

# Shining a Light on the Western Balkans

## Internal Vulnerabilities and Malign Influence from Russia, Terrorism, and Transnational Organized Crime

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**Approved by:**

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jonathan Schroden'.

Dr. Jonathan Schroden, Director  
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## Abstract

Since the civil wars of the 1990s, the Western Balkans region has been plagued by conflict and instability. The United States and Western Europe disengaged from this region in the last decade, and the Western Balkan countries have become particularly unstable due to internal vulnerabilities and external influence from state and non-state actors. CNA initiated a study to assess these internal vulnerabilities and external influence and threats from Russia, international terrorism, and transnational organized crime. Using research and semi-structured discussions with subject matter experts in the United States, Serbia, and Macedonia, including recent U.S. senior military and civilian leaders, this paper presents findings and implications for U.S. and European civilian and military leaders to consider in order to proactively engage in this region, and promote a regional strategy that supports a Europe that is “whole and free,” and one that is based on Western institutions and democratic principles.

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## Executive Summary

The Western Balkans region, encompassing Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Serbia, Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Albania, and Croatia, has been plagued by conflict and instability since the civil wars of the 1990s. Today, the Western Balkans have reemerged as a particularly unstable region, marked by internal vulnerabilities that have made the countries of this region particularly susceptible to external malign influence by state and non-state actors. The U.S. and its European partners remain committed to a peaceful Europe—one that is grounded in democratic values and upholds Western transatlantic institutions, including the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Yet the U.S. and its European partners have largely turned their attention away from this region during the past decade in part as a result of “Balkan fatigue.” Today, fresh concerns over a resurgent Russia, the spread of terrorist groups (particularly the Islamic State), and transnational organized crime, have caused the United States and Europe to shine a light back on the Western Balkans.

In order to inform this renewed focus on the Western Balkans, CNA initiated a study that used a qualitative methodology informed by field work in Serbia and Macedonia and extensive discussions with subject matter experts to investigate four key factors that have turned this region into a *geopolitical competition for influence* between the West and various adversary actors: internal vulnerabilities in Western Balkans countries; external influence from a proactive Russia; violent extremism and the flow of foreign fighters; and transnational criminal organizations that use the region as a major transit zone for people, drugs, weapons, and contraband.

## Summary of insights and findings

Summary points of our findings are discussed in turn below.

**Unaddressed sources of instability in the Western Balkans have made the region more vulnerable and susceptible to external influence and threats, including from Russia, terrorism, and transnational organized crime.** In recent years, internal vulnerabilities such as the rise of nationalism, historical grievances, corruption, weakened state institutions and media, and unemployment have left these countries unstable and set conditions for state and non-state actors to influence them.

**The West has disengaged from the Western Balkans due to transnational challenges facing Western Europe, such as migration, international terrorism, and a resurgent Russia.** Given the severity of internal vulnerabilities and regional instability, the Western Balkans countries are unlikely to resolve these challenges on their own. Without greater investment and support from the United States and Europe, the Western Balkans may continue to be susceptible to greater influence from Russia, violent extremists, and/or transnational criminal organizations.

**The Western Balkans are likely to become a significant playing field for the competition between Russia and the West.** Russia has played a “spoiler role” by using information, political, economic, and military tools in order to discredit Western institutions, including NATO and the EU, discredit foundations for Western democracy, and strategically project and alter elements of power in Western Balkans countries. Russia has chosen to intervene and take advantage of internal vulnerabilities in the Western Balkans by aligning with nationalist and corrupt elements, and interfering in the internal affairs of these countries (e.g., elections).

**Violent extremist ideology has taken root among select Muslim communities in the Western Balkans due to influence from the greater Middle East, including Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States.** Due to relatively weak institutions and other sources of instability, the governments, civil society, and religious institutions of Western Balkans countries have taken limited steps to work with disenfranchised populations.

