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***Western Balkans between opposing blocs:
military alliances, grey zone and multi-
level containment***

Abstract

This article analyses the growing risk of conflict in the Western Balkans arising from the consolidation of antagonistic military blocs formed around Serbia and Kosovo, with the involvement of external actors such as Russia, NATO and the European Union. Using theoretical frameworks such as the balance of power, complex interdependence and the notion of the grey zone, it examines the strategic motivations of the main actors, as well as the critical flashpoints in North Kosovo and Republika Srpska. Despite escalating rhetoric and latent tensions, three key factors of containment are identified: the EU's structural mediation, regional economic interdependence, and international military deterrence through missions such as KFOR and EUFOR Althea. This research aims to assess the impact of emerging military alliances on Balkan stability, considering historical variables, external actors and international security theories, and to analyse whether they increase the risk of armed conflict in the region in a context of unresolved tensions in Kosovo and Republika Srpska.

Keywords

Srpska, Kosovo, Serbia, Grey Zone, Complex Interdependence.

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1 Introduction

1.1 *Brief historical context*

From a linguistic perspective, Serbian, Bosnian and Croatian are standardised variants of the same linguistic diasystem historically known as Serbo-Croatian, sharing grammatical, lexical and syntactic bases. However, since the 1990s, these names have become politicised as instruments of nationalist differentiation.

The fragmentation of the identity of the South Slavic peoples was consolidated during the Middle Ages through the formation of distinct states, a process that deepened in the modern era under divergent imperial influences: the Habsburgs in Croatia (Catholicism), the Ottomans in Bosnia (Islam) and the Serbian Orthodox resistance to Islamisation.

The dissolution of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires after the First World War led to the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (1918), the first unified state to bring these ethnic groups together after centuries of separation. Reconfigured as the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia after the Second World War under the leadership of Josip Broz Tito, the country adopted a federal structure with six republics and two autonomous provinces within Serbia (Vojvodina and Kosovo), delineating the contemporary borders (figure 1).



Figure 1. Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, 25 January 1991

The Titoist period (1945-1980) maintained stability through inter-ethnic balance and a self-managed socialist model. However, after Tito's death, converging factors—economic crisis, the rise of nationalism, institutional weakness, and the Soviet collapse—eroded federal cohesion.

The dissolution process (1991-1992) took divergent paths: while Slovenia and Macedonia achieved independence with low human cost, Croatia and Bosnia suffered devastating conflicts due to the country's complex demographic distribution (figure

2). In Croatia, the war ended with the Erdut Agreements (1995), reintegrating Eastern Slavonia (United Nations, 1995a), the last stronghold of the Serbian Republic of Krajina¹, under UN supervision.



Figure 2. Ethnic groups in the Balkans, 21 April 2018

The Bosnian conflict (1992-1995), which was tri-national and particularly violent—with episodes such as the Srebrenica genocide—culminated in the Dayton Accords (United Nations, 1995b). These established a Bosnian state divided into two entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Croats and Bosniaks) and the Republika Srpska (Serbs), with a tripartite system of government and international supervision by the High Representative. This institutional architecture, although pacifying, has perpetuated ethnic tensions.

The Kosovo War (1999) marked another turning point in the Balkans, when the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) rose up against the government of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro), leading to allegations of massive human rights violations. NATO's military intervention—without authorisation from the UN Security Council—set a critical precedent in international law (OTAN, 2024). This conflict culminated in Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence (2008), recognised by the United States and most NATO members, but rejected by China and Russia, which insist on Serbia's territorial integrity.

Structural tensions persist: Belgrade maintains its resentment towards NATO (Miolesovich, 2019) and is strengthening ties with Moscow, while Albanian Kosovars feel insecure in the face of possible Serbian aggression, especially in northern Kosovo (El Grand Continent, 2024), which has a Serbian Kosovar majority. This dynamic has prompted a military alliance between Kosovo, Albania and Croatia (Koha, 2025a),

¹ The Republic of Serbian Krajina was a territory self-proclaimed by Serbs in Croatia in 1991, following Croatia's declaration of independence. It was not recognised internationally and was dismantled militarily in 1995 during Operation Storm.

interpreted as an 'anti-Serbia' bloc. As a counterweight, Serbia has signed a military cooperation agreement with Hungary, whose government, led by Viktor Orbán (Infobae, 2025a), combines EU/NATO membership with alignment with Russia.

The situation is further complicated by the involvement of the Republika Srpska, whose leadership under Milorad Dodik promotes separatist rhetoric against Sarajevo and seeks to link up with the Serbian-Hungarian alliance (SwissInfo, 2025a). Thus, the unresolved conflicts in Kosovo and Bosnia are intertwined, reactivating historical fractures and threatening regional stability.

1.2 Central question

Does the consolidation of antagonistic military blocs in the Balkans—with the influence of external actors such as Russia and NATO—increase the risk of armed conflict in the region, in a context of unresolved tensions in Kosovo and the Republika Srpska?

1.3 Hypothesis

The formation of opposing military blocs in the Balkans, with the support of external actors, increases the possibility of violent escalation in the Balkans due to unresolved historical tensions.

1.4 Justification

Recent alliances in the Balkans are reactivating classic power balance dynamics in a region marked by deep historical fractures. In this context, the participation of actors with divergent interests—such as Hungary, a member state of the European Union and NATO but politically aligned with Serbia—introduces a new level of geopolitical complexity that challenges traditional structures of regional cooperation and security. However, despite the relevance of this phenomenon, there remains a notable absence of studies analysing this particular configuration from the perspective of contemporary security theories, which justifies the relevance and originality of this work.

1.5 Research questions

- How do balance of power and regional security theories explain the formation of these blocs?
- To what extent does this case represent a conflict in a 'grey zone'?
- What strategic objectives are the Balkan countries involved pursuing by consolidating opposing military blocs?
- How does Hungary's duality (EU/NATO, but pro-Russian) and the role of the Republika Srpska influence the escalation of tensions?

- What containment mechanisms could mitigate the risk of conflict?
- What are the critical scenarios where tensions are most latent?

