



# BALTIC DEFENCE COLLEGE

BALTDEFCOL Policy Brief

## Caught in the Middle: The Western Balkans' Balancing Act between Russian Interference and Euro-Atlantic Aspirations

Çlirim Toci



Caught in the Middle: The Western Balkans' Balancing Act between Russian Interference and Euro-Atlantic Aspiration. BALTDEFCOL Policy Brief, 2025

COL (ret) Dr Çlirim L. Toci is a Defence Planning and Management lecturer at the Baltic Defence College.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this BALTDEFCOL Policy Brief are the responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Baltic Defence College

© CC-BY-4.0

ISSN 3059-5649 (print)  
ISSN 3059-5657 (pdf)

## Caught in the Middle: The Western Balkans' Balancing Act between Russian Interference and Euro-Atlantic Aspiration

[The Balkans] produce more history than they can consume.  
-Winston Churchill-

### Introduction

The Western Balkans, comprising Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, are located strategically between Europe and the Middle East. Historically, this region has been a battleground for competing influences, from the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires to Cold War rivalries. In the post-Cold War era, the Western Balkans pursued integration into Euro-Atlantic structures as a path to stability and prosperity. However, lingering ties to Russia and unresolved internal challenges have left the region vulnerable to external interference.

Today, the Western Balkans occupy a pivotal geopolitical position as a crossroads between East and West, often referred to as the “*powder keg*.” The region navigates a complex struggle for influence between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic community, represented by the European Union (EU) and NATO. This geopolitical contest underscores the region’s significance in shaping the broader European security architecture. The Russian Federation employs soft and hard power tactics to assert its presence,

The Western Balkans occupy a pivotal geopolitical position as a crossroads between East and West, often referred to as the “*powder keg*”.

leveraging historical ties and energy dependencies to foster political alliances that challenge regional stability.

Meanwhile, the EU and NATO seek to promote democratic governance, economic prosperity, and security through integration efforts. These competing pressures compel Western Balkan nations to balance divergent interests while striving for stability and progress.

While most countries in the region aspire to join the EU and NATO, Russia’s active use of political, economic, and cultural instruments seeks to obstruct these aspirations. The result is a delicate geopolitical environment marked by competing influences, unresolved tensions, and a pressing need for strategic engagement. This paper explores these dynamics and provides actionable recommendations to bolster stability, promote reforms, and align the region more closely with Euro-Atlantic institutions while mitigating external risks.

### Russian Interference in the Western Balkans

The strategy of Russia in the Western Balkans is rooted in leveraging historical, cultural, and economic ties to maintain its influence in the region while actively countering Euro-Atlantic integration. This multifaceted approach encompasses political, economic, informational, and security dimensions, with Russia using each to shape the region's geopolitical landscape to align with its broader strategic objectives.

### Political Influence

The political influence of Russia in the Western Balkans is closely tied to its cultural and religious connections, particularly with Serbia and the Serbian Orthodox Church. Moscow strategically aligns itself with nationalist and pro-Russian political figures to foster instability and maintain its political foothold. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for instance, Russia supports Republika Srpska and its leader, Milorad Dodik, deepening ethnic divisions and undermining the central government's stability.<sup>1</sup> Dodik regularly engages with President Putin to secure economic and political support, positioning Moscow as a vital ally in countering Western pressures and promoting greater autonomy within Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>2</sup>

The Western Balkans: Russia leverages historical, cultural and economic ties to maintain influence and counter Euro-Atlantic integration.

Moreover, the influence of Russia extends beyond Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, with pro-Russian sentiments emerging in countries like Montenegro and North Macedonia, further complicating regional unity. In Montenegro, Russia has employed a

range of tactics, including disinformation campaigns and support for pro-Russian political platforms, to influence public perception and destabilise the political landscape.<sup>3</sup> For instance, media outlets like IN4S play a significant role in spreading pro-Russian narratives and disinformation, which undermines Montenegro's Euro-Atlantic orientation.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, in North Macedonia, Russia has leveraged historical and cultural ties to foster pro-Russian sentiments. During North Macedonia's NATO accession process, Russia orchestrated disinformation campaigns and covert operations to oppose the integration.<sup>5</sup> These efforts have created a persistent undercurrent of scepticism towards the EU and NATO among specific population segments.

