

Security and Stability Scenarios for the Western Balkans

Are the EU, NATO and
the Netherlands Prepared?

Wouter Zweers
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Clingendael Report



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Executive Summary

This report examines how the Netherlands, the EU and NATO can enhance their approach to address potential security developments in the Western Balkans in the near future. It specifically examines:

1. The current security and stability situation in the Balkans.
2. Potential security developments in the Balkan region over the next five years (through a scenario exercise).
3. The security instruments of the Netherlands, the EU and NATO for the Western Balkans
4. The effectiveness of the security instruments of the Netherlands, the EU, and NATO in terms of their impact, mutual coherence, and preparedness for various scenarios.

To assess the security and stability situation in the Western Balkans, the report employs a holistic definition of the concept of security and stability, building on the 'Guidelines for risk assessment of the *National Security Risk Analysis* of the Dutch *National Security Analysts Network*¹, which differentiates between territorial, physical, economic, ecological, social and political, and international (legal) security and stability.

Physical and territorial security and stability in the Western Balkans have in the past few years been impeded by the lack of normalisation between Serbia and Kosovo, a lack of reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as wider ethnic tensions and a manifestation of organised crime. Political, social and economic stability and security are negatively impacted by weaknesses in the democratic governance of the Western Balkan countries, a lack of economic stability and migration-related security challenges. The region's ecological security is mainly threatened by (climate change-)induced natural disasters, environmental pollution, as well as insufficient energy security. Lastly, stability is undermined by external actors such as Russia, but also by the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, heightened global geopolitical tensions and global pressure on democracy.

1 In Dutch: Leidraad risicobeoordeling Risicoanalyse Nationale Veiligheid van het Analistennetwerk Nationale Veiligheid (ANV)

Based on a scenario exercise with Dutch experts and policy makers, the report introduces a comprehensive overview of the factors that will influence security and stability developments in the Western Balkans in the next five years and weighs these in terms of their potential impact and predictability. The exercise shows that issues related to territorial security were considered most impactful on overall security and stability in the Western Balkans. Potential renewed interstate conflict, for example between Kosovo and Serbia, or secessionist or intrastate conflict in for example Bosnia and Herzegovina is expected to have major ramifications for regional security. Societal and political unrest, as well as potential physical violence related to ethnic tensions, may also have a major impact on security and stability.

Importantly, the potential for ethnic violence, as well as the potential for interstate conflict in the region, were considered relatively unpredictable. This shows that at least amongst the participants of the scenario exercise, concerns about the potential for broader conflict in the region remain. As such, from a policy perspective, there is a continued need to assess the Western Balkans not only through an EU enlargement lens, but also through a security lens.

Four scenarios are included that showcase fictional but potential security developments in the Balkan region over the next five years. Two of those scenarios foresee violent escalation, respectively in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in North Kosovo. The other two scenarios constitute, respectively, a relatively successful EU integration path marked by external security challenges, and a muddle-through scenario with an intensification of several already persistent security challenges.

Apart from developments in the Balkans, the scenarios show that developments elsewhere, such as the course of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, but also political developments in the United States and the EU, will affect political calculations and developments in the region. All four scenarios also have clear implications for the Netherlands, the EU and NATO. The escalatory scenarios raise questions regarding EU and NATO political unity and military preparedness and may bring about challenges related to migration and ethnic tensions, including among diaspora groups.

With regard to the functioning of Dutch, EU and NATO security instruments, the findings are mixed. NATO and EU preparedness to defend territorial and physical security in the Balkans is theoretically adequate when it comes to potential

escalation in North Kosovo or in Bosnia and Herzegovina, provided that both organisations maintain sufficient political unity to ensure an effective response. Recent uncertainty on transatlantic relations means that such political unity may not be taken as given in the coming years.

When it comes to NATO and EU cyber assistance to the Western Balkans, the report finds that instruments are not yet up to the challenges at hand, meaning that collective responses to hybrid threats, including cyber threats, need further development. Additional steps are also needed to enhance the effectiveness of the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue. Appropriate mechanisms and agencies for combating cross-border organised crime have been set up and cooperation is expanding, but their effectiveness is closely related to broader Dutch and EU (as well as NATO) efforts to bolster democratic rule of law in the region. The same holds true for irregular migration instruments, for which preventing human rights violations remain a main challenge. As such, the EU is recommended to pursue a transformative enlargement approach that fosters further democratic reform.

The EU has developed promising and comprehensive instruments to spur stable economic development. Remaining challenges lie in finding pathways to decrease the financing gap and to give body to the idea of (sectoral) gradual integration to enable the economic convergence of the region with the rest of the EU. To boost ecological security, commitments made in the region are yet to be implemented, and further technical and financial assistance, e.g. for introducing carbon pricing, will be needed.

Negative trends in international rule of law and stability mostly raise questions about the internal functioning of the EU and NATO, prompting a need for accelerating Dutch and EU-wide debates on EU internal reform (in light of potential enlargement), as well as Dutch and European responses to further potential US dereliction of NATO under the new Trump administration. The report recommends the EU to step up European defence integration, e.g. through ensuring adequate functioning of the EU's Rapid Deployment Capacity. Still, broader European security will strongly depend on the development of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Therefore, NATO and EU support to Ukraine, as well as flexibility to adapt to potential diplomatic developments, will remain key.

1 Introduction

In 2023, the Netherlands elevated security and stability to being on an equal footing with its longstanding policy priority—the rule of law—when reformulating its approach towards the Western Balkans. This decision did not emerge out of the blue. As a recent Clingendael policy brief concluded, “more than 20 years after the end of the Yugoslav wars, an escalation of (ethnic) conflict in either North Kosovo or Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot be fully ruled out”.² Continued instability in the region was showcased by the 2023 clashes between NATO forces and (Kosovar) Serb protesters in North Kosovo in May, followed by an armed attack on the Kosovo police by (Kosovar) Serb militants in the same region in September of the same year.

Security risks in the Balkans are not limited to the unresolved conflict between Serbia and Kosovo.³ In Bosnia and Herzegovina, domestic conflict still looms due to a lack of reconciliation amongst the various ethnicities and the secessionist agenda of the *Republika Srpska* entity leadership. The region also suffers from malign external influence from actors like Russia and China, while the current global geopolitical turbulence exacerbates local tensions.⁴ Moreover, state capture dynamics, characterised by a weakened rule of law and substandard democratic norms, threaten regional stability. Slow economic development, media capture, disinformation campaigns, climate change threats, and cyberattacks further compound these challenges. Collectively, the risks of open military confrontation, historical revisionism, and hybrid or information warfare are not diminishing but rather intensifying in the Western Balkans.

The increasing security and stability risks in the Western Balkans are striking when viewed against the region’s ongoing EU integration efforts. All countries in

2 Wouter Zweekers & Milena Rossokhatska, “[Towards an EU geopolitical approach on transformative terms in the Western Balkans](#)”, *Clingendael policy Brief*, February 2, 2024.

3 In this report the Western Balkans are defined as the six countries in South-East Europe that are not (yet) members of the EU: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia.

4 Zweekers et al., “[China and the EU in the Western Balkans - A zero-sum game?](#)”, *Clingendael Report*, August 2020; Zweekers, Drost & Henry, “[Little substance, considerable impact - Russian influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro](#)”, *Clingendael Report*, August 2023.

the region aspire towards EU membership, with Montenegro and Serbia having been engaged in accession negotiations for over a decade. The EU, NATO, other Western partners, as well as individual EU Member States like the Netherlands remain actively involved in the region. However, while Brussels has reaffirmed its commitment to Western Balkan enlargement in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, recent research indicates that the EU has had difficulty in translating renewed geopolitical imperatives into a more effective transformative strategy.⁵

Even if the EU would use a different approach in the EU enlargement process, it may be insufficient to contain the security situation in the Balkans. Therefore, considering the increasing tensions in the Western Balkans, there is some merit in shifting focus towards the security policies and instruments of the EU, NATO and Member States like the Netherlands. The broad range of (potential) security tools these actors have available can contribute to lasting stability in the region - provided they are effective, capable of addressing specific threats, function coherently, and are integrated into a comprehensive strategy. This report examines whether the security and stability toolbox of the EU, NATO, and the Netherlands meets these criteria and explores how it can be further strengthened.

The central question guiding this study is therefore: **How can the Netherlands, the EU and NATO enhance their security approach to address potential security developments in the Western Balkans over the next five years?**

This report is structured around four key sub-questions:

1. What is the current security and stability situation in the Balkans? (Chapter 2)
2. What are the potential security developments in the Balkan region over the next five years? (Chapter 3)
3. What do the security instruments of the Netherlands, the EU and NATO encompass for the Western Balkans? (Chapter 4)
4. How effective are the security instruments of the Netherlands, the EU, and NATO in terms of their impact, mutual coherence, and alignment with broader (desired) political strategies, particularly in the context of the region's EU accession process? (Chapter 4)

5 Wouter Zweers & Milena Rossokhatska, "[Towards an EU geopolitical approach on transformative terms in the Western Balkans](#)", *Clingendael Policy Brief*, February 2, 2024; Frauke Seebass, "[Making the enlargement momentum work – the case for timelines](#)", *SWP Working Paper*, January 2025.

The report concludes with findings and recommendations aimed at Dutch, EU, and NATO stakeholders, focusing on how to enhance the effectiveness of their security toolboxes in the Western Balkans in light of potential security and stability developments up until 2030.

Methodologically speaking, the analysis primarily draws on an extensive literature review and interviews with key experts, policymakers, and lawmakers from the Netherlands, the EU, and the Western Balkans. The report makes use of security and stability scenarios for the Western Balkans up to 2030 (of which the synopses are presented in section 2.3) that were developed through an interactive scenario workshop using the Clingendael 'Alternative Futures' scenario methodology. This workshop, held at the Clingendael Institute in June 2024, gathered approximately 25 policymakers and experts from the Netherlands.

2 The security and stability situation in the Western Balkans

This chapter examines the security and stability dynamics in the Western Balkans in recent years. For the purpose of the analysis, this study employs a holistic definition of the concept of security and stability, building on the ‘Guidelines for risk assessment of the National Security Risk Analysis’ (Leidraad risicobeoordeling Risicoanalyse Nationale Veiligheid) of the Dutch ‘National Security Analysts Network’ (‘Analistennetwerk Nationale Veiligheid’ (ANV)).⁶

Infographic 1: A comprehensive framework for assessing security and stability⁷

	Territorial security	The undisturbed functioning of the Western Balkan countries and their EU and NATO allies as independent states in a broad sense, or territorial security in a narrow sense.
	Physical security	The undisturbed functioning of people in the Western Balkans and their environment.
	Social and political stability	The undisturbed continuation of a social climate in which individuals can function undisturbed and groups of people can live together well within the achievements of the democratic constitutional states of the Western Balkans and the values shared therein.
	Economic Security	The undisturbed functioning of the Western Balkans as effective and efficient economies.
	Ecological security	The undisturbed continued existence of the natural environment in and around the Western Balkans.
	International rule of law and stability	The proper functioning of the international system of norms and agreements aimed at promoting international peace and security, including human rights, and effective multilateral institutions and regimes, as well as the proper functioning of states bordering the Western Balkans.