1.6 Objectives of the article

- To assess the impact of emerging military alliances on Balkan stability, considering historical variables, external actors and theories of international relations.
- To examine the strategic motivations of the actors involved.
- To identify the limits of current containment mechanisms.
- Propose crisis management scenarios based on empirical evidence.

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Balance of power

The *balance of power* theory is one of the central theoretical foundations of international relations. It posits that states act to prevent the hegemonic domination of one actor by forming compensatory alliances, thus generating systemic tensions when the distribution of power becomes unbalanced (Waltz, 1979).

From a historical perspective, Thucydides (431 BC) identified this pattern in *History of the Peloponnesian War*, arguing that the conflict arose from Spartan fear of Athenian rise. Centuries later, neo-realist theorists such as Kenneth Waltz (1979) reformulated the concept, emphasising that the anarchy of the international system forces states to seek rational balances of power to ensure their survival (Waltz, 1979: p. 88).

The current situation in the Balkans accurately illustrates these postulates. Following Waltz, Kosovo—faced with the Serbian threat—has allied itself with Croatia (interested in stabilising Bosnia) and Albania, forming a pro-NATO bloc. At the same time, Hungary, despite its NATO membership, prioritises national and ideological interests over transatlantic cohesion, aligning itself tactically with Serbia (Thucydides, 2014: v. 89). This dynamic confirms the fluidity of alliances in anarchic contexts.

In structural terms, NATO operates as a regional hegemonic power, but its influence generates counter-alliances such as the Serbia-Republika Srpska-Russia axis. Thus, the Balkans replicate the classic cycle of equilibrium described by theory: accumulation of power, formation of coalitions and resulting tensions.

2.2 Grey Zone

The concept of the grey zone describes the strategic space between peace and war where state and non-state actors compete using ambiguous tactics (Mazarr, 2015: p. 12). This framework is particularly relevant for analysing the Balkans, where

Serbia and its counterparts employ strategies that avoid open conflict but perpetuate instability.

Serbia officially rejects the recognition of Kosovo, but exerts influence in the Serb-majority north through parallel structures and calculated mobilisations. An emblematic example was the deployment of Serbian troops near the Kosovar border in 2023, following protests against the installation of Albanian Kosovar mayors in northern municipalities (Cué, 2023) (Mazarr, 2015: p. 45 ‘actors in the grey zone seek to deny responsibility while achieving strategic objectives’).

Hungary, a NATO member but aligned with Serbian interests, illustrates the fluidity of the grey zone. Although it avoids direct military operations, its economic cooperation with Belgrade—such as the agreement to build a bilateral oil pipeline (Daily News Hungary, 2025a)—serves as a lever of influence (Mazarr, 2015: p. 67: ‘economy and diplomacy replace military force in liminal conflicts’).

Milorad Dodik’s separatist rhetoric in the Republika Srpska (Ozturk, 2025) intensifies regional fragility, showing how the boundaries between war and peace are blurring. The combination of tensions in northern Kosovo and Bosnia reflects the risk of inadvertent escalation that Mazarr (2015, p. 89) warns about: ‘the grey zone can collapse abruptly into open conflict if actors exceed critical thresholds’.

The Balkans embody Mazarr’s postulates about the grey zone, where calculated ambiguity, contradictory alliances and non-military tools define a strategic competition that threatens to destabilise the region.

2.3 Complex interdependence theory

The theory of complex interdependence (Keohane and Nye, 1977) posits that transnational economic, diplomatic, and social connections moderate—without eliminating—geopolitical conflicts. This framework explains key dynamics in the Balkans.

Among its characteristics are the existence of multiple channels of interaction between states and actors. (Keohane and Nye, 1977: pp. 23-25) Serbia is critically dependent on the EU (which accounts for 64% of its exports) (OEC, 2023a), including paradoxical trade relations with rival actors: in 2023, it imported goods worth USD 1.27 billion from Croatia (3.11% of its total), while Zagreb depended on Belgrade for 2.7% of its imports (USD 1.17 billion) (OEC, 2023b).

Likewise, the European Union has recently institutionalised this framework of interdependence through the ‘Growth Plan for the Western Balkans’, announced by the Commission on 8 November 2023 (European Commission, 2023a). This instrument, with a budget of €6 billion, goes beyond the mere objective of economic development by establishing explicit political conditionality that links financial assistance to the maintenance of regional stability and constructive cooperation with the EU and neighbouring countries (European Commission, 2023a).

In this way, the Plan stands as a powerful mechanism of geopolitical containment, where economic asymmetries are instrumentalised to raise the costs of any destabilising

action by actors such as Serbia. These structured and politicised interdependencies ultimately create prohibitive opportunity costs that discourage military escalation and reinforce a fragile but persistent regional balance.

On the other hand, Keohane and Nye (1977: p. 29) point out that, in contexts of complex interdependence, international agendas are not hierarchical and high and low politics are intertwined, blurring the boundaries between domestic and foreign policy. In the Balkans, both Serbia—an official candidate for EU membership—and Kosovo—a potential aspirant (Vozpópuli, 2025)—subordinate their territorial tensions to their European integration objectives, revealing a strategic prioritisation of economic and institutional legitimacy over security confrontation.

Belgrade instrumentalises the issue of Serbian minorities in Kosovo and Bosnia as a mechanism for electoral mobilisation, while projecting a narrative of technical compliance towards Brussels in order to maintain aid flows and negotiations. In turn, Hungary aligns its foreign policy with Serbia not only because of ideological affinities, but also to reinforce its discursive sovereignty *vis-à-vis* the EU and consolidate an alternative illiberal axis within the Euro-Atlantic framework.

This logic translates into a symbiosis between domestic politics and strategic diplomacy, where actors seek to maximise domestic benefits without completely abandoning European structures, thus creating an environment of contained competition rather than open rupture.

However, the most relevant feature in the Balkan context is the marginalisation of military force as a primary political tool. Although high-tension crises persist—such as the Serbian mobilisations on the border with Kosovo in 2023 (DW, 2024)—widespread violence does not materialise. This can be explained not only by economic and diplomatic pressure from the EU and the US, which raises the costs of open conflict (Keohane and Nye, 1977), but also by the deterrent effect of the international security missions deployed on the ground.