By fostering these alliances and exploiting regional vulnerabilities, Russia ensures that these states remain hesitant about pursuing deeper integration with the EU and NATO. This strategy complicates regional unity and serves Moscow's broader goal of weakening Euro-Atlantic institutions.

### Economic Footholds

The economic influence of Russia in the Western Balkans extends beyond energy, with significant investments in various sectors. Energy dependence remains a cornerstone of this influence, as countries like Serbia rely heavily on Russian gas, rendering them vulnerable to coercion. Russian energy giants, such as Gazprom

<sup>1</sup> Bechev, D. *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe*, Yale University Press, 2017, p.78.

<sup>2</sup> Hoxhaj, A. "Opinion: Mounting tension and instability in the Western Balkans is playing into Russia's hands", *UCL News*, 17 April 2024. <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2024/apr/opinion-mounting-tension-and-instability-western-balkans-playing-russias-hands>.

<sup>3</sup> Orhan, B. "The Balkans at Risk: Confronting Russia's Malignant Influence Before It's Too Late", International Security Institute, 09 September 2024, [https://orhandragas.com/en/2024/09/09/the-balkans-at-risk-confronting-russias-malignant-influence-before-its-too-late/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://orhandragas.com/en/2024/09/09/the-balkans-at-risk-confronting-russias-malignant-influence-before-its-too-late/?utm_source=chatgpt.com).

<sup>4</sup> Rancy, A. "The Struggle Against Authoritarian Influence in the Western Balkans: Montenegro as a Test Case National Endowment for Democracy", 31 July 2024. <https://www.ned.org/the-struggle-against-authoritarian-influence-in-the-western-balkans-montenegro-as-a-test-case/>.

<sup>5</sup> Zweers, W. "Russian Source of Influence in Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina", Clingendael Report August 2023. <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2023/little-substance-considerable-impact/russian-sources-of-influence-in-serbia-montenegro-and-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>.

and Lukoil, maintain a strong presence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia. The Balkan section of the TurkStream pipeline, supplying over 12 billion cubic meters of Russian gas annually, deepens this dependency.<sup>6</sup> For example, Serbia's energy needs are entirely covered by Russian gas, creating leverage for Moscow. Since 2008, Gazprom Neft and Gazprom have held a 56.15% majority in Serbia's NIS Novi Sad, with Serbia retaining 29.87%.<sup>7</sup>

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly in Republika Srpska, leaders like Milorad Dodik emphasise reliance on Russian gas, framing Moscow as a "Slavic brother" with shared cultural and spiritual ties.<sup>8</sup> Companies like Zarubezhneft control key infrastructure, such as the oil refinery in Brod.<sup>9</sup>

Beyond energy, Russia's economic footprint extends to banking, infrastructure, and real estate. In Serbia, Russian banks, including Sberbank and VTB Bank, support local businesses, while joint infrastructure projects, such as railway modernisation, bolster ties.<sup>10</sup> In Republika Srpska, Russian companies dominate the oil and gas sectors, with Moscow financially backing Dodik's administration.<sup>11</sup> In Montenegro, despite its NATO membership, Russian investments in tourism and real estate remain significant, with Russian nationals owning numerous luxury properties along the Adriatic coast.<sup>12</sup>

These economic ties grant Russia leverage over political decisions, complicating the region's Euro-Atlantic integration. Reliance on Russian energy and investments fosters dependency, constraining reforms and limiting

diversification in energy sources and economic partnerships. This multifaceted influence enables Russia to sustain its foothold in the Western Balkans, challenging alignment with Euro-Atlantic institutions.