⁶ See RIVM, ‘[Werkwijze ANV](#)’ (in Dutch), accessed 22-10-2024.

⁷ Definitions translated from the ANV framework and adapted to the Western Balkans. See RIVM, ‘[Werkwijze ANV](#)’ (in Dutch), accessed 22-10-2024.

This framework of analysis sets out six distinct categories related to overall security and stability: territorial, physical, economic, ecological, social and political, and international (legal) security and stability. While this framework has been developed to assess risks related to the national security of the Netherlands, it provides a relatively universal foundation for analysing security and stability challenges. As such, for the purpose of this study, we apply this framework to the Western Balkan region. A definition of the various types of security can be found in the infographic below.

The assessment of stability and security developments in the Western Balkans in this chapter groups together threats to and violations of territorial and physical security (section 2.1), and social and political stability, economic security and ecological security (Section 2.2), while discussing international rule of law and international stability in section 2.3. It does so as real-world developments often bear security and stability implications in multiple security and stability domains as presented in the framework above.

2.1 Threats to and violations of territorial and physical security

Threats to and violations of territorial and physical security in the Western Balkans have in past years particularly manifested themselves as a result of a lack of normalisation between Serbia and Kosovo, as well as secessionist agendas and a lack of reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Ethnic tensions in the region, as well as organised crime and violent extremism also pose threats to territorial and physical security.

Serbia-Kosovo tensions

In recent years, the lack of normalisation between Serbia and Kosovo has repeatedly caused instability, particularly concentrated in the four predominantly Serb municipalities in northern Kosovo⁸. First, in September 2021, violent clashes erupted over vehicle licence plates when Kosovo's government decided not to renew a decade-long agreement that permitted the use of Serbian and KS number plates in Kosovo, widely used by Kosovar Serbs. Trucks were used to block roads, thereby hampering the security services. During this period, Serbia

8 These are Leposavić, North Mitrovica, Zubin Potok, and Zvečan.

raised tensions by placing its military on high alert and moving troops to the border with Kosovo, thereby hinting at a potential military intervention in Kosovo's north.⁹

A second period of violent instability followed the May 2023 local elections in the mentioned municipalities. Kosovo called these elections after concerted mass resignations by Kosovo Serbs from Kosovar institutions in November 2022 in relation to the number plate dispute. The elections were boycotted by Kosovo Serbs, leading to the election of ethnic Albanian Mayors. Kosovo Serbs subsequently demanded their removal from office and blocked access to municipal offices. NATO peacekeepers deployed to protect the buildings were met with violent clashes, resulting in over 30 NATO soldiers and more than 50 protesters being injured.¹⁰

A new episode of violence occurred in September 2023, when Serb-backed paramilitary groups attacked Kosovo police officers, killing one officer and leading to the deaths of three Serb gunmen. This incident, known as the Banjska attack, could be interpreted as a failed attempt to trigger broader unrest in northern Kosovo, although the exact aims and plans of the attackers remain a matter of speculation. More recently, November 2024 witnessed an attack on Kosovo's critical drinking water infrastructure, after which the Kosovar and Serbian governments immediately accused each other of compliance.¹¹

Several underlying dynamics are at play here. First, while Kosovo actively claims legal jurisdiction over its north, these areas remain under strong informal control by Belgrade. Whenever Kosovo attempts to assert its sovereignty, it is met with resistance from local parallel governing structures informally supported by Serbia. Second, rising tensions reflect the stalled EU-led normalisation process. A key example is the failure of the Brussels/Ohrid normalisation agreement of 2023. Although it was verbally accepted by both Serbia and Kosovo, the agreement was never implemented and was subsequently rejected by the Serbian side. Slow progress on EU accession, coupled with a lack of trust from

9 International Crisis Group, "[Northern Kosovo: Asserting Sovereignty amid Divided Loyalties](#)," April 2, 2024.

10 Isufi, Perparim, "[Protesters, Peacekeepers, Injured as Violence Erupts in North Kosovo](#)," May 29, 2023.

11 Una Hajdari, "[Accusations fly after blast hits key Kosovo water system](#)", *Politico*, November 30, 2024.

both parties over the EU's neutrality and commitment, as well as EU internal coordination challenges, have weakened the EU's ability to mediate effectively.¹²

The tensions also reflect political realities in both countries. Serbia is increasingly following an illiberal trajectory, whereby the Kosovo issue seems to be employed for domestic power consolidation. Successive governments have doubled down on the Kosovo issue, with some officials openly advocating the “Srpski Svet” (Serbian World) ideology. Meanwhile, in Kosovo, Prime Minister Kurti's government has intensified security operations and adopted a more hardline approach to asserting sovereignty in Kosovo's north, while resisting the creation of a form of self-governance for Serbian municipalities, the so-called Association of Serbian Municipalities (ASM). Taken together, these factors significantly heighten the risk of a larger, open conflict. The worsening security situation already prompted NATO to expand its KFOR mission with additional troops in 2023.

Ethnic tensions

Ethnic tensions constitute a second persistent source of instability in the Western Balkans, with especially Bosnia and Herzegovina posing risks. While the Dayton Peace Agreement ended the Bosnian war in 1995, creating the united state of BiH from two self-governing entities - the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska (RS) - the threat of secession from the latter still lingers. The Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik has in previous years continuously signalled his intention and taken steps to withdraw from state institutions as part of a push for greater autonomy.¹³ More explicitly, Dodik has threatened to hold a referendum on the overall secession of RS from BiH on several occasions.

While Bosnia and Herzegovina has not seen large-scale conflict since Dayton, ethno-nationalist tensions are on the rise. They manifest themselves annually on the 9th of January, when Republika Srpska celebrates its “national” day with militaristic parades. This in spite of the fact that the celebration has been proclaimed unconstitutional by BiH's Constitutional Court. The RS entity has in the past few years also militarised its special police, which conducted provocative exercises in the vicinity of Sarajevo in 2021. While the situation in

12 Zweers & De Boon, “[Overcoming EU dividing lines in the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue](#)”, *Clingendael Policy Brief*, April 2022.

13 International Crisis Group, “[Managing the Risks of Instability in the Western Balkans](#),” July 7, 2022.

RS is most alarming, ethno-nationalist rhetoric, including a Bosnian Croat call for a Croat entity, is also to be found in the Croat-Bosniak entity, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH). All in all, the threat of breaches to territorial security and integrity in Bosnia and Herzegovina has increased in the last few years. This has prompted the EU to strengthen its EUFOR Althea mission, amongst others by increasing the availability of reserve battalions in case of an escalation.¹⁴

Apart from BiH, the potential for ethnic tensions in for example North Macedonia should also not be underestimated. Ethnic Macedonians and Albanians fought a short but bloody war in 2001 which ended after international intervention. Subsequently, tensions, amongst other things due to EU accession functioning as a “unifying force”, were diffused and Albanians became better represented in the public sector in the country.¹⁵ Alarming, some safeguards for equal representation have recently been discarded, with polarising political rhetoric on the increase. Scenarios in which conflict reignites cannot be fully ruled out.¹⁶

Organised crime

Threats to physical security in the Western Balkan Six (WB6) also relate to the prevalence of organised crime groups (OCGs). WB-based OCGs engage in a variety of illegal activities, ranging from drug production and trafficking, migrant smuggling, illegal firearms and explosives trafficking, counterfeit goods production and smuggling, money laundering to cybercrime.¹⁷ Weak institutions, the Western demand for illicit goods, and the region’s geographic location along major drug trafficking and migration routes are additional factors that have enabled organised crime to flourish in the area.¹⁸

The past decade has seen increased levels of physical violence between rival gangs, especially Škaljari and Kavač and aligned groups, competing for dominant

14 Sarajevo Times, “[Supreme Commander of NATO: We are increasing Forces in BiH and Kosovo, we are also bringing in heavy Equipment](#)”, accessed 6 November 2024.

15 Benjamin Couteau, Dimitar Bechev et al., “[North Macedonia’s EU path: Challenges and opportunities in 2025](#)”, Jacques Delors Institute, Carnegie, Clingendael & DGAP paper, December 2024.

16 Ibid.

17 See Dušan Stanković, “[Little Black Book of Organized Crime Groups in Western Balkans](#),” September 30, 2022, 4.

18 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “[Measuring Organized Crime in the Western Balkans](#),” December 15, 2020, 13-14.

market positions. When it comes to overall stability in the WB6, the corrosive impact of OGCs on state institutions and links with political elites are especially worrisome. Another security challenge constitutes the effect of illicit financial flows (IFFs), largely driven by corruption associated with crime, organised crime and tax evasion, which amount to an average of 6% of the region's gross domestic product (GDP).¹⁹ This not only weakens democratic governance and the functioning of the rule of law but also hinders economic growth.

Violent extremism and radicalisation

Security challenges also stem from radical-right violent extremism and radicalisation. For reasons of political or financial gain, populist politicians exploit divisions within societies and portray minority ethnic groups as a threat, thereby promoting an ethnic rather than civic definition of society. Such ethno-nationalist narratives are often normalised in public discourse by government-controlled media. Collectively, these factors foster an environment that is conducive to radicalization and extremism.²⁰ In Serbia, an overall abundance of societal violence and a constant atmosphere of crisis is exactly what united citizens and opposition parties to dub anti-government protests “Serbia against violence”.²¹

Radicalisation challenges also relate to the Foreign Fighters phenomenon. The 2023 Europol Terrorism Situation and Trend Report points to a high risk from Foreign Fighters returning from Syria and Iraq to the Western Balkans. Since most Foreign Fighters come from BiH and Kosovo, these states theoretically face the highest risk.²² Reports have also indicated that up to a few hundred Balkan nationals signed up to fight in the Ukraine war, predominantly on the Russian side.²³ Upon their return, these people may be traumatised, have normalised violence, and have difficulties in reintegrating into society, leading to security risks, although it should be noted that the countries in question have adopted policies to mitigate such risks.²⁴

19 Shibli, Aliya, “[Tackling illicit financial flows in eastern Europe](#),” August 23, 2023.

20 Pastuovic et al., “[Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans and MENA Region: Key findings and implications for research](#),” January 16, 2023, 7-8.

21 Politico, “[Thousands protest ‘culture of violence’ in Serbia](#),” June 2023.

22 Europol, “[European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report](#),” June 14, 2023, 37-38;

23 Azra Husaric Omerovic, “[Serb Volunteers Answer Call to Fight in Ukraine](#)”, accessed 6 November 2024.

24 Teuta Avdimetaj & Julie Coleman, [Kosovo's Experience in Repatriating Former Foreign Fighters - What EU Member States Can Learn](#), Clingendael, KCSS & ICCT Policy Brief, June 2020.