The continued presence of KFOR in Kosovo and EUFOR Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina acts as a physical guarantor of the *status quo*, materialising the Euro-Atlantic commitment to block any military escalation. These missions are the operational embodiment of security interdependence, becoming a structural factor that channels tensions towards containment and diplomacy rather than armed confrontation.

The Balkans exemplify how complex interdependence stabilises but does not resolve conflicts. As Keohane and Nye (1977) point out, this creates a fragile balance where actors prioritise economic interests over territorial maximalism.

3 Analysis of alliances

3.1 Kosovo – Albania – Croatia: Collective defence or provocation?

Northern Kosovo, shown in figure 3, comprises the municipalities of Leposavić, Zvečan, Zubin Potok and North Mitrovica, and is the epicentre of the territorial

dispute with Serbia. This enclave, with a Serb-Kosovar majority, responds in a particularly confrontational manner to the regulatory provisions issued by Pristina. An illustrative case was the so-called 'licence plate crisis': between September and October 2021, Kosovo banned Serbian licence plates and deployed special forces at border crossings, leading to blockades and demonstrations (Infobae, 2021) that only ceased after mediation by the European Union.



Figure 3. Serb-majority regions in Kosovo, 15 June 2015

The truce proved short-lived. On 1 August 2022, Serbian number plates expired in Kosovar territory, reigniting protests. Tensions escalated in May 2023, when the Serb-Kosovar population boycotted the municipal elections organised by Pristina (Peregil, 2023) and clashes broke out, leaving dozens of protesters and KFOR troops injured. The refusal to participate in the elections reflected the community's rejection of what it perceives as unilateral impositions that threaten its identity and its ties to Belgrade.

The spiral of violence reached a critical point on 24 September 2023 with the Banjska incident: a Serb Kosovar commando attacked the Kosovar police, killing one officer and three Serbs (EFE, 2021). The situation worsened despite the provisional agreement on mutual recognition of number plates concluded eleven months earlier (Ozturk, 2024). In November 2024, an explosion in a strategic canal damaged water facilities essential to Pristina; the attack was attributed to Serbian militants and classified as terrorism (Reuters, 2024). Each event reinforces the perception of mutual insecurity and highlights the fragility of mediation mechanisms.

Faced with this dynamic, Kosovo lacks sufficient military capacity to balance Serbia and therefore prioritises external guarantees. On 18 March 2025, Tirana hosted the signing of a defence cooperation agreement between Albania, Croatia and Kosovo, interpreted by regional analysts as an alliance aimed at deterring Serbia (SwissInfo,

2025b). For Pristina, the pact has three objectives: to raise the cost of any Serbian coercion, to place its security issues on the Euro-Atlantic agenda, and to strengthen its state legitimacy by creating formal coalitions.

Albania's participation is explained, above all, by identity considerations. Tirana has historically set itself up as the protector of the Albanian diaspora based in Kosovo and North Macedonia. From a nation-state perspective, the Albanian government gains internal political capital by projecting leadership over vulnerable Albanian-speaking communities. However, its motivations are not exclusively symbolic. The Albanian Deputy Prime Minister has described the Durrës-Pristina railway as a geopolitical link that will connect Pan-European corridors VIII, X and Adriatic-Ionian (Koha, 2025b), transforming Durrës into a regional logistics hub. Such infrastructure would cement the interdependence between Tirana and Pristina and give Albania a strategic role in Balkan trade.

At the same time, Albania aspires to establish itself as a NATO operational platform in the eastern Adriatic. The modernisation of the Kuçovë air base under Allied command, located some two hundred kilometres from Camp Bondsteel (the main US facility in Kosovo), allows for rapid projections and logistical synergies between the two facilities (Santos, 2022). The new trilateral agreement reinforces this Atlantic narrative and positions Tirana as an indispensable security actor in south-eastern Europe.

As for Croatia, its alignment is based on a dual identity-strategic calculation. On the one hand, Zagreb sees itself as the guarantor of the Croatian minority in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The close relationship between Belgrade and the Republika Srpska, whose leader Milorad Dodik promotes secessionist rhetoric, threatens the Dayton Accords (1995) and, by extension, the stability of Croatia's south-eastern border. By supporting a coalition that limits Serbia's influence, Croatia seeks to safeguard the *status quo* in Bosnia and Herzegovina and protect its compatriots.

On the other hand, Croatia maintains a structural rivalry with Serbia for symbolic and strategic primacy in the Western Balkans. As a full member of the EU and NATO, Zagreb positions itself as a bastion of the Euro-Atlantic axis, projecting normative stability and alignment with Western institutions. In contrast, Belgrade promotes a policy of 'active non-alignment', combining European aspirations with growing energy and military ties with Moscow. The rapprochement with Kosovo and Albania allows Croatia to reinforce its pro-Western profile, while at the same time providing an explicit counterweight to the geopolitical convergence between Serbia and Russia.

Added to this dynamic is the still unresolved border dispute over a 137-kilometre stretch along the Danube. Croatia claims that the delimitation established by an Austro-Hungarian cartographic survey in 1891 is valid, while Serbia defends the current river course. This divergence creates areas of dispute that hinder bilateral trust-building (Bickl, 2021) and contribute to maintaining a backdrop of persistent friction, even in the context of formal cooperation.