**Porous borders are a transit zone for criminal networks and are used to transfer drugs, people, and weapons.** Transnational criminal organizations routinely exploit the poorly secured borders of the region to transfer and ship weapons, drugs, and humans from the Western Balkans to global destinations, including Western Europe, the Middle East, and South America. Corruption, distrustful and ill-prepared security and intelligence services, lack of border patrol, and lack of economic opportunity have enabled porous borders to become a fertile ground for criminal operations in the region.

Looking holistically at the Western Balkans, the figure below depicts the extent of external influence and internal vulnerabilities.

Figure. External influence and internal vulnerabilities in the Western Balkans

Countries	Influence			Internal Vulnerabilities					
	I1	I2	I3	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6
Bosnia and Herzegovina	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆	◆	◆◆◆	◆◆	◆◆◆
Macedonia	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆
Albania	◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆	◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆
Serbia	◆◆◆	◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆
Montenegro	◆◆◆	◆	◆	◆	◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆
Kosovo	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆	◆◆◆
Croatia	◆	◆	◆	◆◆	◆◆◆	◆	◆	◆◆	◆

I1: Russian Influence  
I2: Terrorism, including radicalization, violent extremism, and the flow of foreign fighters  
I3: Transnational organized crime

V1: Nationalism  
V2: Historical grievances  
V3: Corruption  
V4: Weakened state institutions  
V5: Weak media  
V6: Economic instability

◆ Least severe  
◆◆ Moderately severe  
◆◆◆ Most severe

## Implications

Implications of our findings for U.S. and European military and policy leaders include the following:

1. **Greater investment is needed in civil society institutions** in order to make the Western Balkans less vulnerable and susceptible to external influencers. Such programs may include development of independent media and higher standards of professional journalism; increased educational opportunities; and development of religious, cultural, and professional non-government organizations.
2. **Greater investment in economic growth and employment opportunities is needed** in order to prevent “brain drain” out of the Western Balkans, reduce

the ongoing migration crisis in Europe, and make vulnerable populations less susceptible to radicalization, violent extremism, and organized crime. Such investment by U.S. and European partners may include providing micro-loans, direct and multilateral economic assistance, job training, and tailored economic opportunities for targeted disenfranchised segments of the population in these countries.

3. **Greater investment in discrediting disinformation and propaganda in the region from Russia, ISIS, and criminal actors is needed** in order to counter malign messages and perceptions coming from these adversary actors in an effort to promote stability in the region. U.S. and European partners should consider investing resources in developing positive narratives and actions targeted toward independent voices and vulnerable populations in the region in an effort to promote Western democracy and institutions.
4. **Greater investment in initiatives that focus on law enforcement, border security, intelligence, community policing, interdiction, and collaboration is warranted** in order to counter transnational organized crime and address vulnerabilities in civil society that make individuals and groups more susceptible to engaging in criminal activities in the region. Such initiatives should focus on anti- and counter-corruption programs and the development of good governance of state institutions.
5. **Further research is needed in order to assess competition for influence and the likelihood of effectiveness of U.S. and European programs and initiatives** that aim to strengthen internal vulnerabilities in the Western Balkans, and mitigate external and transnational threats posed by Russia, international terrorism, and transnational organized crime. This includes analysis of how these actors manipulate sources of instability in the Western Balkans countries, and ways that U.S. and European programs and initiatives seek to strengthen the environment as a way to counter external threats.

With significant internal vulnerabilities and troubling external influences from state and non-state actors, stabilizing the Western Balkans countries will remain a key priority to western collective security. Strategic reengagement from the U.S. and its European partners will be critical in order to ensure that Europe remains “whole and free.”