2.2 Social and political stability, economic security and ecological security

Security and stability developments in the region are also closely related to the domains of social and political stability, economic security and ecological security related challenges. This section provides an overview.

Governance flaws, societal stability and economic stability

Notwithstanding the fact that the situation differs from country to country, the Western Balkans continue to suffer from governance flaws such as a relatively weak rule of law, ineffective government and a politicised judiciary, (high-level) corruption, media capture, and inadequate protection of minority rights. Albeit at different levels, all six Western Balkan countries (WB6) suffer from risks of state capture: A process of systemic political corruption, in which political actors abuse political influence over the country's decision-making processes for personal gain and closely manage state institutions, the media and society at large.²⁵

Such political systems, sometimes dubbed 'stabilitocracies', are inherently unstable. As noted in a BiEPAG explainer, "Semi-authoritarian stabilitocracies are both willing to cause and manage instability with its neighbours or towards the internal other - the opposition or minorities - for the sake of securing continued rule."²⁶ In practice, such instability can for example be witnessed in Serbia in the past few years, where large democratic protests have been met with repression as well as physical violence from both the police and unidentified hooligan-like groups, and the authorities have resorted to inducing external crises related to Kosovo to distract from domestic democratic shortcomings.²⁷ In short, responses by the authorities to societal dissatisfaction concerning flawed governance systems can induce broader security threats and instability.

The state of the rule of law in the Western Balkans is also directly related to the economic stability of the region. A 2024 report by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) highlights that the WB6 significantly

25 Wouter Zweers & Maarten Lemstra, "[The destructive effects of state capture in the Western Balkans](#)," September 21, 2020, 1.

26 Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, '[What is a Stabilitocracy](#)', BiEPAG Blog, May 5, 2017.

27 Adelheid Wölfl, Proteste in Serbien: "Demonstrierende werden von der EU und den USA alleingelassen", comment by Florian Bieber in *Der Standard*, January 28, 2025.

lag behind the EU in terms of living standards, amongst other things as a result of the “ineffectiveness of state institutions and the courts, the lack of protection for property rights and intellectual property, and the perceived high level of corruption”.²⁸ This, in turn, disincentivises foreign direct investments, thereby affecting the foreseen economic development of the region.

Emigration and brain drain challenges

Democratic deficits, socio-economic outlooks and the longevity of the EU integration process prompt the emigration of especially the highly educated population from the region. Poor institutional quality, weak governance, corruption, pollution and the slow EU accession process, as well as economic factors like low growth rates, structural unemployment, and limited development prospects, contribute to widespread emigration flows. Young people also emigrate to seek a better education, improved healthcare, and higher wages.²⁹ Such a brain drain process is directly related to regional stability, as it leads to a loss of democratic and economic capacity of Western Balkan societies. Direct effects on physical security can also be observed, especially because of the decreased availability and quality of healthcare, a sector that is particularly affected by brain drain challenges.³⁰ Demographically speaking, emigration combined with the aging populations in the region will further strain social welfare systems that are inadequately equipped to deal with the demographic shift.³¹

Irregular migration through the Balkans

Apart from emigration from the region, irregular migration flows through the Western Balkans also affect physical security in various ways. While not unique for the region, the past few years have seen increased reports of pushbacks, abuses related to migrant smuggling, and the restriction of movement of irregular migrants through incarceration in asylum centres. Pushbacks often turn violent, a trend documented on a monthly basis by the Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN). For example, the BVMN reported an instance in which 70 people were

28 European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, “[Can the Western Balkans converge towards EU living standards?](#)”, February 26, 2024, 5.

29 Marchais, Isabelle, “[Depopulation in the Western Balkans](#),” July 20, 2023, 5.

30 Ingrid [Gercama and Marjolein Koster](#), “[De dokter wil eerst geld en rakija](#)”, *De Groene Amsterdammer*, August 21, 2024.

31 In all WB countries, the population is aging, except for Kosovo, which has a relatively young population. See Tim Judah’s articles on [Kosovo](#), [North Macedonia](#), [Montenegro](#), [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), [Albania](#) and [Serbia](#) in *BalkanInsight*, accessed 6 November 2024.

stripped of their clothing and personal possessions by Serbian authorities and forced to walk back to North Macedonia for several kilometres in temperatures below freezing point.³²

Environmental, energy and climate security

Environmental disasters and climate change processes are already influencing security and stability in the region. In the past decade, natural hazards, such as the November 2019 earthquake in Albania, the 2014 and 2024 floods in BiH, Serbia and Croatia, the 2017 droughts across the region, and the 2024 wildfires and other natural disasters provide direct threats to physical security in the region, with the examples mentioned resulting in numerous casualties.³³ Climate change-induced heatwaves, droughts, forest fires, and floods also negatively impact agricultural production and are expected to further harm the sector that currently contributes to 11 percent of the total GDP in the region.

The Western Balkans also struggle with air, water and soil pollution, further threatening physical and ecological security in the region. The region's dependency on outdated coal and lignite-fired power plants, such as in Bitola (North Macedonia) and Tuzla (Bosnia and Herzegovina) constitutes a major threat to public health and the environment. Other industries, including (copper) mining like the Zijin mine in Bor, Serbia, and automotive production plants (e.g. the Linglong tyre factory in Zrenjanin, Serbia) have similar effects.³⁴

Third, energy security and energy transition remain important challenges for broader stability in the region. While the region has committed itself to EU climate objectives through the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, investments in fossil energy from Russia and China continue and spur geopolitical dependencies. The decarbonisation of the energy sector is crucial from a climate viewpoint but could come with socio-economic challenges to local communities whose labour force relies on the coal industry.³⁵ Climate change also disrupts

32 Border Violence Monitoring Network, "[Illegal Pushbacks and Border Violence Reports](#)," April 24, 2024, 10.

33 See Euronews, "[Balkans battle wildfires from prolonged heatwave in Europe](#)"; Reuters, "[High winds and flash floods bring chaos to Serbia](#)", accessed 6 November 2024.

34 Christina Stuhlberger, "[Mining and environment in the Western Balkans](#)", Zoi Environment Network, 2018.

35 Hofhuis et al., "[The Green Agenda: Providing breathing space for Western Balkans citizens?](#)" July 26, 2021.

energy supplies, as predicted increased droughts will decrease the productivity of hydro-power plants, the major source of renewable energy in the region.³⁶

2.3 International rule of law and stability

Threats to international rule of law and stability constitute the final destabilising factor in the Western Balkans. This section discusses the influences of Russia, China and several other countries in the Western Balkans, the effects of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the region, as well as several other global developments impacting on security in the region.

Third country influences

Russia constitutes the main external destabilising factor in the Western Balkans. The Kremlin seeks to obstruct the Euro-Atlantic integration of the region by inducing instabilities and advocating against NATO and EU integration, emphasising historical (Slavic) ties with Russia instead. Notably, instead of pursuing sustainable and all-encompassing state-to-state relations, Russia exerts political influence through building strong and personalised ties with political leaderships in especially Republika Srpska and Serbia. Moscow thereby leverages its alignment with Serbia on Kosovo as an entry point, alongside its near monopoly as an energy (gas and oil) supplier to Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Importantly, the country does not shy away from using malign instruments. Through a loose network of oligarchs, representatives of the Orthodox Church, political proxies, non-state organisations, organised crime groups and hacker groups, Russia seeks to destabilise the region and/or further its influence. Examples include support for the “Night Wolves” outlaw biker group and the alleged use of the Russian Serb Humanitarian Centre in Niš for malign activities. The country has also been linked to cyberattacks against Montenegro as well as the failed political coup in that country in 2016. Most importantly, Russia spurs disinformation campaigns and spreads anti-Western and other divisive narratives in the region, e.g. through local branches of Russia Today and Sputnik, wielding substantial soft power over citizens in especially Serbia and Republika Srpska.³⁷

36 Barron and Van Manen, [“The World Climate and Security Report 2022: Climate Security Snapshot – The Balkans,”](#) July 25, 2022.

37 Zweers et al., [“Little substance, considerable impact: Russian Influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro,”](#) August 17, 2023.

China has a different approach towards the Western Balkans than Russia. While it does not resort to similar malign tactics as Russia, it would be naïve to assert that its objectives merely include tapping into developing markets and creating trade routes through its Belt and Road Initiative. Indeed, China does also seek to increase its political clout over the region. It invests heavily in infrastructure and industries, while also building political ties, especially with Serbia. The main stability risk with Chinese engagement in the region is that it undermines EU-induced standards on a variety of issues, including the security field. For example, Chinese infrastructure investments are often based on untransparent government-to-government (G2G) contracts that exacerbate corruption, undermine governments' accountability and solidify inimical power structures. Major projects furthermore bear the risk of creating debt traps for the countries at hand.³⁸ Chinese investments are also generally “associated with a lack of transparency, corruption, human rights violations, environmental damage and use of low-quality construction material”, as such also impacting on physical and ecological security.³⁹

Several other countries influence the Western Balkans both politically and security-wise. Türkiye seeks to boost its influence on especially Kosovo, Albania and North Macedonia, for example through military cooperation or cultural programmes. Hungary also seeks to exert its influence in the region, building alliances with political parties pursuing illiberal democratic agendas in amongst others Serbia and North Macedonia that may undermine the EU's overall democratic objectives. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and other Middle Eastern countries also influence the region culturally and financially, with financial investments for example posing risks related to corruption.

Global geopolitical instability and democratic decline

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, and the ensuing heightened global geopolitical tensions, have affected the Western Balkans in several ways.

38 Chinese loans have, for instance, caused Montenegro's debt rate to reach 7.4% of GDP, with public debt hitting 90% of GDP, of which 17% is owed to the Chinese Eximbank. Given that the EU's Stability and Growth Pact sets limits of 3% for deficit-to-GDP and 60% for public debt-to-GDP for its Member States, such high levels of indebtedness complicate prospects for further EU integration. Coface, “[Montenegro: Country File, Economic Risk Analysis](#),” April 23, 2024.

39 Stanicek and Tarpova, “[China's strategic interests in the Western Balkans](#),” June 24, 2022, 3; Zweers et al., “[China and the EU in the Western Balkans A zero-sum game?](#),” August 31, 2020, 52; Prelec, Tena, “[The Vicious Cycle of Corrosive Capital, Authoritarian Tendencies and State Capture in the Western Balkans](#),” October 23, 2020, 188.

Politically, the war has created more fragmentation between and within the WB countries as divisions among already existing pro-Western and pro-Russian sentiments have been further intensified. Economically, the war has brought about higher energy prices and higher housing (rental) prices in areas where Russians have migrated, such as in Belgrade.⁴⁰ EU sanctions against Russia, to which all WB countries except for Serbia have aligned, have also negatively impacted inflation, state deficits, and GDP growth.⁴¹ Lastly, the conflict directly impacts the alliance security of NATO, and thereby, the security of NATO members Montenegro, North Macedonia and Albania.