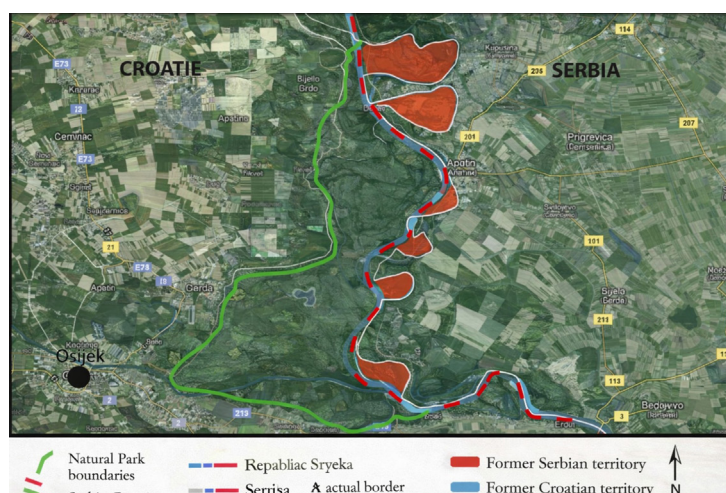


Figure 4. Croatia-Serbia border dispute, 2011

The Tirana-Zagreb-Pristina agreement thus illustrates the ‘complex interdependence’ described by Keohane and Nye: no single issue prevails absolutely over the others, and the distinction between domestic and foreign policy is blurred. Military motivations coexist with identity, logistical and normative variables; the protection of diasporas, the articulation of economic corridors and the framework within Euro-Atlantic organisations influence as much as classic deterrence. At the same time, governments instrumentalise domestic demands—whether the security of Serbs in Kosovo, the protection of Albanians in the diaspora or the defence of Croats in Bosnia—to legitimise foreign policy decisions.

For the European Union, these dynamics pose a dilemma. Enlargement remains Brussels’ main lever, but its credibility is eroded by the slowness of the process and competition from external powers. As long as the EU cannot offer tangible incentives that reduce the perception of threat, local actors will tend to seek alternative security guarantees or forge *ad hoc* coalitions.

In short, the Croatia-Albania-Kosovo alliance should not be interpreted as a mere classic military pact, but as the manifestation of a web of interests where identity, geo-economics and institutional positioning converge. Its effectiveness will depend on the partners’ ability to balance national ambitions with cooperative commitments and, above all, on the evolution of the Belgrade-Pristina relationship.

3.2 Serbia – Hungary and Slovakia?: A dissident axis within the European Union

In March 2025, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán banned the LGBT Pride march in Budapest, invoking recent legislation restricting the ‘promotion’ of sexual diversity to minors, a regulation inspired by the conservative agenda of the Russian Federation (Nagy, 2025). Far from demobilising activists, the measure had the opposite effect: more than 200,000 people took part in the demonstration despite official threats (Aljazeera, 2025). Such state intervention cannot be interpreted solely as domestic policy; it also serves as an ideological marker that projects Hungary’s adherence to an illiberal and national-conservative discourse to the outside world.

Restrictions on adoption by same-sex couples, the veto on school content on gender identity and the rhetoric of the traditional family are presented by Budapest as a defence of cultural sovereignty against ‘impositions from Brussels’, a discursive framework almost identical to that used by Vladimir Putin to accuse the European Union of moral decadence (Bayoud, 2022).

This convergence of values is reinforced by the personal cordiality between Orbán and the Russian president, evident in successive bilateral meetings and Hungary’s refusal to support full sanctions against Moscow (Grippo, 2024). Thus, civil rights policy becomes an instrument of symbolic alignment with the Kremlin, giving Hungary a unique profile within NATO and the EU.

In Serbia’s case, convergence with Russia is even more explicit. Memories of the NATO bombings in 1999 and the perception that the West supports Kosovo’s independence continue to shape public opinion. Even though the European Union is its largest trading partner, Belgrade has prioritised its strategic alliance with Moscow: it refused to join the sanctions against Russia following the invasion of Ukraine, despite the fact that this decision hinders its EU accession bid (Infobae, 2024). In this context, Serbian identity is articulated around a narrative of historical grievance and Slavic solidarity that favours alignment with the Kremlin.

The political-military rapprochement between Budapest and Belgrade crystallised on 1 April 2025 with the signing of a cooperation agreement (Peirano, 2025). This agreement outlines plans for seventy-nine joint activities in 2025 in the military and energy fields (Stojanovic, 2025). The pact was interpreted as a direct response to the alliance announced weeks earlier by Croatia, Albania and Kosovo—three actors clearly aligned with NATO and the United States—and thus constitutes the second major subregional coalition created in the Balkans in less than a month. From the Hungarian-Serbian perspective, the new bilateral framework aims to guarantee the stability of their respective national minorities and strengthen strategic autonomy in the face of pressure from Brussels and Washington.

The economic aspect of the relationship is equally significant. In 2023, Hungary consolidated its position as the third largest destination for Serbian exports, absorbing 5.72% of the total (OEC, 2023a). Among the main items is electricity, an area in which Serbia is one of the key suppliers to the Hungarian energy system (OEC, 2023c).

Both governments are also promoting interconnection projects that will increase the degree of mutual dependence: the construction of a bidirectional oil pipeline to guarantee fuel supplies to Serbia, scheduled for 2027 (Daily News Hungary, 2025b), and the modernisation—financed in part by Chinese capital—of the Budapest-Belgrade railway line, which is scheduled for completion by the end of 2025 (Daily News Hungary, 2025c). These infrastructures create *faits accomplis* that anchor Hungary within Serbia’s economic orbit in the energy and logistics sectors.

The equation could be complicated by Slovakia’s hypothetical entry. Members of the Serbian Parliament have confirmed talks aimed at Bratislava’s accession to the defence agreement (Gardner, 2025). Of particular note is the intervention of Serbian MP Dragan Stanojević, a member of the People’s Voice party, who, from an openly

pro-Russian position, has alluded to the possible incorporation of Slovakia into the Belgrade-Budapest cooperation axis. However, so far the Slovak authorities have not issued any official statement on the matter (Mlakar, 2025).

In any case, the shift is plausible given the positions of Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, who is openly critical of sanctions against Russia and inclined towards a pragmatic foreign policy that reduces military assistance to Ukraine. Fico was, in fact, the only EU head of government to attend the Victory Day parade in Moscow (Brezar, 2025). The progressive political alignment between Hungary, Slovakia and Serbia was evident during the summit held in Komarno in October 2024, at which the heads of state of the three countries reaffirmed their commitment to cooperation on controlling irregular migration and jointly protecting Europe's external borders (TVPWorld, 2024).

