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Editorial

## The Balkans at a Crossroads: Security, Integration, and the Future of Europe

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The Balkan Peninsula has long been shaped by shifting borders, competing nationalisms, and complex geopolitical dynamics. But while the region is often discussed as a singular geopolitical entity, the reality is far more nuanced. Like all of Europe, the Balkan Peninsula is an intricate patchwork of proud nations, cultures, languages, and histories – each with its own distinct trajectory toward political and economic development. This diversity means that there is no universal formula for integration into European and transatlantic institutions. Instead, tailored engagement—one that accounts for local histories, security needs, and economic disparities—is essential to building a stable and prosperous future. While the conflicts of the 1990s left an enduring imprint of war and humanitarian crisis, today’s focus is on the role of NATO and the European Union in fostering stability, economic growth, and security cooperation.

Since the end of the Cold War, the appeal of NATO’s collective defense to states within the Balkan region has been significant, and these individual accessions have enhanced NATO’s defensive capabilities. Only Greece and Türkiye were in the alliance in 1952. After the collapse of the USSR and a receded Soviet empire, Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovenia entered NATO in 2004. Croatia and Albania joined in 2009, followed by Montenegro in 2017 and North Macedonia in 2020.

While the NATO accessions have strengthened collective defense in south-eastern Europe, EU economic enlargement has been a much more complex process. Since Greece’s entry to the European Economic Community (1981), only Slovenia (2004), Bulgaria (2007), Romania (2007), and Croatia (2013) have been

admitted to the EU. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia remain in various stages of EU candidacy, facing an accession process that has grown increasingly protracted.

This relatively slower pace of EU integration has broader implications for European security. Balkan integration is not just a peninsular concern; it is a central consideration to the long-term growth of the continent's trade, investment, and capital flows in the face of renewed great power competition. Failure to more fully integrate the region into transatlantic institutions may risk leaving a strategic vacuum, one that external actors such as China and Russia are eager to exploit in their revisionist worldviews. Countering Russian and Chinese malign or predatory influence is becoming increasingly important to ensure the security and prosperity of the region.

In this issue, *Mikael Weissmann* examines China's growing influence in Serbia and the Western Balkans, assessing the strategic risks associated with Beijing's engagement. Meanwhile, security threats extend beyond geopolitics. *Saša Mijalković*, *Dragana Čvorović*, and *Vince Vári* analyze the destabilizing role of organized crime in Serbia, highlighting its far-reaching impact on governance and regional security.

The long shadows of history continue to outline contemporary challenges across the Balkans. *John Ashbrook* revisits the role of nationalism in the region, evaluating its enduring influence on political developments. *Pal Dunay* examines the EU's often-frustrating engagement with the Balkans, exploring how past experiences might inform more effective policies moving forward. Meanwhile, *İbrahim Fevzi Güven*, *Hamza Preljević*, and *Alpaslan Özerdem* emphasize the importance of local ownership in political and security reforms, particularly in Albania. In the military domain, *Marko Žunjić* and *Marina Kostić Šulejić* examine how multinational military exercises—facilitated through NATO and the Partnership for Peace Consortium (PfPC)—are fostering interoperability and defense cooperation among Balkan states and their allies.

This edition of *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* does not claim to offer a definitive roadmap for the Balkans' future, but it does provide critical insights into some of the region's pressing security and governance challenges. The region's future is inextricably linked to that of Europe. As NATO and the EU continue to shape their relationships with the Balkan states, engagement must be strategic, sustained, and tactfully sensitive to historical and cultural realities.

## Disclaimer

The views expressed are solely those of the authors and do not represent official views of the PfP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes, participating organizations, or the Consortium's editors.

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