Finally, global pressure on democracy also affects the Western Balkan region. For example, challenges to democracy within the Member States of the European Union impact overall EU commitment and credibility on the promotion of democracy and good governance, and thereby, the transformative power of the EU. Recent rifts in US-EU relations may affect the Western Balkans, as the agendas of both powers towards the region can be expected to diverge much more than before. Global geopolitical and democratic instability also threaten the functioning of the international rule-based order and its institutions like the United Nations, the Council of Europe and the OSCE.

40 See TRT World, [‘How Has the Arrival of Russians in Belgrade Increased Real Estate Prices?’](#), Youtube, 10 January 2023.

41 Panagiotou, Ritsa, [“The Impact of the Ukraine War on the Western Balkans: What is at Stake?”](#) 2023, 165-167.

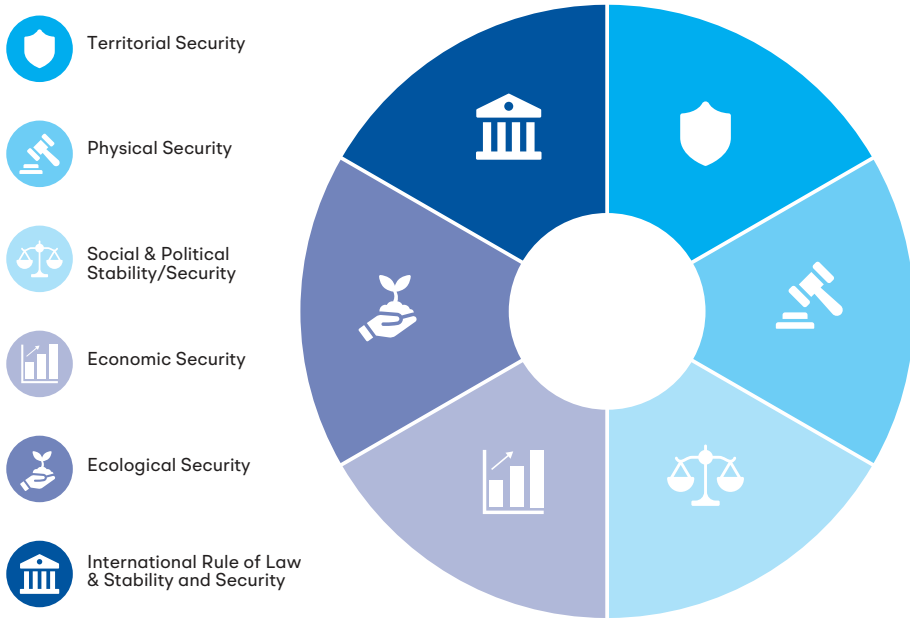
3 The future of security and stability in the Western Balkans

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the factors at play that influence security and stability developments in the region and weighs these factors in terms of their potential impact and predictability. It provides a synopsis of four scenarios for security and stability in the Western Balkans up until the end of 2029 that were developed in a scenario workshop as part of this research project.

3.1 A comprehensive overview of factors influencing security and stability in the Western Balkans

To reflect on potential future developments through possible scenarios, it is crucial to build a comprehensive overview of the factors of influence that will dictate security and stability developments in the Western Balkans in the next five years. The infographic below presents such an overview, categorizing factors of influence according to the ANV framework of analysis.

Infographic 2: Overview of factors of influence for a scenario exercise on Security and Stability in the Western Balkans



Territorial Security

- Potential for interstate conflict (e.g. the risk of war between Serbia and Kosovo)
- Potential for intrastate conflict (i.e. risks of violence between paramilitary groups and the security forces, e.g. in North Kosovo)
- Potential for secessionist conflict in BiH (the risk of Republika Srpska secession, effects on stability in BiH at large, for example in Brčko)
- Potential for (border) disputes arising from a lack of demarcation (e.g. MNE-Croatia, SRB-Croatia etc.)
- Manifestation of regional imperialism (i.e., *Srpski Svet* / Greater Albania ideologies, political agendas, informal influence on the domestic affairs of other countries in the region)
- Level of digital sovereignty: level of cyberattacks from Russia (as seen in MNE), from Iran (as seen in Albania) or elsewhere
- Level of alliance security: Risks of the invasion of NATO members (e.g. the Baltic States) by a foreign power



Physical Security

- Level of ethnic violence in the region (e.g. attacks on civilians, buildings and roadblocks over ethnic issues)
- Level of violence from organised crime and/or hooligan networks
- Level of violence by (far-right) ideological groups / as a result of ideological beliefs (e.g. anti-LGBTQI+ violence)
- Level of Foreign Fighter issues (e.g. in Kosovo or BiH), terrorism and religious radicalisation
- Potential for injuries and deaths caused by a pandemic outbreak / pollution / poor roads / landmines and ammunition left behind from previous conflicts / level of gun control
- Potential for injuries and deaths caused by poorly accessible healthcare facilities / lack of medical staff, etc.



Social & Political Stability

- Level of functioning democracy (e.g. election freedom, level of autocratisation, inclusive governance, etc.)
- State of the rule of law, judicial independence, state capture dynamics, high-level corruption, level of checks and balances
- Functioning of constitutional governance: specifically, BiH: stranglehold of Dayton, lack of international and domestic recognition of OHR, failure to comply with the ECHR's Sejdić-Finci (and subsequent) decision(s)
- Level of dedication of the WB countries to the EU accession process
- Level of geopolitical balancing by WB countries and alignment with the EU CFSP
- Amount of production, trade and proliferation in/of drugs, illicit arms, counterfeit goods, humans and animals
- Level of nexus between organised crime and politics
- Level of irregular migration through the Western Balkans and the weaponisation of migration risks
- Demographic developments in the WB (e.g. related to emigration and brain drain issues, the fertility rate, etc.)
- Technological developments such as in AI
- Level of dedication of the WB countries towards cooperation with NATO and acceptance of a NATO presence in the region
- Public and political leadership openness towards and portrayal of international organisations such as the ECHR, CoE (e.g. Venice Commission)
- Level of political trust and political polarisation
- Level of public democratic apathy vs. activism/protest readiness
- Level of (violent) far-right/nationalistic political thinking (and violence encouraged/normalized by political elites)
- Level of minority protection, language and identity issues
- Level of functioning human rights protection through regulatory frameworks, e.g. for whistleblowers, journalists, protestors, also in the digital sphere (smart cities monitoring citizens) affecting civic freedoms
- Level of reconciliation between ethnic groups / historical revisionism
- Changes in political leadership in the countries of the region
- Level of social cohesion (e.g. societal divisions between the youth/older generation, separated communities / educational systems, level of social tissue)
- Amount of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), e.g. through (social) media, through Russian media outlets (Sputnik + RT Balkans), from Hungary, China, and others
- Level of religious influences (e.g. ties between ROC & SOC, influence from Arab countries on Islam in WB, religious fundamentalism), and the geopolitics of religion
- Level of media capture and the functioning of the media market
- Level of online hatred, media literacy/conspiracy thinking and the spread of disinformation/misinformation



Economic Security

- Level of economic dependence on the Russian Federation in terms of gas/oil, investments, real estate, etc.
- Amount of corrosive capital (opaque investments (un)intentionally sustaining corruption (strategic corruption): e.g. from Russia, China, Arabic countries, etc.
- Level of the instrumentalisation of state debt: debt trap diplomacy from China (e.g. towards MNE, MKD)
- Level of influence from oligarchs/ kleptocrats undermining economic development and stability
- Development of economic crises/weaknesses (commitment to draft and implement sound economic policies, the functioning of institutions, infrastructure and business environment, the number of investments), industrial competitiveness, the availability of resources
- Level of the development of tourism in the region
- Socio-economic factors: the level of poverty and specifically energy-poverty in the region, development of salaries and purchasing power
- Amount of remittance flows towards the region
- Level of the grey economy / international financial flows from organised crime



Ecological Security

- Level of droughts / climate change (amongst others their impact on agriculture, hydropower production etc.)
- Development of air, water and soil pollution / waste management issues (and the awareness of the population towards these issues)
- Level of resilience against natural disasters, including floods (e.g. Serbia/BiH), earthquakes (e.g. Albania, MKD), and forest fires
- Level of degradation of biodiversity
- Level of exploitation of natural resources (e.g. construction of hydropower plants, mines, silviculture)
- Level of agricultural sustainability / risks of crop failures / failed harvests
- Level of degradation of wild rivers from the construction of hydropower plants (BiH, Albania, etc.)
- Level of (the implementation of) legislation on the protection of the environment (as enshrined in EU standards / Green Agenda for the WB)
- Level of sustainable economic growth
- Level of maintenance of power plants and industrial installations; level of investments in sustainable installations



International Rule of Law & Security and Stability

- Level of functioning of the EU, related to decision-making capacity of the EU, development of democracy and safeguarding of core EU values in the EU, nationalism/populism in the EU, and the level of divisions within the EU
- Level of norms-based conditionality in the EU enlargement approach: the extent to which the EU (and Western partners) pursue a normative transformative or pragmatic/short-term stability-based approach towards the Western Balkans
- Functioning of the EU integration process of the WB, related to the level of discord within the EU on future enlargement, the credibility of the membership perspective and the EU commitment to the accession perspective
- Level of success of the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue (and the related level of discord within EU/internationally over Kosovo's statehood)
- Level of international geopolitical tensions (e.g. resulting from the war in Ukraine, conflict in the Middle East, tensions between autocracies vs. democracies)
- Development of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine
- Level of bilateral conflicts between EU Member States and WB countries (e.g. MNE-Croatia, Albania-Greece), Member States pursuing individual gains (bilateralisation) in the accession process
- Level of regional (economic) integration, such as Open Balkan / CEFTA / Common Regional Market
- Functioning of NATO (relations between NATO states, commitment to Article 5, etc.)
- Functioning of international justice related to the WB (ICTY and Kosovo Specialist Chambers)
- Level of global democratic standards (e.g. in EU, US, and elsewhere)
- Security role of third countries in the WB, especially Türkiye, China, Russia
- Level of US military and political engagement in the WB region and the level of US cooperation with NL/EU/NATO in the region
- Functioning of multilateral institutions like the UN (especially the decision-making capacity and credibility of UNSC), OSCE, CoE, etc.
- Level of global economic development and cooperation
- Potential for regional imperialism (i.e., Srpski Svet / Greater Albania ideologies, political agendas, informal influence over the domestic affairs of other countries in the region)
- Level of digital sovereignty: level of cyberattacks from Russia (as seen in MNE), from Iran (as seen in Albania) or elsewhere
- Level of alliance security: risks of the invasion of NATO members (e.g. the Baltic States) by a foreign power

3.2 Crucial influencing factors for the next five years

Having established the driving forces that are relevant for security and stability in the Western Balkans, this section examines the impact of individual factors, as well as the level of certainty with which their course of development over the scenario period – the next five years – can be estimated. It does so based on analysis in the scenario workshop conducted for this report, in which participants answered the following questions, making use of a scale from 1 (low impact / very certain) to 5 (high impact / very uncertain) for each factor discussed in the previous section:

- How much impact does this specific factor have on overall stability in the Western Balkans in the next five years?
- How certain/uncertain is it in which direction this factor of influence will move in the coming years?

