security in this historic phase characterised by persistent, simultaneous and cross-boundary challenges. To detect and address them in a timely manner, we must invest in the resilience of these countries, promote a digital approach to security and adopt a more agile decision-making process. Today's challenges require a whole-of-society approach capable of managing conflicts in all their dimensions, including the informational and cognitive domains. Armies win battles. Countries win wars.

Within NATO, there is ongoing strategic reflection on our ability to decipher, contain and, where necessary, counter hybrid threats. Our aim is to increase the opportunity cost of potential hybrid Russian campaigns, whether directly or indirectly controlled, by raising the price of our response, using asymmetric

tools where necessary, for example by focusing on the shadow fleet, and thereby pushing Russia to recalibrate its risk calculations.

As we know, reforms and good neighbourly relations are key. If we are truly to advance and ultimately complete the Euro-Atlantic integration process, we must offer a clearly better perspective than that of our strategic competitors. I have no doubt about this.

The issue also concerns communication, public perception and the conditions attached to such an outcome. NATO, the EU and the Western democracies in general are high-standard clubs, accessible only through sacrifice, hard work and generational reforms often incompatible with strong nationalist agendas.

I observe a growing awareness at all levels within NATO. Security, in all its dimensions, cannot be taken for granted, and it comes at a cost. Increasing efforts are therefore being made to strengthen our internal security, including through partnerships. Italy strongly advocates a 360-degree approach to Euro-Atlantic security. The Western Balkans are one of the main theatres where hybrid competition is taking place today. Hybrid warfare is also affecting many of our Southern Mediterranean partners (Libya, for example) as well as the Sahel region, which is experiencing the malign influence of our strategic competitors.

All this is to say that Allies and partners together can advance Euro-Atlantic integration. Intensified outreach is needed, as well as stronger measures to reinforce societal resilience, paired with a renewed commitment to sound and effective reforms from the countries concerned.

Finally, we must keep our democratic standards high. Lowering them would not serve our long-term interests. In the short and medium term, we, as the Euro-Atlantic family, must work not only towards stronger and more capable deterrence and defence, but also towards reinforcing our resilience vis-à-vis the multifaceted threats posed by our strategic competitors.

Biography

Counsellor **Andrea Romussi** is an Italian diplomat currently serving as the Head of Office IV (NATO and Strategic Security and Political-Military Issues) at the Directorate General for Political and Security Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. In his role, Counsellor Romussi has addressed challenges

faced by the Alliance, emphasising NATO's comprehensive 360-degree approach to security. Prior to his current position, Romussi held various diplomatic assignments, including roles at the Permanent Mission of Italy to the United Nations in New York and the Italian Embassy in Beirut. His career reflects a strong focus on international security and multilateral cooperation.



Balkans and Black Sea Perspectives 2025

Building Bridges: Defusing Hybrid Threats For Regional Stability

High-Level Conference

Organised by the NATO Defense College Foundation

*In co-operation with NATO Political Affairs and Security Policy Division,
Fondazione CSF and the NATO Defense College*

Rome, Monday, the 13th of October 2025

Venue: Le Meridien Visconti Hotel

15,00 – 15,45 CET

PARTICIPANTS ARRIVAL AND REGISTRATION

15,45 – 15,55 CET

WELCOME REMARKS

- ✦ *Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo*, President, NATO Defense College Foundation, Rome
- ✦ *Catherine Bourdès*, Director Academic Plans, Policy and Engagement, NATO Defense College, Rome

15,55 – 16,05 CET

OPENING REMARKS

- ✦ *Charlotte Hallengren*, Director, OPS, NATO HQ, Brussels

16,05 – 16,25 CET

OPENING DIALOGUE SESSION – THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DAYTON ACCORDS

- ✦ *Carl Bildt*, Former Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Stockholm
- ✦ *Milica Marinović*, Media Adviser to the President of Montenegro, Podgorica

16,25 – 17,25 CET

SESSION I

NATO strategy in the Western Balkans: achievements and existing challenges

This session will analyse NATO's evolving strategic role in the region, providing the general backdrop for coordinated actions with the EU as strategic partner in order to meet present challenges and preserve actual achievements in the context of the most recent Summits.

CHAIR: *Lara Jakes*, Foreign Correspondent, The New York Times, Rome

- ✦ *Peter Sørensen*, EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue, European External Action Service, Brussels
- ✦ *Zeynep Alemdar*, Director, Foreign Policy Programme, EDAM, Istanbul

- ✦ *Vessela Tcherneva*, Deputy Director, European Council on Foreign Relations, Sofia

Q&A Session

17,55 – 18,05 CET KEYNOTE SPEECH

- ✦ *Lana Prlić*, Member of Parliament of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo

18,05 – 19,05 CET SESSION II

Foreign influences in the region: hybrid threats from Russia and China

The region faces hybrid threats from Russian influence, including disinformation campaigns and political destabilisation efforts, as well as Chinese activities aiming at economic leverage through strategic investments and infrastructure projects. What are NATO and the European Union's strategies to counter these multifaceted threats? What are the key issues, and countries where hybrid operations need to be countered? How to strengthen Allied and partners' coordination?

CHAIR: *Solomon Passy*, Founding President, Atlantic Club of Bulgaria; Co-Chairman, Hello Space, Sofia

- ✦ *Alina Bârgăoanu*, Dean, College of Communication and Public Relations, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest
- ✦ *Edward P. Joseph*, Adjunct Lecturer, Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy Institute, John Hopkins, Washington D.C.
- ✦ *Valery Perry*, Senior Associate, Democratization Policy Council, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Q&A Session

19,05 – 19,15 CET
CLOSING REMARKS

- ✦ **Andrea Romussi**, Minister Plenipotentiary, Office for NATO, Security and Political-Military Strategic Issues, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Rome

END OF THE WORKING DAY

In media partnership with





President, Ambassador Alessandro Minuto Rizzo, and Director, Dr. Alessandro Politi, in a meeting with Peter Sørensen shortly before the start of the Conference.

Source: NATO Defense College Foundation