There are, therefore, two possible interpretations of the ultimate purpose of the alliance. The first conceives it as an anti-EU sovereignty project: the three governments would use the discourse of a 'Europe of nations' to resist EU federalism and revalue state powers without necessarily seeking direct dependence on Moscow.

The second argues that the axis constitutes, *de facto*, a vector of rapprochement with Russia, aimed at eroding the Western liberal order and reconfiguring loyalties within the EU and NATO. The two frameworks are not mutually exclusive; rather, they feed into each other in practice: the rejection of European centralisation favours the opening up of a space where Russian influence encounters less regulatory resistance.

The rift is already apparent in forums such as the Visegrad Group. Poland and the Czech Republic, which favour a hard line against Moscow, are distancing themselves from Hungary and Slovakia, which advocate negotiations and the gradual lifting of sanctions (Bugajski, 2025). The result is the paralysis of the Central European coordination mechanism, with direct implications for the EU's common security and defence policy.

Beyond the internal consequences, the Hungarian-Serbian alliance raises serious questions about NATO's cohesion. Never before has a member state (Hungary) signed a military pact that is presented as a counterweight to another bloc involving two Atlantic allies (Croatia and Albania). The risk is a form of 'neutralisation from within', in which Budapest could veto collective responses to crises in the Balkans if it perceives that such actions would run counter to its commitments to Belgrade. Slovakia would add another potential blocking voice in the North Atlantic Council, complicating the development of regional contingency plans.

In short, the April 2025 military agreement and the hypothetical enlargement to Bratislava outline a new Central European axis which, without declaring itself an enemy of the West, challenges its principles from within. By invoking cultural sovereignty and resistance to Brussels' 'ingratitude', Belgrade, Budapest, and potentially Bratislava are creating a parallel architecture that hinders unified EU action and threatens to introduce systemic vetoes in NATO. Understanding the hybrid nature—ideological, economic and strategic—of this alignment is essential to assessing its capacity to reshape the balance of power in the Balkans and, by extension, Euro-Atlantic security.

3.3 *Republika Srpska: Catalyst for conflict?*

The growing separatism of the Republika Srpska (RS), led by Milorad Dodik, constitutes the most imminent threat to the peace architecture that has governed Bosnia and Herzegovina since the signing of the Dayton Accords in 1995. Although successful in stopping the violence, these agreements created an extraordinarily complex state framework that was vulnerable to capture by ethnic elites. In 1998, Dodik became head of the RS government with the explicit backing of Washington and Brussels, projecting himself as a moderate reformer committed to the post-war order; the international community consequently saw him as a suitable partner for consolidating peace (McAdams, 1998).

However, during his second term in office, which began in 2006, he moved from conciliatory rhetoric to openly questioning the constitutional framework, invoking the RS's 'right' to call a referendum on independence and gradually turning this secessionist cause into the pillar of his internal legitimacy (Traynor, 2011).

The strategic shift was formalised in 2015, when Dodik's Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) passed a resolution setting 2018 as the deadline for proclaiming independence if the entity considered that Sarajevo continued to restrict its powers (Zuvela, 2015).

Since then, secession has become *de facto* official policy of the ruling party. Just one year later, Dodik organised a referendum—consultative in nature, but symbolically powerful—on the establishment of 'Republika Srpska Day', with 98.81% support (Quesada, 2016). This referendum represented the first direct challenge to the legal authority of the Bosnian state and demonstrated the effectiveness of plebiscites as a tool for mobilising identity.

In 2017, now as president of the RS, Dodik issued a decree banning the teaching of the Srebrenica massacre in public school curricula (Reuters, 2017). This measure, seen by many analysts as an attempt to rewrite collective memory, seeks to reinforce an autonomous Serb-Bosnian national identity and, at the same time, relativise the moral legitimacy of central institutions.

The next milestone came in December 2021, when the RS Assembly voted to gradually withdraw three key pillars of the common state—the judicial system, the army, and the tax administration (Sito-Sucic, 2021). This vote was the first concrete legislative step towards dismantling the federal structure and called into question the practical viability of the Dayton model.

Dodik's rise continued unabated: in November 2022, he was re-elected president of the RS, and in January 2023, he decorated Vladimir Putin during the 'RS Day' celebrations (ApNews, 2023a). The gesture was an unequivocal sign of strategic alignment with Moscow and linked the local secessionist agenda with Russian geopolitical interests in the Balkans.

Faced with this dynamic, the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina resorted to his 'Bonn powers' and revoked several laws adopted by the RS on the grounds that they were contrary to the Dayton Agreement (Sito-Sucic, 2021), recalling

that the Constitution does not provide for any mechanism for unilateral secession. In 2024, the Bosnian State Court opened criminal proceedings against Dodik for repeated contempt of central institutions (ApNews, 2023b), thus bringing to trial a conflict that until then had been essentially political.

Tensions reached their peak in April 2025, when RS police units blocked a state operation to execute the arrest warrant against Dodik in the vicinity of Sarajevo (ApNews, 2025). For many observers, this was the moment of greatest risk of direct violence since 1995, as it highlighted the existence of rival security forces within the same sovereign territory. Since then, the stability of the state has been perceived as contingent, subject to the ability of the international community—and the EUFOR mission—to contain possible outbreaks of violence.

The RS conflict is intertwined with the Kosovar question and the formation of a revisionist Belgrade–Budapest axis. Dodik has declared his intention to integrate the entity into the political and, eventually, military convergence between Serbia and Hungary (SwissInfo, 2025c). At the same time, he has strengthened his personal ties with Putin through frequent visits to the Kremlin and public statements hinting that Russia could offer him political asylum if legal action against him is successful (Infobae, 2025b). Such links project the idea that the RS acts as a hub in a network of alliances that challenges Euro-Atlantic influence in south-eastern Europe.