### *Information Warfare*

Information warfare is another critical element of Russia's strategy in the Western Balkans. Moscow has employed disinformation campaigns and media manipulation to fuel anti-Western sentiments and destabilise the region. State-sponsored outlets such as *Russia Today* (RT) and *Sputnik* spread narratives that oppose NATO expansion and EU integration while glorifying Russia's historical ties with Slavic nations. These media campaigns exploit regional ethnic and political divisions, promoting conspiracy theories and fostering mistrust in Western institutions, which undermines efforts at reconciliation and regional cooperation.

Russian-backed media outlets also utilise social media platforms to target younger audiences, spreading anti-Western propaganda, deepening political divisions among parties, and inflating fears of sovereignty loss and exploitation. A 2023 European External Action Service (EEAS) study revealed how these disinformation campaigns intensified during political instability in the region, further eroding public trust in EU and NATO institutions. This hybrid warfare strategy, which blends information manipulation with cyberattacks, highlights Moscow's growing use of non-military tactics to challenge Euro-Atlantic integration.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Gotev, G. "US Tells Serbia to Zero Out Russian Ownership of Largest National Oil Company", *Euractiv*, 2025.

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/us-tells-Serbia-to-zero-out-Russian-ownership-of-largest-national-oil-company/>.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Bechev, D. 2017, pp.1-2.

<sup>9</sup> Gotev, G. 2025.

<sup>10</sup> Stronski, P., & Himes, A. "Russia's Game in the Balkans." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2019, p.6.

<sup>11</sup> Bechev, D. 2017, pp.1-2.

<sup>12</sup> Gotev, G. 2025.

<sup>13</sup> European Parliament, "Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effective Counter Them", Policy Department, 2020, p. 11-12.

<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/kri/assets/disinformation-in-western-balkans-report.pdf>.

## Security Implications

Russia's actions in the Western Balkans also include direct security implications, notably through military cooperation, intelligence operations, and cyberattacks. Moscow opposes the independence of Kosovo and NATO's presence in the region, further fuelling tensions. Joint military exercises, such as the "*Slavic Brotherhood*" drills between Russia and Serbia, signal Moscow's intent to maintain a strategic military footprint in the Balkans.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, Russian operatives have been implicated in destabilising activities, including the 2016 coup attempt in Montenegro aimed at thwarting its NATO membership bid.<sup>15</sup>

The presence of Russian military advisors and the training of local security forces also contributes to regional instability, undermining the effectiveness of local efforts to stabilise the region and integrate with Western institutions. These actions illustrate Russia's commitment to using military and covert operations as part of its broader hybrid warfare strategy to weaken the influence of the EU and NATO in the region.<sup>16</sup>

*What is Russia's broader strategic goal in the region?*

At the heart of Russia's actions in the Western Balkans lies a broader strategic goal to destabilise the region and divide the Euro-Atlantic community. By fostering regional instability, Moscow seeks to create leverage points that can be used to extract geopolitical concessions from the EU and NATO.<sup>17</sup> This strategy complicates the Western Balkans' integration into Euro-Atlantic structures and weakens the cohesion of the EU and NATO, undermining their collective ability to

respond to Russia's geopolitical challenges.

Therefore, Russia's interference in the Western Balkans is not just about securing its influence in the region but also about countering the broader strategic goals of the West. As the EU and NATO continue to seek stability and integration for the Western Balkans, they must contend with Russia's continued efforts to disrupt these aspirations. Effective countermeasures are essential to mitigate Russian influence and ensure the region's long-term stability and alignment with Western institutions.

## Euro-Atlantic Aspiration and Challenges

The Western Balkans' path toward Euro-Atlantic integration has been marked by significant progress and persistent challenges.

### *EU Integration Process*

Despite the EU's longstanding commitment to the Western Balkans, the integration process has been slow and fraught with obstacles. The EU's stringent accession criteria, which focus on democratic governance, rule of law, and market reforms, have proven difficult for countries in the region to meet.<sup>18</sup> Political instability, corruption, and limited progress in judicial reforms remain significant challenges. For example, Serbia's complex relationship with Kosovo and its ties to Russia have hindered its EU accession negotiations.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Bosnia and Herzegovina's fragmented political structure impedes meaningful progress toward EU membership.