An aggregation of the replies results in the matrix below (**Infographic 3**), which first of all provides an interesting indication of the factors that are considered most impactful. Clearly, issues related to territorial security, indicated in light yellow, are considered most impactful on security and stability in the Western Balkans. Indeed, renewed interstate conflict, for example between Kosovo and Serbia, or secessionist or intrastate conflict in, for example, Bosnia and Herzegovina can be expected to have major ramifications for regional security. Societal and political factors (in blue) also score relatively highly on impact, followed by international factors and economic factors. Issues related to ecological security were considered as being of less importance for the overall stability in the region, whereas issues related to physical security are spread across the spectrum, with ethnic violence being regarded as most impactful.

When it comes to predictability, differences between and within the categories can also be observed. Factors related to economic security, such as the socio-economic development of the region, are considered to be relatively predictable. Estimates of how predictable ecological security will develop until the end of 2029 differ from factor to factor. Interestingly, the impact of climate change and pollution is considered to be relatively predictable. It goes without saying that natural disasters are considered to be more unpredictable. Factors related to physical security are also scattered across the spectrum, with especially the potential for ethnic violence being regarded as unpredictable. International developments, societal and political developments, but especially issues related to territorial security are seen as relatively unpredictable. The latter is

an important outcome, because it shows that at least amongst the participants of the scenario exercise, concerns about the potential for broader conflict in the region remain. Just after changes in political leadership, which are always relatively unpredictable, the group scored the potential for interstate conflict in the region as the second most unpredictable development for the next five years. This result highlights the need to assess the Western Balkans not only through the lens of EU enlargement, but also through a security lens.

3.3 Four scenarios for the future of the Western Balkans

Through a scenario workshop, we identified four potential scenarios for security and stability in the Western Balkans in the period up until the end of 2029. This section provides a synopsis of the developed scenarios. These scenarios are not meant to provide exhaustive options as to what the future could look like, nor to predict the future as such. Instead, they serve as examples of fictional potential future outcomes meant to inspire critical reflection on the preparedness of the security instruments of the Netherlands, the EU and NATO – an assessment that will follow in chapter 4.

Scenario 1: Team Europe

- The EU accession process of all WB6 countries moves forward successfully, with a positive effect on domestic (economic) development and ethnic tensions in the region.
- Ongoing conflict in Europe's east impacts negatively upon stability in the Western Balkans, amongst other things through heightened irregular migration flows.
- The WB6 face heightened hybrid threats from third actors.

Scenario 2: Brave new world

- A breakdown of the international order takes place and the United States become less active in the Western Balkans.
- Reduced attention by the international community leads to the de facto collapse of Bosnia and Herzegovina and an ensuing civil war, affecting stability also in neighbouring countries.
- Instability leads to migration flows of displaced citizens within the region and from the region to the EU.
- Internal divisions in the EU and NATO pose challenges to the readiness of both organisations to respond to the conflict.

Scenario 3: Slow deterioration

- A lack of progress in EU accession results in growing regional scepticism towards the EU.
- The WB6 face heightened autocratisation, ethnic tensions, and violence by far-right groups, although these do not result in large-scale conflict. Such tensions also affect diaspora groups in the EU.
- Economically, several WB countries intensify their relations with China, while Russia intensifies its use of FIMI instruments.

Scenario 4: Escalation in the North

- After heightened ethno-nationalist tensions, a paramilitary conflict erupts in North Kosovo.
- The EU and US remain divided on the crisis, with some countries siding with Serbian and others with Kosovar actors.
- The conflict affects stability in the wider Western Balkan region. Bosnia and Herzegovina experiences rising tensions, with Russia fuelling instability through hybrid warfare.
- NATO's ability to act is severely undermined due to a failure of the UN Security Council to renew the KFOR mandate.

4 Security and stability instruments of the EU, NATO and the Netherlands – fit for purpose?

Having established the current security challenges in the Western Balkans (chapter 2), as well as scenarios for the security and stability of the region (chapter 3), this chapter zooms in on the instruments the European Union, NATO and the Netherlands have at their disposal to influence the security and stability of the region. After introducing an overview of such instruments (section 4.1), the chapter assesses their effectiveness in terms of their impact and mutual coherence (section 4.2). Subsequently, section 4.3 examines the preparedness of these instruments for the scenarios developed in the previous chapter. While predominantly focusing on strategies and tools currently employed by the said actors, available tools that could potentially be applied are also included in the analysis where relevant.

4.1 EU, NATO and Dutch security instruments – an overview

The EU and NATO play a key role in promoting security and stability in the Western Balkans, with the Netherlands being engaged as a core member of both organisations. This section discusses their respective roles, while also presenting a schematic overview of the available security instruments.

The EU as a security actor in the Western Balkans

The EU's main policy towards the Balkans, the enlargement policy, has a clear stability objective. It seeks to enhance overall societal and political democratic stability, amongst other things through exporting EU norms on democracy and the rule of law, but also through forging the alignment of the region with the EU Common Foreign Security Policy. The EU accession policies for the Western Balkans introduced the criterion of enhancing good neighbourly relations, a testament to the fact that the EU started this accession round partly in response to the conflicts of the 1990s with the objective of bringing peace and stability.

However, also outside the EU enlargement realm, the EU is a security provider for the Western Balkans. This is the case through various missions as part of its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions in the region. These comprise the EUFOR Althea mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a major military mission aimed at retaining peace and stability in the country. A second main mission is the civilian EULEX mission in Kosovo, which acts as the formal second security responder in the country, after the Kosovo police force. The EU furthermore acts as a facilitator of conflict resolution through the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue, offers operational support on irregular migration challenges through Frontex, and contributes to physical security and countering organised crime through – amongst other organisations - Europol and Eurojust.

The EU also seeks to enhance ecological security, amongst others through its Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, which ties the region to the climate objectives as enshrined in the EU's Green Deal. Regulatory convergence also takes place through the EU accession negotiations on chapter 27 of the Acquis on Environment and Climate Change. The Energy Community plays an additional role in the transposition of EU legislation on the matter.⁴²

Economically, reform with the aim of the integration of the Western Balkan economies with the EU is a key component of the Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAAs), and creating a functioning market economy is a key (Copenhagen) criterion for EU membership.⁴³ The EU also supports regional economic integration and enhanced integration with the EU's internal market before full membership through the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, while supporting investment in the region through the Economic and Investment Plan (EIP). Lastly, the EU promotes economic development and stability through boosting infrastructure development, e.g. through the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the European Investment Bank (EIB). A full overview of EU security and stability instruments can be found in the table below (**Infographic 4**).

42 Wouter Zweers, Kristina Naunova and Giulia Cretti, "[The prospects of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans](#)", *Clingendael Policy Brief*, May 2021, 2.

43 For the Copenhagen criteria, see European Commission, "[Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood - Glossary](#)", accessed February 2025.

NATO's role in the Western Balkans

In comparison to the European Union, NATO performs a somewhat narrower but equally important function as a security provider in the Western Balkans. Three out of the six Western Balkan countries are full NATO members – Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia – and as such constitute an important pillar of the organisation in Southeast Europe. Being a part of NATO, they are not further reflected upon in this analysis. NATO has institutionalised its relationship with Bosnia and Herzegovina and with Serbia through a so-called Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme, dedicated to “increase stability, diminish threats to peace and build strengthened security relationships”.⁴⁴ Such PfP programmes are underpinned by an Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (ITTP) to establish the exact objectives of this cooperation.

NATO furthermore has an important operational presence in the Western Balkans through its KFOR mission in Kosovo, a peace enforcement operation mandated by UNSC resolution 1244 that played an important role in stabilising the region in 1999. While for many years the mission contained less than 4000 troops, NATO allies decided to deploy reinforcements in order to increase this number up to 4500 troops in response to increasing security challenges that were observed in 2023. During the unrest in North Kosovo in May 2023, KFOR troops were activated, as the third security responder in Kosovo, to stabilise the situation, with over 30 NATO soldiers sustaining injuries in ensuing clashes.

Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina take part in joint exercises with NATO troops as part of their PfP programme. Such exercises, but also training and the sharing of expertise allow these countries to adopt NATO standards and to improve the functioning of their military and its interoperability. Practically speaking, cooperation is shaped, amongst others, through a liaison office in Belgrade, as well as a NATO Headquarters in Sarajevo. Lastly, NATO also plays a role in terms of boosting cyber resilience and countering hybrid threats, an issue on which it also cooperates with the European Union.⁴⁵ A full overview of NATO security and stability instruments can be found in the table below (**Infographic 4**).

44 NATO, “[Partnership for Peace programme](#)”, accessed 7 November 2024.

45 Marie Brethous & Nad'a Kovalčíková, “[Next level partnership - Bolstering EU-NATO cooperation to counter hybrid threats in the Western Balkans](#)” *EUISS Brief*, February 2023.

The Netherlands' contribution to security and stability in the Western Balkans

The Netherlands is a key member of both NATO and the EU and in that capacity contributes to the instruments of both organisations discussed above. The country has regularly deployed troops to the Balkans, with most recently a contingent of about 150 marines contributing to the EUFOR Althea Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina. A small number of staff officers and others remain at the EUFOR Althea headquarters, Camp Butmir, at the time of writing, and future deployments are being actively considered.⁴⁶ The Dutch Armed Forces and the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee also contributed to KFOR and EULEX in Kosovo up until 2017.

Dutch operational cooperation within the EU takes place among other things through EU battlegroups, which since 2022 are being transformed into the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC). In the case of a severe crisis, the EU's RDC – potentially including Dutch troops – could in the future be deployed to the Balkans. The Netherlands is also actively engaged in joint training activities, both bilaterally and in the context of EU and NATO programmes, as well as capacity building and research and development activities for new concept development. It is furthermore active on the defence diplomacy front.⁴⁷

When it comes to broader political and societal stability, the Netherlands amongst other things supports civil society, media freedom and plurality, good governance and other objectives through the Dutch Fund for Regional Partnerships (NFRP)/the Matra Programme.⁴⁸ The Dutch embassies in the region (located in all countries except for Montenegro) have a regional rule of law network, a security network and a stability network which cover all WB6 countries. Dedicated colleagues in each embassy engage in information gathering and reporting to The Hague with the aim of boosting the Dutch information position and solid policy and strategy development. While being politically not the most outspoken supporter of EU enlargement, the Netherlands generally supports a transformative EU enlargement policy, in which rule of law

46 Defensie.nl, "[Mariniers terug uit Bosnië-Herzegovina](#)," accessed 7 November 2024.

47 See Militaire Spectator, "[Militaire diplomatie als enabler en handelingsoptie voor Defensie](#)," June 2021.

48 See Government.nl, "[NFRP/Matra: Grants for strengthening democracy and the rule of law in Europe](#)," accessed 7 November 2024.

and democracy development take centre stage. A full overview of Dutch security and stability instruments can be found in the table below (**Infographic 4**).