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## Glossary

BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
CVE	Countering violent extremism
DPMNE	Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity
EU	European Union
EUFOR	European Union Force
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IS	Islamic State
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
KFOR	NATO's Kosovo Force
KLA	Kosovo Liberation Army
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NOVA	New Serbian Democracy
OHR	Office of the High Representative
RS	Republika Srpska
SNS	Serbian Progressive Party
UNMIK	UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo
UN	United Nations
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
IMRO	Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Party

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# Introduction

For centuries, the countries of the Western Balkans—Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Serbia, Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Albania, and Croatia—have stood at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. After the breakup of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, and the long and brutal civil wars that followed, the Western Balkans entered a period of relative quiescence. In recent years, the Western Balkans have reemerged as a region of instability, marked by internal vulnerabilities in the environment that make the countries in this region particularly susceptible to external malign influence by state and non-state actors.

Given the United States' commitment to a peaceful Europe based on strong Western institutions, including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU), stability in the Western Balkans is a key priority in order to ensure that Europe remains whole and free from internal and external threats.<sup>1</sup> While the United States and its European allies largely turned their attention away from this region during its relatively quiet period, fresh concerns about terrorism—particularly the spread of the Islamic State (IS) into Western Europe—have caused Western policy makers and military leaders to once again turn their attention to the Western Balkans.

In order to inform this renewed focus on the Western Balkans, CNA initiated a study that investigates four key aspects of the region:

- **Internal vulnerabilities** that make the Western Balkans susceptible to external and transnational threats.
- **Influence from a proactive Russia** that has turned the Western Balkans into an arena of geopolitical competition.
- **Violent extremism and the flow of foreign fighters**, which has plagued the region.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of State, Factsheet on the Balkans. <https://www.state.gov/p/eur/rt/balkans/> Accessed 15 February 2017.

- **Transnational criminal organizations** that use the Western Balkans as a major transit zone for people, drugs, weapons, and contraband.

## Analytical approach

In order to examine these issues in depth, our research proceeded in four phases:

1. We conducted a broad literature review to understand key vulnerabilities in the Western Balkans, and external and transnational influence posed by Russia, international terrorism, and transnational criminal organizations.
2. We traveled to Serbia and Macedonia to gather additional data and identify broader implications for the region as a whole. During our field work, we held discussions with civil society organizations, journalists, policy analysts, and U.S. government officials in order to examine in depth the internal vulnerabilities and transnational threats posed by Russia, terrorism, and transnational criminal organizations.
3. We synthesized our data to identify key themes pertaining to internal vulnerabilities in the Western Balkans and the challenges that external and transnational threats pose to U.S. and European interests.
4. We used these themes, along with discussions with CNA senior fellows (retired senior military and civilian leaders), to identify a set of findings and implications for U.S. and European leaders to consider when engaging with Western Balkans countries and with those actors that have a direct interest in this region.

## Caveats

It is important to point out a few caveats to our study:

1. Pursuant to available resources, we were unable to conduct field work in all of the Western Balkans countries. However, we traveled to Serbia and Macedonia and held semi-structured discussions with stakeholders in order to understand internal vulnerabilities, and external and transnational threats that the region faces. As a result, our assessment and findings are more robust for these two countries than the others in the Western Balkans.
2. Given the opaque nature of the organized crime phenomenon—in the Western Balkans, as in the rest of the world—authoritative quantitative data on the size and activities of such organizations are lacking. Organized crime is often

politically sensitive, and many governments are reluctant or unwilling to share information, making cross-national comparisons difficult. Any estimates of the size and economic impact of organized crime should therefore be treated with some degree of caution.<sup>2</sup>

3. This assessment addresses the internal vulnerabilities in the environment in the Western Balkans countries and the threats posed by Russia, transnational terrorism, and organized crime. While we have a preliminary understanding of U.S. and European actions to counter external threats and influence, and to strengthen vulnerabilities in these countries, this paper does not assess the full extent of U.S. and European actions and their intended purpose.