<sup>14</sup> Tcherneva, V. "Europe's new agenda in the Western Balkans", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, Princeton University Press, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Stronski, P. "*The Montenegro Coup Attempt and Russia's Hybrid Warfare*", Carnegie Europe, 2018, p.6.

<sup>16</sup> Rácz, A. "Russia's Influence Operations in the Western Balkans", *Finnish Institute of International Affairs Report*, 62, 2021, pp 1-15.

<sup>17</sup> Bechev, D. 2017; Conley, H., Melino, M., & Stefanov, R. *Russia's Influence in the Western Balkans*, CSIS, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Jano, D. "EU Accession Criteria and Procedures: Up for the Challenges?", *EuZ – Zeitschrift für Eurorecht*, 04/2024, p. 5. <https://eizpublishing.ch/artikel/euz/04-2024/eu-accession-criteria-and-procedures-up-for-the-challenge/>.

<sup>19</sup> Gotev, G. 2025.

Additionally, enlargement fatigue within the EU, driven by internal concerns such as economic instability and migration crises, has led to hesitation among member states to prioritise further expansion. This reluctance risks alienating Western Balkans nations and creating a vacuum for external actors like Russia to exploit.

However, according to the European Commission's 2023 Enlargement Package, countries like Albania and North Macedonia have made notable progress in advancing reforms to meet EU standards.

### *NATO Involvement*

In recent years, NATO has played a pivotal role in stabilising the region, with significant milestones achieved. Montenegro's accession to NATO in 2017 and North Macedonia's membership in 2020 underscore the alliance's commitment to integrating the Western Balkans. NATO enhances regional security and counters Russian influence through military cooperation and capacity-building initiatives.

However, challenges persist. Serbia's official stance of military neutrality and its deepening ties with Russia limit NATO's ability to establish comprehensive regional security. For instance, Serbia has participated in joint military exercises with Russia, such as the "*Slavic Brotherhood*" drills, while maintaining a policy of non-alignment with NATO.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, fuelled by Moscow's influence, Republika Srpska's resistance to NATO membership complicates alignment efforts in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

### *Obstacles to Progress*

Despite aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration, the Western Balkans face significant internal challenges. Corruption

<sup>20</sup> Stronski, P., & Himes, A. "Russia's Game in the Balkans, Chapter: Serbia: Russia's Closest Partner in the Balkans", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2019, p.6.

<sup>21</sup> Transparency International, "*Corruption Perceptions Index*", 2024.

remains pervasive, undermining public trust in institutions and stalling reforms.<sup>21</sup> Weak rule of law and entrenched ethno-nationalist rhetoric exacerbate divisions, impeding the region's ability to embrace

**Corruption, instability and foreign influences hinder the Western Balkans' Euro-Atlantic integration.**

Euro-Atlantic norms fully.

Furthermore, socio-economic disparities, including high unemployment rates and limited access to education, fuel discontent and emigration, particularly among young populations. This brain drain deprives the region of much-needed talent and undermines long-term development. Without addressing these systemic issues, progress toward EU and NATO integration will remain uneven and vulnerable to external interference.

### *The Role of Regional Cooperation*

Enhanced regional cooperation is critical to overcoming shared challenges and advancing Euro-Atlantic aspirations. Initiatives such as the Berlin Process, aimed at fostering economic connectivity and reconciliation, highlight the potential for collective action.<sup>22</sup> However, the success of these efforts requires sustained political commitment and support from the EU and NATO.

## **The Balancing Act: Strategic Dynamics**

The interplay of national priorities and external influences shapes the geopolitical balancing act in the Western Balkans.

[https://www.transparency.am/en/cpi?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.transparency.am/en/cpi?utm_source=chatgpt.com).

<sup>22</sup> RCC. (Regional Cooperation Council) "*Annual Report on Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans*", 2021, p. 6.