Infographic 4: Overview of EU, NATO and Dutch instruments

	EU	NATO	NL
Territorial Security	<p>Missions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – EULEX Kosovo (civilian mission) – EUFOR ALTHEA (BiH) <p>EU Battlegroups / EU rapid deployment capacity</p> <p>CFSP cooperation and alignment of WB, amongst others on sanctions</p> <p>Instruments against (hybrid) threats</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) EU-NATO Centre of Excellence on Countering Hybrid threats 2) EEAS Stratcom Western Balkans Task Force 3) Single Intelligence Analysis Capacity (SIAC) 4) Disinformation Rapid Alert System (RAS) 5) European Union Agency for the Operational Management of Large-Scale IT Systems in the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice (EU-LISA) 6) Strategies (EU global strategy, action plan on migration / disinformation, Green Agenda etc.) <p>Conflict resolution efforts: Facilitation of the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue</p>	<p>Partnership for Peace (PfP) with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia</p> <p>Planning and Review Process (PARP), BiH, Serbia</p> <p>Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (ITTP), Serbia</p> <p>Missions: KFOR</p> <p>Partnership Trust Fund Policy, e.g. Serbia</p> <p>Joint exercises (e.g. Platinum Wolf)</p> <p>Education and training activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Partnership Cooperation Menu (PCM) – Defence Education Enhancement Programmes (DEEPs), e.g. Serbia, BiH <p>NATO liaison officers (e.g. in Belgrade)</p> <p>Cyber support and training</p>	<p>Defence diplomacy</p> <p>Capacity building (both through consultancy and on-site training)</p> <p>Research & development (joint concept development feeding into EU and NATO capabilities)</p> <p>Training:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – bilaterally - inviting countries to train with NL (international military cooperation course NL), – NATO Defence Capacity Building mechanism (NATO DCB), – Training via EU partnership missions or training and advising missions <p>Practice and training as a signal effect</p> <p>Equipment cooperation (joint acquisition, disposals and sales, donations)</p> <p>Sharing information knowledge and intelligence</p> <p>Deployment: Contributions to EU and NATO missions, including to EUFOR Althea</p> <p>Operational cooperation (integration units with Germany, EU battlegroups/ EU rapid deployment capacity)</p> <p>Police cooperation: information exchange (operational) and expertise exchanges</p>





	EU	NATO	NL
Economic Security	Growth plan for the WB (and WBIF) European Economic Investment Plan SAAs EBRD IPA funding European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) Horizon Europe participation		Bilateral economic cooperation
Ecological security	EU Green agenda for the Western Balkans New Growth plan WB (and WBIF) Energy and transport communities EIP Horizon Europe		Bilateral ecological cooperation
International Rule of Law & Stability/Security	EU enlargement policy Conflict resolution and reconciliation activities: 1) Facilitation of Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue 2) Financial support to the ICTY and the Kosovo Specialist Chambers Strategies (EU global strategy, action plan on migration / disinformation, Green Agenda etc.)	Support for a rules-based international order Safekeeping of NATO territory through credible deterrence	Support for a rules-based international order and international organisations

4.2 Effectiveness and mutual coherence

This section reflects on the effectiveness of instruments for each of the security categories reflected upon in the above infographic. Apart from joint effectiveness, we mainly assess the extent to which instruments are mutually reinforcing and collectively cover the threats identified in earlier parts of the report.

Territorial and physical security

When it comes to **operational presence** to safeguard territorial and physical security, EUFOR Althea and KFOR are generally regarded as well functioning and up to the job. Both missions strengthened their presence and the availability of reserve forces in light of heightened tensions in previous years, indicating a flexible and vigilant approach from both NATO and the EU. Given the deteriorating global geopolitical stability, the missions will remain crucial, and the readiness of NATO and EU Member States to contribute even more so. As such, a potential US decision to pull back its troops from Europe would also result in challenges for KFOR, to which, according to NATO, 602 US troops momentarily contribute.⁴⁹ While, ideally, an operational presence would over time be replaced by more softer security instruments, for the moment the security situation in both Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Kosovo does not allow for such a step to be taken.

The EU's **facilitation of the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue** between Serbia and Kosovo has seen many challenges. An attempt to use the momentum after Russia's invasion of Ukraine to push through, after years of standstill, a relatively ambitious normalisation agreement in 2023 fell through after Serbia only committed itself orally, but later denied the applicability of the agreement's obligations in a letter to the European Commission.⁵⁰ This episode exemplifies wider issues concerning the EU's efforts to forge stability through conflict resolution facilitation. First, the effectiveness of EU membership as a main incentive for the parties to constructively engage in the process has faded because of the relative standstill in the accession process for both countries. Second, the EU suffers from credibility issues related to a) a lack of coordination between the EU's Special Representative (EUSR) and the Member States, resulting among other things in an unclear mandate for the EUSR, and b) the non-recognition of Kosovo by five EU Member States, and the perceived lack of neutrality of the previous HR/VP and EUSR.⁵¹ Most importantly, a lack of ownership by the conflict parties themselves, as well as undermining external influence, have resulted in a situation where the dialogue in previous years has failed to bring about any decisive steps forward on key political issues.

49 NATO, '[Contributing Nations](#)' accessed February 2025.

50 See EEAS, "[Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue: Agreement on the path to normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia](#)", February 27, 2023; Jelena Nikolić, "[Serbia formally refuses to abide by EU-brokered agreements with Kosovo](#)", EURACTIV, December 15, 2023.

51 Zweers & De Boon, "[Overcoming EU internal dividing lines in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue](#)", Clingendael Policy Brief, April 2022.

When it comes to **hybrid threats** and **Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI)**, EU and NATO efforts are less comprehensive. While both organisations have stepped up their attention to the issue since 2016, current efforts have not been sufficient to counter increasing threats to the region, e.g. when it comes to disinformation campaigns. The EU and its Member States are especially active in fostering media freedom, functioning media markets, as well as debunking disinformation. NATO and the EU also engage in strategic communication and situational awareness. A more concerted effort underpinned by a grant strategy, more structural engagement, as well as using strategic communication to enhance the reputation of both organisations in the region could help to increase effectiveness in countering covert interference.⁵²

Lastly, the EU, its agencies and Member States are increasingly cooperating with the Western Balkans on countering **organised crime**. Operational cooperation and information sharing are on the rise and are facilitated through cooperation agreements and/or projects with EUROPOL, EUROJUST, CEPOL, the EMCDDA, EMPACT, the EJM and OLAF. Since its establishment in 2017, the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) has also signed cooperation agreements with various Western Balkan countries. **Eurojust** has been instrumental in addressing **cross-border crime**, providing judicial advice and supporting prosecution processes. The agency has been successful in dismantling various drug and human trafficking networks in amongst others Albania.⁵³ Effective cross-border cooperation between the Western Balkans and EU Member States has been an essential ingredient for its success and has contributed to enhancing mutual trust. Some criticism has been voiced that cooperation is relatively asymmetrical, meaning that initiatives are being imposed by the EU through a top-down approach.⁵⁴ The fact that the agency has to rely on national judiciary systems, which in the Western Balkans are not immune from corruption, remains another challenge.

52 Marie Brethous & Nad'a Kovalčíková, "Next level partnership - Bolstering EU-NATO cooperation to counter hybrid threats in the Western Balkans", *EUISS Brief*, February 2023.

53 See for example EUROJUST, "Eurojust supports major operation against Albanian drug-trafficking ring in Italy: 66 arrests | Eurojust | European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation", September 26, 2024.

54 Andi Hoxhaj, "The EU Rule of Law Initiative Towards the Western Balkans", *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law*, November 18, 2020.

As a country facing severe organised crime challenges, the Netherlands has an interest in forging constructive bilateral cooperation with Western Balkan partners on the issue beyond EU-wide mechanisms.⁵⁵ In practice, however, cooperation is still hindered by governance flaws in the Western Balkans and alleged links between political actors in the region and Organised Crime Groups (OCGs).⁵⁶ Apart from information sharing, joint investigations, enhancing working standards through training and other operational instruments, wider efforts to bolster the rule of law in the region will remain equally important to address the challenge of organised crime.

Social & Political Stability/ Security

EU Enlargement has often been referred to as one of the most successful foreign policy instruments of the EU, as, at least in theory, it has the transformative power to create democratic political and social stability. For the Balkans, the process started with the **Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAAs)** signed in the early 2000s, which were equally intended to spur harmonisation with EU standards, specifically in the sectors of the rule of law, trade and human rights, and thereby advance democratic stability. The invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 put enlargement back onto the agenda, thereby ending over a decade of enlargement fatigue, and spurring the EU to open accession talks with Moldova, Ukraine, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, the intended democratic transformation has come about much more slowly than was initially foreseen, and even in light of new geopolitical momentum, the EU's transformative power seems to remain limited at best. The European Court of Auditors concluded in a 2022 report that “while EU action has contributed to reforms in technical and operational areas, such as improving the efficiency of the judiciary and the development of relevant legislation, it has had little overall impact on fundamental rule of law reforms in the region.”⁵⁷ It cites a low political reform drive in the Western Balkan countries as a core reason for this. However, other studies have also suggested that EU policies have contributed to the entrenchment of so-called stabilocracies, that is, political systems which sustain the appearance of democratisation, without implementing the comprehensive reforms needed

55 Zweers & Dafa, “[Together or Alone? The need for increased Albanian-Dutch cooperation to fight transnational organised crime](#)”, *Clingendael Policy Brief*, August 2020.

56 See for example Robert F. Worth, “[The President, the Soccer Hooligans and an Underworld 'House of Horrors'](#)”, *New York Times*, May 3, 2023.

57 European Court of Auditors, “[EU support for the rule of law in the Western Balkans: despite efforts, fundamental problems persist](#)”, January 2022.

in that regard.⁵⁸ Persistent challenges in the EU enlargement approach include a) politicisation and *bilateralisation* hampering EU credibility, b) the EU pursuing an overly technical tick-box exercise, and c) EU diplomatic unwillingness to consistently apply conditionality and to act against any backlash as a result of internal divergences and perceived interests. A clear case in point is that in November 2024 most Member States (though not all) supported the opening of a new negotiations cluster with Serbia, even if it can be argued that the country is geopolitically and democratically not ready for this. Through the Lithium deal signed between major European companies, the EU and Serbian officials in July 2024, the EU has rather deepened strategic cooperation and legitimised what is according to independent observers like the Freedom House Index an increasingly autocratic leadership⁵⁹, thereby demonstrating tension between the EU's interests and values in its relations with the candidate countries.