Hungary and Serbia have reinforced this support structure. Despite the arrest warrant issued in Bosnia, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán sent an official invitation to Dodik to visit Budapest (Hetzmann, 2025), giving him visibility and diplomatic legitimacy. Shortly afterwards, the Bosnian Serb leader appeared at a campaign rally alongside Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, demonstrating the strategic harmony between the two leaders (ANSA Latina, 2025). This increasingly explicit triple convergence erodes the coherence of the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy and exposes Brussels' limitations in imposing unified sanctions on actors who enjoy the protection of a Member State.

The pattern that emerges from Dodik's trajectory is one of calculated escalation: he combines internal regulatory production — capable of stripping federal institutions of their powers — with historical revisionism that shapes the narrative in schools and the media, and with external alliances that provide political, diplomatic and, potentially, financial support. Although secessionist rhetoric began as an electoral tactic, since 2015 it has become a geopolitical tool with three converging functions: consolidating the SNSD's domestic power, keeping Sarajevo in a state of permanent crisis and offering Moscow a vector of influence in the Balkans.

For the Kremlin, the situation offers an asymmetric benefit: without the need to deploy troops, Russia can exploit Bosnia's institutional weakness and divert the attention of NATO and the EU at a time when both are focused on Ukraine and the north-eastern flank. Following the logic applied in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Moscow supports a local actor who invokes self-determination, denies its own direct interference and reserves the right to provide diplomatic or energy support when it considers it strategic.

At the same time, Hungary acts as an internal spoiler within the Union, blocking sanctions initiatives and projecting a narrative that depicts Dodik as a victim of political persecution. The European Commission has warned, however, that the actions of the RS are hindering Bosnia and Herzegovina's accession process and undermining regional stability (Europa Press, 2025).

In short, the evolution of the Republika Srpska is in line with Russia's strategy of opening up 'micro-fractures' on the Euro-Atlantic periphery, but it also responds to the convergence of interests of local (Dodik), regional (Serbia and Hungary) and external (Russia) actors. Therefore, RS separatism should be interpreted less as a unilateral imposition by the Kremlin and more as the result of a shared geopolitical articulation, the persistence of which threatens to reactivate ethnic fault lines and impose a new focus of military and diplomatic attention on the EU and NATO in the Western Balkans.

4. Conflict scenarios and containment factors

Although there is no open armed conflict in the Balkans today, the region remains immersed in a logic of 'post-military conflict and pre-political conflict', particularly visible in two hotspots: Northern Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

4.1 Northern Kosovo

Serbian and Kosovar state structures coexist in Northern Kosovo. Belgrade has never recognised Kosovo's independence and maintains direct influence over the Serb-majority municipalities—Leposavić, Zvečan, Zubin Potok, North Mitrovica, Štrpce, Klokot, Gračanica, Novo Brdo, Ranilug and Parteš—grouped together in the planned Community of Serbian Municipalities (figure 5). Under the 2013 Brussels Agreements, Serbia retains parallel institutions in the area (The Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2013).



Figure 5. Map of the Community of Serbian Municipalities in Kosovo, according to the 2013 Brussels Agreements, 2025

The overlap of sovereignty is more pronounced in the four municipalities in the far north, adjacent to Serbian territory. There, Belgrade maintains a parallel administration thanks to local support and the reluctance of the Serbian population to fully integrate into the Kosovar system. This institutional duality generates political, identity and security tensions, as discussed in previous sections.

In this context, Serbia has mobilised military contingents on the border on several occasions. Added to this is the presence of nationalist paramilitary groups, such as Civilna Zaštita and Severna Brigada, which are classified as terrorist organisations by the Kosovar authorities (Bytyci, 2023). The resulting situation is a breeding ground for armed incidents between Pristina and pro-Serbian actors, which are likely to provoke further deployments of Serbian troops on the grounds of protecting their compatriots.

The *status quo* is therefore difficult to sustain. Without effective reintegration or formal partition, friction will persist. However, the hypothetical territorial swap—North Kosovo to Serbia and the Albanian-majority Preševo Valley to Kosovo—is unfeasible for economic reasons and due to water and energy security concerns.

Indeed, Lake Gazivoda, located entirely in Northern Kosovo, supplies a significant percentage of the country's drinking water (Sánchez, 2015) and cools the Obilić thermal power plant, which is primarily responsible for national electricity generation (France24, 2018). For this reason, authorities such as Prime Minister Albin Kurti have reiterated that the division of Gazivoda is non-negotiable (Kossev, 2025). Mutual recognition, therefore, seems unlikely in the short term.

4.2 *Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska*

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the source of instability is Milorad Dodik's separatist rhetoric. The RS's gradual withdrawal from state military, judicial and fiscal structures, which began in 2021, is eroding the federal framework and could result in Sarajevo losing effective territorial control.

Although regional support for Dodik's project and the European Union's position have been analysed, it is worth considering the role of the United States. As the main player in NATO, Washington led the air campaign against Belgrade and was one of the first to recognise Kosovo's independence. Since then, US diplomacy has systematically leaned towards Albanian positions over Serbian ones. However, the arrival of Donald Trump introduced a degree of ambiguity: his business interests span both Serbia and Albania, and his inner circle exhibits divergent positions.

On 8 March, Secretary of State Marco Rubio condemned Dodik's actions on social media for threatening regional security. In contrast, Rudy Giuliani, a businessman close to Trump, visited Banja Luka and wore a cap with the slogan 'Make Srpska Great Again' during a speech (Rhotert, 2025). The US position is therefore ambivalent.

On the other hand, an institutional contagion effect cannot be ruled out: the Bosnian Croats, who constitute a minority within the Federation of Bosnia and

Herzegovina (figure 6), already proclaimed the Croatian Republic of Herzeg-Bosnia during the war (1992-1995), a self-declared entity that was later dissolved under the Dayton Accords. However, demands for autonomy persist within this community, reactivating secessionist sentiments and calling into question the current federal architecture.



Figure 6. Map of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina 15 January 2023

Bosnian Croat nationalists argue that the Bosniak majority in the Federation marginalises them politically (SwissInfo, 2022). The Croatian National Assembly (HNS) has warned that it will promote its own autonomy if the electoral law is not reformed (Reuters, 2022). Although the Croatian proposal officially aims at greater autonomy and not secession, it shares with the RS strategy the tactic of invoking the creation of a new entity to gain influence or press for reforms, adding instability to the Balkan mosaic.