## Serbia

Serbia occupies a central role in the region's balancing act. While it formally pursues EU membership, the Serbian president Vučić simultaneously nurtures deep ties with Russia. These ties are rooted in shared Slavic heritage, Orthodox Christianity, and historical alliances.<sup>23</sup> Economically, Serbia's dependence on Russian energy, mainly through Gazprom, emphasises the complexity of its connections. Politically, Serbia has abstained from fully aligning with EU sanctions on Russia following the invasion of Ukraine, reflecting its strategic balancing act.

In the security domain, Serbia conducts joint military exercises and drills with Russia while participating in EU-led peacekeeping operations. This duality exemplifies Serbia's attempt to maintain strategic autonomy. However, its relationship with Kosovo remains a key obstacle to EU integration, with Russian support further complicating dialogue efforts mediated by the EU.<sup>24</sup> This duality highlights the complex geopolitical positioning as it seeks to leverage relationships on both sides to safeguard its national interests.

Serbia's dual alignment with the EU and Russia exemplifies the region's complex geopolitical position.

Public opinion in Serbia reflects this duality. If a vote were held tomorrow, only 34% of Serbs would vote to join the EU, 51% would vote against, and 11% are undecided.<sup>25</sup> Russia is considered the most crucial ally, supported by 40% of public opinion, compared to 30% for the

EU and 24% for China.<sup>26</sup> This indicates that Russia and China are more desired partners than the EU.

## Republika Srpska

Republika Srpska, one of the three entities of Bosnia and Herzegovina, serves as a focal point of Russian influence in the region. Milorad Dodik has consistently advocated for secession and closer ties with Moscow. Dodik's alignment with Russian narratives, including his opposition to NATO membership and support for Russian actions in Ukraine, undermines Bosnia and Herzegovina's Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

Economically, Republika Srpska benefits from Russian investments in energy and infrastructure, further entrenching Moscow's foothold. Politically, Russian backing emboldens Dodik's rhetoric and resistance to reforms, deepening Bosnia and Herzegovina's internal divisions and stalling its EU and NATO integration. This dynamic highlights the strategic importance of addressing external influences to preserve the territorial integrity and stability of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This country remains structurally intact but institutionally and politically dysfunctional.<sup>27</sup>

## Kosova

Kosova's unresolved status presents unique challenges in the region's balancing act. Russia's steadfast support for Serbia's non-recognition of Kosova's independence exacerbates tensions and undermines EU-led normalisation efforts. This support extends to the UN Security Council, where Russia's veto power blocks Kosova's aspirations for international recognition.

<sup>23</sup> Bechev, D. 2017, pp.1-2.

<sup>24</sup> Gotev, G. 2025.

<sup>25</sup> Foreign Political orientations of citizens of Serbia, Basic data research (1203 responded to a telephone survey), 4 May 2023.

<https://demostat.rs/upload/prezentacija.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Toci, Ç. "The Western Balkans: How is the Region Endangered by Russian Influence?", *Horizon Insights*, Vol. 6, Issue 4 -2023 (Oct-Dec) p. 9.



Despite these challenges, Kosovo has made progress toward Euro-Atlantic integration. Its alignment with NATO, support for Ukraine and active participation in regional security initiatives demonstrate its commitment to stability. However, the ongoing dialogue with Serbia remains critical to its future. Russian influence in Serbia adds complexity to this process, making resolving Kosovo's status a critical indicator for the region's overall Euro-Atlantic integration.

## Policy Options and Recommendations

To address the challenges posed by Russian interference and strengthen Euro-Atlantic alignment, the following measures are proposed:

*Simplifying EU Accession Pathways:* The EU should simplify accession pathways and provide clear timelines to sustain reform momentum in the Western Balkans. This includes targeting funding for judicial reforms, anti-corruption measures and economic development projects. This approach will help counteract Russian influence by demonstrating the tangible benefits of EU membership.<sup>28</sup>

*Expanding NATO Security Cooperation:* To deter Russian influence, NATO should expand its security cooperation and military presence in the Western Balkans. This includes increasing joint military exercises, such as Steadfast Defender 2024, providing advanced training for local forces, and enhancing intelligence-sharing mechanisms. A more substantial NATO presence will reassure Western Balkan countries of their security and deter potential Russian aggression.