## Paper organization

This paper is organized into six sections. First, we provide a brief historical background on the Western Balkans. Second, we identify sources of instability and vulnerability in the Western Balkans. Third, we highlight key objectives and elements of Russia's influence in the region. Fourth, we describe international terrorism challenges in the region, to include threats posed by internal radicalization and foreign fighters traveling from the Middle East through the Western Balkans en route to Western Europe. Fifth, we highlight the challenge posed by transnational crime in the region. Sixth and finally, we present our overall findings and implications for U.S. government leaders and European partners to consider when engaging in the Western Balkans and with those actors that have a direct interest in this region.

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<sup>2</sup> For more on these points, see Ernesto U. Savona and Barbara Vettori, "Evaluating the Cost of Organised Crime from a Comparative Perspective," *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 15 (December 2009).

## Background

In the aftermath of the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, many international observers hoped for democratic consolidation and peaceful co-existence in the Western Balkans, a region that has historically been tumultuous—standing, as it does, at the crossroads of European and Asian cultures (Figure 1). However, those postwar hopes have increasingly given way to serious concerns about democratic backsliding and internal fragmentation, with potentially catastrophic consequences for the stability of the region and the national security interests of both the United States and Europe.

Figure 1. Western Balkans Region



Source: Michael Markowitz, CNA.

The Balkans remained relatively peaceful throughout the Cold War period, but when Yugoslavia descended into bloodshed after the collapse of Communism, the region became a high priority for the West.

. Yugoslavia was made up of six republics: Serbia, Montenegro, and Macedonia, which were predominantly Orthodox; Bosnia-Herzegovina, which was predominantly Muslim; and Slovenia and Croatia, which were predominantly Catholic. Within Serbia, there were two autonomous regions—Kosovo, which had an Albanian Muslim majority, and Vojvodina. Amid a declining economy and rising nationalism after the death of Yugoslav dictator Josip Broz Tito in 1980, Slovenia and Croatia declared independence in 1991. BiH, the most ethnically diverse republic, followed in 1993, which led to full-scale war and ethnic cleansing.

Western intervention in the region, largely under the auspices of NATO, was largely ineffective in preventing mass atrocities and ultimately approximately 100,000 people died in the ensuing conflicts. Eventually, NATO's bombing of Serbia and Montenegro coerced the Serb leadership to the negotiating table, leading to the 1995 Dayton Agreement, which ended the violence and redrew the map of the Balkans. In particular, BiH was divided into two self-governing entities, the Croat-Muslim Federation and the Republika Srpska.

Another war followed in 1998-1999, when a Kosovar Albanian rebel group known as the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) attempted to wrest the territory from Serbia's control. NATO air strikes targeted the Serb-dominated Yugoslav army in Kosovo, while NATO called for the restoration of the region's autonomy. Ultimately, Serbia lost control over most of the area, although the southern portion retained its Serb majority. Kosovo declared independence in 2008, gaining recognition from the United States and most European countries but not from Serbia or Russia.

NATO peacekeeping forces remained in Bosnia to oversee the Dayton Agreement until 2004, when the European Union's (EU's) EUFOR took over. The international community still maintains a presence in the former Yugoslavia through a small EUFOR presence, as well as the United Nations' Office of the High Representative (OHR) for Bosnia and Herzegovina. NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR) and the United Nations' (UN's) Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) are still based in Kosovo in order to ensure overall stability in Kosovo.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the United States moved on to other security challenges. Peacekeeping, nation building, and democratic institution-building in the Balkans remained high on Europe's agenda, but have since fallen off Europe's radar due to both internal and external challenges. Since the wars of the 1990s, the promise of EU and NATO membership has been the "carrot" incentivizing reform in the Western Balkan countries. In particular, EU "conditionality" focused on strengthening internal institutions, settling border disputes, and ensuring the rights of minorities. However, EU "enlargement fatigue," crises such as the Greek debt crisis and Brexit, and the rise of IS terrorism within Europe have taken Europe's attention away from the Balkans. As a result, transnational and external actors, such as Russia and IS, have tried to thwart reform processes and exploit the absence of European and U.S. attention in order to advance their own agendas in this strategic region.