In short, the two flashpoints—Northern Kosovo and the threat of Bosnian fragmentation—are interconnected by a network of competitive alliances that make the area a veritable grey zone. Serbia projects its power in northern Kosovo and supports Banja Luka to expand its cross-border influence. Hungary, as an internal spoiler within the EU, offers diplomatic cover and blocks sanctions, while Moscow uses the Balkan chessboard as leverage to pressure the EU and NATO.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Croatia, Albania and Kosovo converge on common interests, tacitly endorsed by KFOR and the EU's civilian dimension. Zagreb could exploit Bosnian Croat discontent to counterbalance Serbian expansion, while Tirana and Pristina seek to avoid a partition that would take Gazivoda away from them and alter the border *status quo*.

Under this scheme of cross-alliances, a localised outbreak—a confrontation in Leposavić or the collapse of the Bosnian judicial system—could trigger reputational commitments. Belgrade would be forced to defend its co-religionists; Zagreb and

Tirana would try to prevent territorial changes; Budapest, a member of the EU and NATO, would complicate a Western consensus.

Thus, latent crises today could metamorphose into interconnected conflict, recalling that in the Balkans a local spark already triggered the First World War. Regional stability will depend on the ability of the European Union and NATO to maintain credible deterrence and channel disputes into negotiating frameworks that prevent the escalation of these opposing alliances, an issue that will be addressed in the following section.

4.3 *Containment factors*

Although the flashpoints of tension in Northern Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina are approaching critical thresholds, it is worth emphasising the continued existence of a network of containment mechanisms. Stability in the Balkans does not rest solely on the will of local actors, but on a multi-level deterrence architecture that combines European diplomacy, economic interdependence and strategic military presence. Rather than the absence of open hostilities, the region is sustained by a dynamic of ‘monitored containment’.

The European Union (EU) has played the role of principal facilitator of dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo since the signing of the Brussels Agreements in 2013. Within this framework, agreement was reached, among other things, on the creation of the Association of Serbian Municipalities (ASM), the incorporation of Serbian police structures in northern Kosovo under the jurisdiction of the Kosovar Ministry of the Interior—with a Serbian regional commander—Serbia’s de facto recognition of Kosovar institutions in that region, and a mutual commitment not to block each other’s European integration processes (United Nations, 2013).

The Brussels Agreement placed Serbia in a more favourable position to advance in the accession negotiations, a process it entered as a candidate country in 2009 (Martínez, 2009). Similarly, the prospect of EU membership is the main normative incentive for Bosnia and Herzegovina, an official candidate since 2016 (Europa Press, 2016), and for Kosovo, which submitted its formal application in 2022 (Zemenko, 2022). It is clear that none of these states will be able to complete the accession process while territorial disputes and political instability persist.

The EU has also played a direct role in crisis containment. Following the shooting in Banjska in September 2023, Brussels sent Special Representative Miroslav Lajčák, whose mediation helped to defuse the warmongering rhetoric in Belgrade and Pristina and re-establish the logic of immediate dialogue (Bajrami and Semini, 2023).

In 2023, a new normalisation agreement, known as the Ohrid Plan, was also reached, whereby the parties agreed to mutually recognise official documents, committed not to block each other in international forums, and agreed to cooperate on energy and telecommunications (Parlamento Europeo, 2023). All these advances were again led under the auspices of the EU.

Finally, the Union complements its diplomatic action with economic incentives: in 2023, it announced a €6 billion package for the Western Balkans, earmarked for Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia (Comisión Europea, 2023b). In short, the EU is not only a mediator; it constitutes the institutional and regulatory framework within which even the most nationalist actors project their expectations of economic modernisation and legitimise their own political agendas.

4.3.1 Role of the European Union as a structural mediator

Unlike ideological discourses or historical loyalties, macroeconomic indicators reveal an indisputable reality: the European Union is by far the main trading partner, investor and financial donor of Serbia, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This interdependence structures local economies and acts as a silent mechanism of containment against possible conflicts.

In Serbia, more than 70% of foreign direct investment comes from EU Member States, with Germany, Austria and Italy leading the way. Notable examples include the Belgrade-Niš railway corridor, financed by a €2.2 billion package of EU loans and grants (Transport Community, 2023), and the more than €800 million allocated to the modernisation of 190 kilometres of the pan-European motorway that will connect the EU-Aegean axis, consolidating Serbia as a regional logistics hub (WBIF, 2025).

Belgrade's deep integration into EU-sponsored assistance, infrastructure and development mechanisms not only modernises its economy, but also anchors it to EU regulatory standards and continental supply chains. Breaking these ties would entail political and macroeconomic costs that would be difficult to bear, even for a nationalist leadership.

From the perspective of complex interdependence, Serbia's ability to resort to force or escalate violence in Kosovo is constrained by the credible threat that Brussels will delay or reschedule aid flows, which are vital for Serbian growth and fiscal stability.

By contrast, ties with the Russian Federation—despite pan-Slavic affinity, shared Orthodoxy, and a history of support in the Kosovo war—lack a comparable structural economic counterweight. Consequently, the incentives provided by the EU function as a pragmatic safety net: Belgrade can exploit its proximity to Moscow rhetorically, but it is unlikely to risk the financial and regulatory anchorage that binds it to Brussels.

4.3.2 Military deterrence and international presence

In a region historically marked by identity conflicts, porous borders and recent memories of violence, the mere expectation of international military intervention alters the strategic calculations of local actors. Unlike other areas of global tension, the Western Balkans maintain a permanent military presence under multilateral mandates, whose objective is not only to prevent the resumption of hostilities, but also to preserve a minimum *status quo* of stability.

In this context, deterrence is not limited to the physical deployment of force, but is based on the credibility of its use. Both NATO and the European Union play a central role as guarantors of security, not only in military terms, but also in political and symbolic dimensions.