*Investing in renewable energy projects:* Investing in renewable energy projects and enhancing interconnectivity is crucial for reducing the region's reliance on

Russian gas. The EU and NATO should support the development of alternative energy sources, such as solar and wind power, and facilitate the construction of infrastructure like liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals and interconnectors as planned and implemented in Albania and Croatia. These efforts will enhance energy security and reduce Moscow's leverage over the region.

**Deterring Russian Influence:  
NATO should strengthen  
security cooperation and  
expand its military presence  
in the region.**

*Countering Russian Disinformation:* The EU and NATO should establish regional media literacy programs and support independent journalism to counter Russian disinformation campaigns. By promoting critical thinking and media literacy, citizens can better identify and resist disinformation. Additionally, supporting independent media outlets will ensure the availability of accurate and unbiased information, thereby strengthening public trust in Western institutions.<sup>29</sup>

*Enhancing Regional Cooperation:* Strengthen initiatives like the Berlin Process and the Regional Cooperation Council to improve connectivity, economic integration, and political dialogue among Western Balkan countries. This could involve organising regular high-level meetings, funding cross-border infrastructure projects and facilitating trade agreements.

*Increasing Defence Spending and NATO Interoperability:* Western Balkan countries should increase their defence budget to meet NATO standards and enhance interoperability with NATO

<sup>28</sup> Gotev, G. 2025.

<sup>29</sup> Associated Press (World News) EU leader denounces Russia's 'hybrid war' aiming to destabilise Western Balkans democracy, 2024.

<https://apnews.com/article/european-commission-von-der-leyen-balkans-kosovo-russia-04edfec4d473d88620793c5b9f9d6ed3>.

forces. This could include purchasing modern military equipment, participating in joint exercises, and adopting NATO-standard operating procedures.