## Internal Vulnerabilities

Given increased disengagement from the Western Balkans by the U.S. and the EU in recent years, actors such as Russia, Turkey, China, Saudi Arabia, IS, and transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) have taken advantage of Western Balkans countries' internal vulnerabilities to exert their own influence. For the sake of this discussion, we define *internal vulnerability* as a source of instability that may make a country or region more susceptible to malign influence or transnational threats from state or non-state actors. In the case of the Western Balkans, internal vulnerabilities exist at the country and regional levels, and make the region particularly unstable. These vulnerabilities include: the rise of nationalism, historical grievances, corruption, weak state institutions, a weakened media environment, and economic instability. We will discuss each of these vulnerabilities in turn below.

### Rise of nationalism

In the last two decades, countries of the Western Balkans have seen a rise in nationalism that has permeated all elements of society, including politics, business, civil society, and media. Nationalism and historical revisionism continue to undermine Serbia's relations with its Balkan neighbors, notably Kosovo and Croatia. In BiH, the entity of Republika Srpska (RS) promotes an aggressive brand of Serb nationalism. The most recent flashpoint for these tensions was the controversial October 2016 referendum on whether January 9 should remain a national holiday in BiH's predominantly Serbian enclave. Although the country's Constitutional Court ruled that the referendum was both unconstitutional and discriminatory against non-Serb minorities, it can be used to justify a 2018 referendum for RS independence. Independence for the RS would signal the break-up of the Bosnian state and could set a precedent for other minority communities in the region, such as Bosnian Muslims or Croats in BiH, Serbs in Kosovo, or Albanians in Macedonia to seek greater autonomy.

In Macedonia and Albania, nationalism continues to be a major concern, particularly given the contested nature of the Muslim Albanian minority in Macedonia. This challenge is particularly compounded by nationalist, pro-Putin, and anti-Western politicians who view Albanians as second class citizens. A worrying recent example is

the clashes between armed Albanian gunmen and Macedonian police in May 2015, which left 22 people dead in the northern town of Kumanovo.<sup>34</sup>

## Historical grievances

Politicians in the Western Balkans successfully tap into historical narratives of victimization to consolidate power and assert claims about national identity and international orientation. Since the 1999 NATO bombings, many Serbs still have feelings of defensiveness and humiliation. These bitter memories of the NATO bombings, combined with resentment over EU conditionality and pressure to recognize Kosovo's independence, have affected the credibility of the West and have contributed to conspiracy theories about Western intentions in the Balkans.

In addition, historical grievances left unresolved from World War II contribute to ongoing tensions between Serbia and Croatia. The nationalist ruling parties of both countries have taken a revisionist and polarizing approach to their respective histories and tend to demonize each other based on this, particularly over the actions of Serb resistance groups and Croatian collaborators in the 1940s and the causes and consequences of the wars of the 1990s.<sup>5</sup> The tension between these two countries could have serious consequences for Serbia, as Croatia has repeatedly threatened to block Serbia's access into the EU.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Macedonia's European aspirations are undermined by the government's nationalistic approach to history. In particular, the "nation rebranding" program of Macedonia's prime minister, Nikolai

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<sup>3</sup> Fatjona Mejdini and Sinisa Jakov Marusic, "Albanian Opposition Takes to the Streets in Macedonia." May 10, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/albanian-opposition-takes-to-the-streets-in-macedonia-05-10-2016C>

<sup>4</sup> Semi-structured discussions with Metamorphosis, 9 September, 2016, Skopje, Macedonia.

<sup>5</sup> Milan Dinic, "Serbia-Croatia relations: No way forward in sight," LSE Research on Southern Europe, March 17, 2015, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsee/2015/03/17/serbia-croatia-relations-no-way-forward-in-sight/>.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Mason, "Croatia's election is a warning about the return of nationalism to the Balkans," *The Guardian*, September 12, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/12/croatias-election-warning-nationalism-balkans-eu-government-second-world-war-fascism>; Daniel McLaughlin, "Serbia warns EU about resurgence of far right in Croatia," *The Irish Times*, August 2, 2016, <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/serbia-warns-eu-about-resurgence-of-far-right-in-croatia-1.2742923>.