In the case of Kosovo, the *Kosovo Force* (KFOR) mission, a NATO-led multinational force, was deployed on 12 June 1999, two days after the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (United Nations, 1999). It currently consists of approximately 4,500 troops from thirty-three countries (OTAN, 2025) and its mandate focuses on ensuring a secure environment and freedom of movement for all communities in Kosovo.

The possibility of a Serbian military incursion into Kosovar territory is severely limited by the presence of KFOR and its ability to respond immediately to threats to stability. This has been evident on several occasions, such as during the crisis between 2011 and 2013, when KFOR troops intervened in response to Serb-Kosovar protests in the north (RFERL, 2011), or during the incidents of 2023, when Prime Minister Albin Kurti requested additional reinforcements on the border with Serbia (ApNews, 2023c).

Complementing this international presence, the US base at Camp Bondsteel, located near Ferizaj in Kosovar territory, provides an additional element of strategic deterrence. Established in June 1999 following NATO's intervention, this facility operates as a logistics and command centre within the operational framework of the KFOR mission. In September 2022, troops stationed at the base were deployed in tactical exercises in response to the possibility of a deterioration in security in northern Kosovo (Siebold, 2022).

In May 2025, KFOR conducted joint manoeuvres with the United States National Guard (Wajler, 2025), demonstrating effective interoperability between military and civilian components. Camp Bondsteel thus symbolises a cohesive and functional military presence, reinforcing the message to Belgrade that any attempt at escalation would be met with a forceful response from a coalition organised under NATO mandate.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the EUFOR Althea mission acts as guarantor of the implementation of the Dayton Accords. This force originated in 1995 as the Implementation Force (IFOR), established by UN Security Council Resolution 1031 (United Nations, 1995c). During the first months of the post-conflict period, IFOR succeeded in preventing the resumption of hostilities.

In 1996, IFOR was succeeded by the Stabilisation Force (SFOR), created by Resolution 1088 (United Nations, 1996). Its functions included the arrest of war criminals, such as Bosnian Serb General Radislav Krstić, who was detained in December 1998 and handed over to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (IRMCT, 1998), as well as the disarmament of militias and the seizure of illegal arsenals, such as in Han Pijesak in October 2001 (OTAN, 2001).

In 2004, SFOR was replaced by EUFOR Althea under Security Council Resolution 1575 (United Nations, 2004). By that date, a unified Bosnian army had

been established and inter-ethnic violence had decreased considerably. The reduction in troop numbers, from sixty thousand in 1996 to seven thousand in 2004, reflected this development. However, EUFOR continues to operate as a stabilising factor, particularly in the face of signs of separatist tension (EUFOR, 2025).

In this regard, following the ruling against Milorad Dodik, the European Union decided to reinforce EUFOR Althea with four hundred additional troops, anticipating a possible attempt at institutional breakdown or localised unrest (Hajdari, 2025). NATO, for its part, has reiterated its support for this mission in the event of an escalation of tensions (Bne Intellinews, 2025).

In conclusion, military deterrence in the Western Balkans is not merely symbolic, but an active risk management tool. The continuity of missions such as KFOR and EUFOR Althea, together with strategic infrastructure such as Camp Bondsteel, form a multinational network of physical presence and immediate response capability. This security architecture prevents unilateral actions and raises the political and strategic cost of any attempt at escalation, thus preserving a still fragile but functional balance in the region.

5. Conclusions

This article has shown that the relative stability of the Western Balkans is not due to the overcoming of historical tensions, but to the existence of multiple containment mechanisms operating at simultaneous levels. From a theoretical perspective, the logic of the balance of power, the concept of the grey zone and complex interdependence allow us to understand the persistence of antagonistic blocs, as well as the fragility of the regional order.

Empirical analysis revealed two emerging coalitions: the Kosovo–Albania–Croatia axis, oriented towards the Atlantic, and the Serbia–Hungary–Republika Srpska axis, with Eurosceptic leanings and links to Moscow. Although these configurations generate risks of escalation, their open confrontation is mitigated by three key factors: the deterrent power of NATO and the EU (KFOR, EUFOR Althea, Camp Bondsteel), normative and economic pressure from Brussels, and the high costs of disrupting the network of regional interdependencies.

In short, the Balkans continue to inhabit a liminal space between peace and conflict. Preventing a new war depends not so much on reconciliation as on maintaining a multi-level architecture of surveillance, deterrence and external engagement, whose resilience will be key in the face of future outbreaks of tension.

In response to the central question of whether the consolidation of these antagonistic blocs increases the risk of armed conflict, this possibility does exist as it reactivates historical fractures and deepens antagonistic geopolitical alignments, especially in Northern Kosovo and the Republika Srpska.

However, this risk remains contained, but not eradicated, thanks to international military deterrence, regional interdependence and economic pressure from the EU.

Therefore, the hypothesis is partially confirmed: the risk exists and is structural, but its immediate realisation is hampered by an external architecture of containment, which, until now, has prevented open escalation.

Precisely in order to strengthen this precarious balance, it is recommended that a dual approach be reinforced, combining greater economic integration with the European Union and credible but proportionate military deterrence. Firstly, it is a priority to accelerate the tangible benefits of the accession process through visible investments in infrastructure, education and youth employment. These initiatives must be widely disseminated at the local level in order to improve public perception of the EU's role as a legitimate mediator. Linking socio-economic development with regional cooperation can weaken the nationalist narrative and foster a logic of transnational co-responsibility.

Secondly, the secessionist rhetoric of leaders such as Milorad Dodik and recent incidents in North Kosovo highlight the need to strengthen international vigilance and presence, in particular through EUFOR and KFOR, with precise mandates and expanded operational capabilities. However, this presence must be projected as a guarantor of stability and not as an occupying force, in order to avoid fuelling perceptions of grievance.

It is also recommended that formal and second-level diplomatic channels be strengthened, promoting dialogue between communities and political elites. European aid must be linked to the fulfilment of peace commitments, without neglecting the economic sustainability of fragile contexts. Finally, economic interdependence should be used as a stabilising mechanism, promoting cross-border projects that generate reciprocal costs in the event of any escalation, thus anchoring local interests to regional stability.

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