## Conclusion

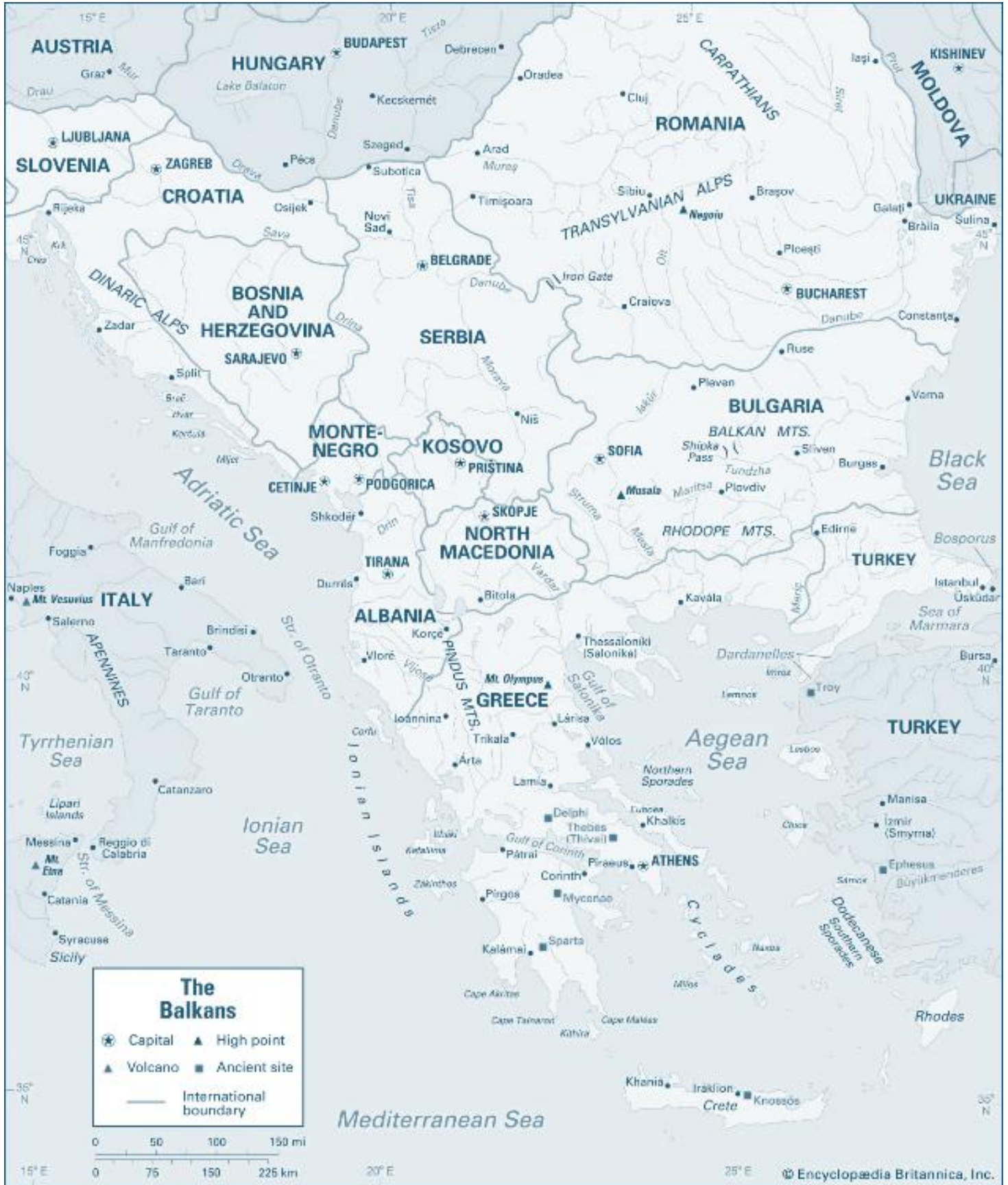
The Western Balkans are at a critical crossroads, balancing Russian interference with the aspirations for EU and NATO integration. A stable, self-sufficient region is essential for both European and global security. While EU and NATO membership offers a potential path to stability, persistent challenges, such as political instability and external influence, demand coordinated efforts from both regional leaders and international stakeholders.

Addressing these challenges requires strengthening governance, improving security, and countering external interference. Key domestic reforms, including energy diversification and enhanced regional cooperation, will help reduce vulnerabilities and promote long-term stability. Continued support from the EU and NATO, through financial assistance, technical expertise, and strategic communication, will be crucial in accelerating these reforms and addressing issues like disinformation.

Despite the complex challenges, the Western Balkans can achieve sustainable progress toward Euro-Atlantic institutions with strategic initiatives and coordinated efforts. A stable and prosperous Western Balkans will benefit the region and contribute to broader European and global security.

The path to Euro-Atlantic integration is neither simple nor guaranteed, but with sustained reforms, strengthened institutions, and strategic support from the EU and NATO, success is achievable. Securing the Western Balkans is essential not only for regional stability but also for reinforcing European security, countering external influences, and ensuring a more resilient transatlantic alliance.

A stable Western Balkans is crucial for European and global security, requiring reforms, strong governance, and sustained Euro-Atlantic support.



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



The BALTDEFCOL was founded in 1999 and is one of the most successful examples of cooperation among the Baltic nations and the only English-language PME institution in continental Europe. As of June 2024, 2,051 students from 44 countries have graduated from BALTDEFCOL.

BALTDEFCOL functions as a PME institution at operational and strategic levels. It also participated in a ground-breaking initiative with the first-of-a-kind Command Senior Enlisted Leaders (CSEL) Course.



As the battlefield and the international security environment evolve, so does our curriculum. BALTDEFCOL received ACT accreditation as an education and training facility in 2022. As such, the BALTDEFCOL strives to become a hub of knowledge on AI, digital transformation, and multi-domain operations while continuing to serve as a centre of expertise on Russia and all security and defence issues in the turbulent international security environment.