Gruevski's has created conflict with Greece, which has responded by blocking the country's entry into the EU.<sup>7</sup>

## Corruption

Corruption throughout government, business, media, and civil society has created immense instability in countries of the Western Balkans region. For example, Prime Minister Milo Dukanovic of Montenegro has been accused of extreme corruption and criminality by using his political power to enrich his family while the country's economic situation continues to deteriorate.<sup>8</sup> Audio leaks made public in 2014 revealed that his government has been engaged in widespread electoral fraud, voter intimidation, and rigging of election results.<sup>9</sup>

In Macedonia, leaked wire tapes revealed extensive corruption by Macedonian politicians including Director of Security and Counterintelligence Sasho Mijalkov and Prime Minister Nikolai Gruevski. Most notably, these tapes revealed extensive spying on private citizens, electoral fraud, and criminality. While Macedonians took to the streets to protest the wiretapping, the international community's response has been minimal.<sup>10</sup>

In Serbia, Prime Minister Alexander Vucic transformed himself from an ultranationalist into a pro-EU reformer, promising to prioritize the fight against corruption. While he rose to power on this platform,<sup>11</sup> many perceive that Vucic is

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<sup>7</sup> Edward P. Joseph, Sasha Toperich, and Ognen Vangelov, "Backing the Balkans: Prioritizing EU Enlargement Post-Brexit," *Foreign Affairs*, July 6, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/bosnia-herzegovina/2016-07-06/backing-balkans>.

<sup>8</sup> Besnik Pula, "The Budding Autocrats of the Balkans," *Foreign Policy*, April 15, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/15/the-budding-autocrats-of-the-balkans-serbia-macedonia-montenegro/>.

<sup>9</sup> Koca Pavlovic, "Montenegro and the EU: living on the frontline," openDemocracy, March 19, 2015, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/ko%C4%8D-pavlovi%C4%87/montenegro-and-eu-living-on-frontline>.

<sup>10</sup> Semi-structured discussions with Balkan Investigative Journalist Network, 10 September, 2016, Skopje, Macedonia.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Carmona-Borjas, "Serbia's struggle with corruption," *Financial Times*, April 18, 2016, <http://blogs.ft.com/beyond-brics/2016/04/18/serbias-struggle-with-corruption/>; "IRI Serbia Poll," International Republican Institute, September 21, 2015, <http://www.iri.org/resource/iri-serbia-poll-98-see-corruption-serious-problem-concerned-about-economy-employment>.

engaged in a Putin-style personification of political power by undermining state institutions and governing through nepotism.<sup>12</sup>

## Weakened state institutions

Weakened and suppressed state institutions have made Western Balkan countries particularly susceptible to external influence and transnational threats. In Macedonia, for example, the current government has been banning non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and restricting civil society.<sup>13</sup> Bosnia's central institutions, designed by the 1995 Dayton Agreement to end the war, have come under serious pressure from the separatist-minded leader of Republika Srpska, who ignored a Constitutional Court ruling in order to proceed with a controversial referendum. In Serbia, there are deep concerns over the increasing centralization of power and even creeping authoritarianism in the person of Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic. Critics point to the absence of the rule of law in the country and highlight attempts to control media and civil society that point out Vucic's autocratic tendencies. In Kosovo, violent anti-government protests involving arson and tear gas have been a regular feature of political life in recent years, as members of the Albanian majority ethnic group try to undermine attempts to demarcate borders and normalize relations with Serbia and Montenegro. A clear example is antipathy to the agreement to create an Association of Serb Communes in Kosovo, which led to violent protests and a political crisis over fears that granting additional autonomy to minority Serbs would threaten Kosovo's sovereignty.<sup>14</sup>