To untap the potential of EU enlargement and to ensure that the policy fosters democratic stability, the EU will need to better apply democratic conditionality, while at the same time supporting reforms and building linkages with the candidates. The debate on accelerated or gradual integration may offer a way forward but will need to be enhanced by more political dialogue and a sense of direction for enlargement, as well as more focused discussions on EU internal reform. As suggested in earlier research, a more sincere EU enlargement approach will also help to embolden democratically-oriented citizens in the Balkans and prepare EU citizens for accession decisions.⁶⁰

Regarding Migration, **FRONTEX** has been vital for managing irregular migration in the region and ensuring border security. The agency provides training and technical and operational support to the countries which are faced with the same challenges as the EU itself. Through Status Agreements, the agency has deployed a significant number of staff members to the Western Balkans, who have been relatively successful in cooperating with local border surveillance and control. This cooperation can be seen as a form of accelerated integration and serves to build

58 Solveig Richter & Natascha Wunsch, "[Money, power, glory: the linkages between EU conditionality and state capture in the Western Balkans](#)", *Journal of European Public Policy*, February 17, 2019; Zweers et al., "[The EU as a promoter of 'stabilitocracy' in the Western Balkans?](#)", *Clingendael report*, February 8, 2022.

59 Freedom House, "[Nations in Transit – Serbia 2024](#)", accessed 7 November 2024.

60 Zweers and Rossokhatska, "[Towards an EU geopolitical approach on transformative terms in the Western Balkans](#)", *Clingendael Policy Brief*, February 2024.

mutual trust between the EU and the candidate countries. At the same time, the securitisation of borders has resulted in, also in the Western Balkans, human rights violations in the form of migrant pushbacks. Now that FRONTEX cooperation with the Balkan countries is increasing – for example, through the new cooperation agreement with Serbia⁶¹ – the EU will need to be vigilant concerning upholding human rights standards in the agency’s operations. It can do so through boosting democratic oversight and, thereby, transparency and accountability.⁶²

Economic Security and stability

EU support for the economic transformation and development of the Western Balkans has been relatively successful. A 2020 study found that the **SAAs** have had a strong impact on FDI flows from the EU to the Western Balkans, while also positively impacting WB exports to the EU.⁶³ The EU has also effectively underpinned the process of the transposition of its economic acquis by the Western Balkans by economic and financial support, most recently through the **EIP**, and is creating increasing pathways for accelerated economic integration through the **Growth Plan**. However, it remains a challenge for the Western Balkan countries to catch up with the EU Member States’ economies. This is not only a result of continued governance challenges in the candidate countries but also stems from the fact that EU Member States receive a substantially higher amount of funding through, among other things, the **EU’s cohesion funds**. While the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans and EIP already acknowledge the need for and support economic convergence, there may be some merit in exploring more progressive financing models as part of the current discussions on staged integration, and/or the “frontloading” of cohesion funds to candidates, to be combined with strict rule of law conditionality.⁶⁴ While (accelerated) economic integration brings opportunities, the EU will need to remain active in offsetting any negative effects. Especially regarding the (earlier discussed) brain drain

61 European Commission DG NEAR, “[EU signs agreement with Serbia to strengthen migration and border management cooperation](#)”, accessed 7 November 2024.

62 Bernd Parusel, “[Should They Stay or Should They Go? Frontex’s fundamental rights dilemma](#)”, SIEPS Report, 2022.

63 Richard Grieseson et al., “[Regional Economic Cooperation in the Western Balkans: The Role of Stabilisation and Association Agreements, Bilateral Investment Treaties and Free Trade Agreements in Regional Investment and Trade Flows](#)”, *Wiiw Research Report*, September 2020.

64 See Ardian Hackaj and Krisela Hackaj, “[Accession before Membership: Bringing South East Europe 6 into EU Cohesion and EU Industrial policy debates](#)”, *CDI Working Paper*, October 2024; European Policy Centre Belgrade, “[The Initiative for a Staged accession to the EU](#)”, accessed 7 November 2024.

challenge, a more coordinated and strategic approach to **labour migration**, taking into account the interests of the candidates, would be opportune.⁶⁵

Ecological Security

Despite substantial attention and action from the EU on the matter, fostering energy security in the Balkans is facing hard realities. While the WB6 formally committed to the EU climate objective in 2020, actual implementation in the words of one expert “hardly got started”.⁶⁶ This is underpinned by the fact that candidates, by continuing to operate outdated power plants, have regularly been in breach of **their Energy Community** obligations.⁶⁷ All in all, many challenges to ecological security remain, with first and foremost cutting dependency on outdated coal-fired power plants. The EU’s current toolkit is comprehensive, its instruments being mutually reinforcing, and this is also aided by the Member States’ bilateral and other multilateral initiatives (most prominently – **the Berlin Process**). It is nevertheless insufficient. Accelerating the transition and energy diversification will require a comprehensive approach benefiting from enhanced financial support and focused on offsetting potentially disturbing labour effects through education and the creation of alternative livelihoods. Building on the existing instruments, enhanced EU technical assistance, e.g. on introducing **carbon pricing** (especially in light of the EU’s Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism regulations that will come into effect and will strongly affect the Western Balkan countries), combined with closing the **green transition financing gap** between candidates and Member States, could be ways forward to further increase their impact.⁶⁸ Furthermore, as in other fields, sectoral cooperation is only effective in light of clear and principled political guidance. Also in the energy field, governance flaws in the candidates hinder effective paths forward, meaning that consistent democratic conditionality will remain key. This also means that the EU should take a critical look at the interest-based logic behind the EU push towards ‘friendshoring’ the sourcing of Critical Raw Materials such as lithium, which risks exacerbating state capture challenges in Western Balkan candidates.⁶⁹

65 A Clingendael policy brief on labour migration and EU enlargement is forthcoming in March 2025.

66 Bankwatch Network, “[Western Balkans: NGOs launch proposals to revive EU’s flagging Green Agenda](#)”, October 1, 2024.

67 See for example Energetika, “[BiH must address LCPD Breach – Energy Community](#)”, October 28, 2022.

68 Dimitar Bechev, “[The Green Transition and the Western Balkans](#)”, *Carnegie Europe*, October 9, 2023.

69 Vedran Dzihic, “[Mining Lithium, Undermining a Democratic Future: EU Deal Takes Serbia Further from Europe](#)”, *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, September 30, 2024.

International Rule of Law & Stability/ Security

It falls outside the scope of this report to assess EU, NATO and Dutch efforts to safeguard the functioning of the international rule of law and international institutions like the United Nations. However, the functioning of the EU and NATO themselves are central to both organisations' effectiveness towards the Western Balkans and are therefore discussed here, as well as EU and NATO responses to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine.

The **EU's own functioning** is challenged amongst other things by a democratic and rule of law deterioration in some of its Member States. This directly affects the credibility and effectiveness of the EU's enlargement policy, through which candidates are expected to meet high rule of law standards. Regardless of the speed of EU enlargement, the EU will need to seriously assess and strengthen its rule of law instruments, decision-making procedures, institutional set-up, as well as the budget and key policies such as the cohesion and agriculture policies to become more effective and efficient.⁷⁰

NATO has functioned relatively well in previous years but it is now faced with more internal discord, especially since the United States under the new Trump administration is pursuing a more transactional approach and may be inclined to sideline NATO at times. While European Members of NATO have increased their defence spending in recent years, and different scenarios for the future of NATO exist, there is more work to be done to boost European Defence cooperation and thereby the European pillar of NATO.⁷¹ In spite of political changes in the US, a joint commitment to Article 5 will need to be secured to uphold credible deterrence. Unity in both the EU and NATO is also key with regard to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. From the onset of US President Trump's second term, the US has put further pressure on the EU and European NATO partners to support Ukraine militarily and politically.

70 Camille van Hees et al., "[The Dutch Dragging Their Feet - The Challenge of Being Constructive While Making the EU 'FitFor30+'](#)" *Clingendael Policy Brief*, November 2023.

71 Dick Zandee & Roman de Baedts, "[The US elections and the future of NATO - A scenario analysis](#)", *Clingendael Report*, October 2024.

4.3 Preparedness for future scenarios

The (synopses of) the scenarios presented in this report raise important questions for the EU, NATO and the Netherlands regarding their preparedness for different Western Balkan security and stability future outcomes. They are, however, not fully comprehensive and do not reflect on all the security challenges the region faces. For example, issues related to organised crime or ecological security hardly featured in the scenarios, which were developed within a relatively short timeframe. This section reflects on the most prominent security threats featured in each scenario, while the conclusions section of the report draws parallels and seeks to bring in also other security challenges discussed in earlier sections.

In the **Team Europe scenario (no. 1)**, external threats unite the region and spur EU accession reform, meaning that domestic security threats and ethnic tensions diminish. The main security threat in this scenario is the increased Russian FIMI in response to the region's relatively successful EU integration progress. The reduced focus of the United States on Europe in this scenario mostly impacts Ukraine and Georgia rather than the Western Balkans. But enhanced instability in Europe's East does create more irregular migration challenges, including for the Western Balkans. As such, for this scenario the preparedness of instruments to counter FIMI and manage irregular migration is key.

On FIMI, the more democratic outlook of the region in this scenario will open up new possibilities to cooperate with the WB governments on combating external challenges. At the same time, the increased FIMI threats will require a strengthening of the EU, NATO and Dutch toolboxes. The EU, NATO and Member States like the Netherlands would do well to start ramping up support to the region for boosting cyber resilience, combating disinformation, and creating functioning media markets, but also by creating more integrated strategies for combating FIMI.

On irregular migration, the EU and its Member States are already more prepared, given that in response to migration flows in the past decade cooperation with candidates through amongst others Frontex has already been intensified. Enhanced democratic political dynamics in this scenario could positively impact such cooperation, but at the same time, increased irregular migration flows will put pressure on capacities and spur a need for continued vigilance to prevent human rights violations.

Lastly, given the positive steps forward in the region, the credibility of the EU's accession perspective will be tested in this scenario. As such, the scenario necessitates a more focused and intense debate between the Member States and the EU institutions, as well as with EU citizens, about EU internal reforms and EU enlargement as such, to technically and politically prepare the EU for further enlargement.

The **Brave New World scenario (no. 2)** is marked by a breakdown of the international order and pullback by the United States from Europe, prompting Republika Srpska to secede from BiH, leading to civil war in the country. As such, this scenario sees severe security challenges in the region, as well as migration flows from the region, even if the candidate countries Montenegro and Albania succeed in attaining EU membership.