## Weakened media environment

State control of the media—and restrictions on freedom of press and speech—throughout the region have substantially weakened and restricted the media

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<sup>12</sup> Sasha Dragojlo, "Vucic Not Tackling Serbia's Corruption, Experts Say," *Balkan Insight*, April 8 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/vucic-s-government-made-no-promised-progress-on-tackling-corruption-04-07-2016>; and Europe Commission, "Key Findings of the 2016 Report on Serbia," November 9, 2016, [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_MEMO-16-3635\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-16-3635_en.htm), accessed November 15, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Semi-Structured discussions with Balkan Investigative Journalist Network, 10 September 2016, Skopje, Macedonia.

<sup>14</sup> Frederick Tiffin, "Kosovo's Government Headquarters Set on Fire After Riots Erupt at Huge Protest," *Vice News*, January 9, 2016, <https://news.vice.com/article/kosovos-government-headquarters-set-on-fire-after-riot-erupts-at-huge-protest>.

environment in these countries. Often, this has been due to state control of civil society institutions and opaque ownership of media institutions. In Montenegro, government crackdowns on journalists who have tried to investigate organized crime have raised questions about Montenegro's claims to respect due process and freedom of the press.<sup>15</sup> In Croatia, non-profit media—particularly electronic media and hard-copy magazines—have struggled to receive financing from the state, while right-wing media that are supportive of the government have received larger shares of the budget.<sup>16</sup>

In Macedonia, the media are largely controlled by the ruling party; many good Macedonian journalists have left the profession. Given this media environment, Macedonian society is victim to government disinformation.<sup>17</sup> In Serbia, the media environment is particularly closed, due to opaque media ownership, poor regulation and legislation, and relatively low trust in media and the journalistic profession. Tabloids and television are the most popular media, but the tabloid press has been described as a form of yellow journalism while television is prone to “info-tainment” that “casts a serious shadow over serious news.”<sup>18</sup>

## Economic instability

The dire economic situation of the Western Balkans is another major vulnerability. Many of these countries were severely impacted by the 2008 economic crisis, but poverty, unemployment, and public debt remain extremely high throughout the region. In BiH, the government has done a poor job of privatization and there are still many state-owned enterprises, leading to potential delays in receiving International Monetary Fund (IMF) support and costing the country billions in potential earnings.<sup>19</sup> In Serbia, the current budget deficit is so high that austerity measures may become

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<sup>15</sup> “Montenegro: Release Journalist Pending Trial,” September 19, 2016, Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/09/19/montenegro-release-journalist-pending-trial>

<sup>16</sup> Sven Milekic, “Croatia Media Await Funding Ruling With Concern,” BIRN, January 30, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Semi-structured discussions with Balkan Investigative Journalist Network, 10 September 2016, Skopje, Macedonia.

<sup>18</sup> Semi-structured discussions with Open Society Serbia, 5 September, Belgrade, Serbia.

<sup>19</sup> “IMF Approves \$620 Million in Loans for Bosnia Tied to Reforms,” RFE/RL, September 8, 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/a/imf-approves-620-million-loan-bosnia-tied-economic-reform-privatization/27974304.html> ; Drazen Simic, “Privatization Delay Costs Bosnia Entity Billions,” BIRN, March 23, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/privatization-delay-costs-bosnia-entity-billions-03-22-2016>

inevitable. Some fear that this could lead to popular protest and destabilization of the country.<sup>20</sup>

In Macedonia, poverty and unemployment have exacerbated already existing ethnic and religious grievances between Macedonians and Albanians.<sup>21</sup> The lack of opportunity has contributed to a worrying trend of “brain drain” out of the country and could further exacerbate an ongoing migrant crisis. In 2016, tens of thousands of Kosovars fled their country’s collapsing government and corrupt economy, heading north into Western Europe.<sup>22</sup>

## Summary of vulnerabilities

It is important to note that while these vulnerabilities exist in many of the Western Balkans countries, not every country exhibits every vulnerability. To demonstrate this variance and highlight the overall vulnerability picture, Table 1 depicts countries where these vulnerabilities are present, with the scale of vulnerability spanning from least vulnerable (one diamond) to most vulnerable (three diamonds).