First and foremost, the scenario raises questions regarding the preparedness of EUFOR Althea, as well as overall NATO and EU abilities to intervene militarily to bring the situation under control. The issue is that both organisations in this scenario are more divided internally, with the US under President Trump being less invested in NATO and having pivoted towards Asia. As the US may pull back its troops from the Balkans in such a scenario, the EU will need to ramp up its military preparedness by speeding up the process of the transformation of its battlegroups, currently too small and depending too much on US operational support, to a fully functioning EU Rapid Deployment Capacity.

A potential second open conflict in Europe besides the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine also prompts questions about the capacities and integration of the European defence industry, even if a large European peacekeeping mission in BiH would necessitate different capacities than the support for Ukraine. Lastly, public support within the EU and NATO Member States for potential military interventions will not be guaranteed. On the migration front, large refugee flows from BiH - which has a population of about 3 to 3.5 million people - to the EU and other WB countries will put further pressure on asylum capacities in the Member States including the Netherlands, even if the number of refugees will be less than those having come from Ukraine in the last few years.

In the **Slow deterioration scenario (no. 3)**, no major escalation takes place, but ethnic incidents occur regularly in especially North Kosovo, and the region at large experiences heightened autocratisation and ethno-nationalism. Emboldened far-right groups engage in more violence against irregular

migrants and minority groups. Security is impeded by external actors through cyberattacks, and economic stability is challenged by divergence from the EU and an increasing role by China. This scenario mostly sees an intensification of the existing challenges that are already present.

Economically, the scenario renders questions about the ability of the EU to further the sustainable economic development of the region through the exportation of EU standards and deepened economic integration. Key in that respect will be the effectiveness of the EU's Growth Plan which foresees both further regional economic integration based on EU standards as well as accelerated economic integration with the EU. Currently, however, the European Commission and the Member States are finding it difficult to take the idea of gradual integration any further. The main challenge is identifying sectors in which such gradual integration could take place without endangering EU internal market dynamics and standards. That is especially the case because not all of the *acquis* has as yet been effectively implemented by the candidates and challenges remain related to legal certainty. It will be key for the EU to further engage in internal discussions to identify the road forward.⁷² As such, more work needs to be done on reaping the potential benefits of gradual economic integration.

The intensified ethnic violence in this scenario shows a need to ramp up reconciliation efforts, e.g. through the Netherlands supporting local-level and youth projects. More importantly, it necessitates a more adequate political radar from the EU, NATO and Member States such as the Netherlands that clearly speaks out against politicians promoting ethno-nationalism in the region, instead supporting a more civic concept of statehood. As ethno-nationalism may also create unrest amongst and within diaspora groups in countries like the Netherlands, this scenario also requires sound relations between governments and diaspora groups, government expertise among diaspora groups and policy preparedness to reduce such tensions. As the scenario builds upon stability risks that can already be observed in the region, in general terms it calls for a more critical review of current EU strategies towards the region.

72 See Camille van Hees, Saskia Hollander and Robin Neumann, "[Gradual integration of candidate countries into the European Union - Pushing the impossible, delaying the inevitable?](#)", *Clingendael Report*, February 20, 2025.

Lastly, in the **Escalation in the North Scenario (no. 4)**, relations between the EU and the Western Balkans take a transactional turn and EU accession is halted. After years of increasing ethnic tensions, a violent conflict erupts in North Kosovo that quickly spreads towards other parts of the region. As in scenario 2, internal divisions, a pullback by the US and a breakdown of the international order hinder EU and NATO responses. This scenario especially prompts questions regarding the preparedness of EULEX and KFOR for a violent escalation in Kosovo's North. Second, the scenario shows that the effectiveness of the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue is closely connected to overall security in the region. As analysed in the report, while there has been significant attention from the EU and key Member States towards the process, several steps could be taken to enhance its effectiveness, even if political calculations in both Belgrade and Pristina will remain decisive. While operational instruments in theory may be prepared for any escalation, political preparedness in this scenario is much more uncertain. The scenario thereby demonstrates the clear risks of disunion within both NATO and the EU.

5 Conclusions and recommendations

This report has examined how the Netherlands, the EU and NATO can enhance their security approach to address potential security developments in the Western Balkans in the period up until the end of 2029. Therefore, it has first assessed the current security and stability situation in the Western Balkans, displaying current threats to territorial, physical, economic, ecological, social and political, and international (legal) security and stability. Especially the lack of normalisation between Serbia and Kosovo and persisting secessionist agendas and a lack of reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as a manifestation of ethnic tensions and organised crime have in the last few years threatened physical and territorial security in the region. The report also highlights continued weaknesses in the democratic governance of the Western Balkan countries, which also negatively impact economic stability and bring about migration-related security challenges. The region's ecological security is mainly threatened by (climate change-)induced natural disasters, environmental pollution, as well as insufficient energy security. Lastly, stability is undermined by external actors such as especially Russia, but also by the effects of the war in Ukraine, heightened global geopolitical tensions, global pressure on democracy and uncertainty surrounding transatlantic cooperation.

Subsequently, the report has presented (the synopses of) four scenarios that showcase fictional but potential security developments in the Balkan region over the next five years. Two of those scenarios foresee a violent escalation, respectively in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in North Kosovo. The other two scenarios see, respectively, a relatively successful EU integration path marked by external security challenges, and a middle-through scenario with an intensification of several already persistent security challenges. Apart from developments in the Balkans, the scenarios show that developments elsewhere, such as the course of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, but also political developments in the United States and the EU, will affect political calculations and developments in the region. All four scenarios also have clear implications for the Netherlands, the EU and NATO. The escalatory scenarios raise questions regarding the EU's and NATO's political unity and military preparedness. They also prompt migration flows putting pressure on Dutch and

other EU Member States' already tight asylum capacities. The more incremental scenarios also feature threats that can impact the rest of Europe. FIMI and cyber-related attacks may also bear implications for Western countries, and potential rising ethno-nationalism in the Western Balkans could lead to unrest amongst diaspora groups. While organised crime and ecological security threats hardly feature in the developed scenarios, they have a clear cross-border nature. Taken together, the scenarios show the increased interdependency of local security and stability in the Western Balkans and broader European and global trends.

Third, this report has sought to create an overview of Dutch, EU and NATO security instruments, assessing their effectiveness in terms of their impact and mutual coherence, their alignment with broader political strategies, as well as their preparedness for the developed scenarios. It finds that NATO and EU preparedness to defend territorial and physical security in the Balkans is adequate when it comes to potential escalation in North Kosovo or in Bosnia and Herzegovina, provided that both organisations retain sufficient political unity to ensure an effective response. NATO and EU cyber assistance to the Western Balkans are not yet up to the challenges at hand, meaning that collective responses to hybrid threats, including cyber threats, need further development. Further steps are also needed to enhance the effectiveness of the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue. Appropriate mechanisms and agencies for combating cross-border organised crime have been set up and cooperation is expanding, but their effectiveness is closely related to broader Dutch and EU (as well as NATO) efforts to bolster democratic rule of law in the region. The same holds true for irregular migration instruments, for which preventing human rights violations remains a main challenge. Economically, especially the EU has developed promising and comprehensive instruments to encourage stable economic development. Remaining challenges lie in finding pathways to decrease the financing gap and give body to the idea of (sectoral) gradual integration to enable the economic convergence of the region with the rest of the EU. To boost ecological security, commitments made in the region are yet to be implemented, and further technical and financial assistance, e.g. for introducing carbon pricing, will be needed. Lastly, negative trends in international rule of law and stability mostly raise questions about the internal functioning of the EU and NATO, prompting a need for accelerating Dutch and EU-wide debates on EU internal reform (in light of potential enlargement), as well as Dutch and European responses to the potential US dereliction of NATO under the new Trump administration. Importantly, broader European security will strongly depend

on the development of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, and as such NATO and EU support for Ukraine, as well as flexibility to adapt to potential diplomatic developments, will remain key.

Based on this analysis, we formulate the following recommendations:

- In light of the potential further course of the United States under the new Trump administration, (European) members of NATO are advised to accelerate discussions and efforts to find political unity and preparedness to act, and to boost strategic autonomy through enhancing operational capacities and defence integration independently from the US. For the EU, this especially requires speeding up efforts to convert battlegroups into an EU Rapid Deployment Capacity that can operate independently from US support.
- NATO and the EU could further boost joint efforts and support to counter hybrid threats related to FIMI and cyberattacks in the Western Balkans. They can do so through furthering joint strategy development on FIMI and cyber issues, by enhancing their own strategic communication, and for the EU and Member States like the Netherlands by continuing (and potentially expanding) support for independent media and boosting Stratcom / EUvsDisinfo activities.
- The EU would do well to critically assess and work on internal differences that have hampered the effectiveness of the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue, in line with recommendations from earlier research.⁷³ To counter ethnic tensions, further programmes to boost societal reconciliation could be considered, but their effectiveness will depend on a clear political stance regarding ethno-nationalist politics in the region.
- As a lack of political unity in the European Union is likely to continue hampering an effective and unitary political EU approach towards the region, Member States that are serious about upholding the EU's transformative objectives could create a more active coalition of the willing to coordinate their messaging towards the candidates and assist reform-oriented political forces in the region.
- The EU and its Member States could further pressure and assist the Western Balkan countries to start implementing their climate and energy commitments as part of the Energy Community and Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. They can do so, amongst other things, by providing technical and financial

73 See Zweers & De Boon, "[Overcoming EU dividing lines in the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue](#)", *Clingendael Policy Brief*, April 2022.

assistance to introduce national carbon pricing mechanisms in light of the forthcoming EU CBAM regulation that the WB countries will face.

- To boost economic security, the EU and its Member States are advised to give more body to the concept of accelerated sectoral integration as enshrined in the EU's Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, and to consider more progressive financing to spur economic convergence and integration with the EU, e.g. through the frontloading of EU Cohesion Funds.
- To ensure that the EU functions effectively, Dutch and EU-wide debates on EU internal reform (in light of potential enlargement) could be accelerated. Such internal reform discussions should include efforts to strengthen EU internal rule of law instruments, to create a more future-proof institutional set-up, to enhance the effectiveness of decision-making processes (e.g. in EU foreign policy), and to prepare EU policies like the Cohesion Policy and the Common Agricultural Policy, as well as the EU budget, for potential future enlargement.
- As sustainable democratic development is crucial for securing a more stable and secure future for the Western Balkans, the EU is advised to pursue, in line with recommendations from earlier research⁷⁴, a sincere transformative enlargement strategy focused on longer-term transformation, thereby clearly supporting democratic actors within the region while speaking out against those undermining democratic stability.

74 See: Wouter Zweers & Milena Rossokhatska, "[Towards an EU geopolitical approach on transformative terms in the Western Balkans](#)", *Clingendael Policy Brief*, February 2, 2024.