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<sup>20</sup>Srdja Pavlovic, “Serbia’s choice: EU membership or eastern promises,” openDemocracy, March 30, 2015, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/srdja-pavlovic/serbia%E2%80%99s-choice-eu-membership-or-eastern-promises>

<sup>21</sup> “Fatos Butusi, “Poverty, frustration keep Macedonia tensions alive,” Reuters, March 30, 2012. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-macedonia-tensions-idUSBRE82T09620120330>

<sup>22</sup> Joseph, Toperich, and Vangelov, “Backing the Balkans.”

Table 1. Internal Vulnerabilities in the Western Balkans

Country	Nationalism	Historical Grievances	Corruption	Weak State Institutions	Weak Media	Economic Instability
Bosnia and Herzegovina	◆◆◆	◆◆	◆	◆◆◆	◆◆	◆◆◆
Macedonia	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆
Albania	◆◆	◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆
Serbia	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆
Montenegro	◆	◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆
Kosovo	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆◆
Croatia	◆◆	◆◆◆	◆	◆	◆◆	◆

Source: Danielle Johnson, Vera Zakem, and Bill Rosenau, CNA.

## Russia's Influence in the Western Balkans

In this section, we describe Russia's malign influence in the countries of the Western Balkans by identifying Russia's goals in the region and the instruments that Russia uses to exert influence on these countries and their populations.

Russia does not have a grand strategy towards the Western Balkans, but takes advantage of opportunities to protect its existing economic and security interests, expand its sphere of influence, and prevent Western encroachment. To this end, ***Russia's overarching goal in the region is to discredit Western institutions, including the EU and NATO, and the foundations of Western democracy in order to project and alter elements of power in the international system.***

Russia achieves this in the region by playing a spoiler role, rather than attempting to make territorial gains. Russia also exploits the perception of a power vacuum left by the United States and Europe, which have de-prioritized the Western Balkans in recent years, to create doubts about Western intentions and present partnership with Russia as a necessary alternative.

Russia has exerted influence on all elements of society of the Western Balkans countries. From political, socio-economic, media, security, and cultural spheres, Russia's influence can be felt in many elements of society in the Western Balkans. While this influence varies greatly by country, Russia's actions have contributed to the crisis of democratic governance in Serbia, Montenegro, and Macedonia. In addition, in Serbia and Macedonia, Russia's president Vladimir Putin is viewed favorably and perceived as a strong leader. However, it remains to be seen whether this represents a surface-level admiration or reflects a strong desire to model leadership, decision, and policy making in the Western Balkans on Russia's approach.

### Russia's instruments of influence

In order to understand Russia's influence in the Western Balkans, it is important to examine the instruments that Russia uses in order to achieve its objectives. Russia's elements of influence include: the spread of disinformation; exploiting national sentiment; historical narratives of Western maltreatment; cultural, religious, and

political influence; perception of economic influence; energy dependence; military cooperation; and intelligence gathering. We will briefly discuss each of these instruments in turn.

**The spread of disinformation.** Russia uses disinformation to exploit vulnerabilities in the media environments of Western Balkans countries. Stories in the Balkan press, particularly tabloid publications, contain a “grain of truth” but are otherwise light on facts and heavy on speculation and conspiracy theories. This causes consumers to question the accuracy of all media they encounter and leaves them more vulnerable to Russian narratives. These articles focus heavily on such topics as Russian military might and claims that the West is seeking to control or destroy the Balkans. For example, Russian conspiracies are widely quoted in Macedonian media, and are spread via entertainment and news shows on television and the internet.<sup>23</sup> These articles also may ignore the positive actions of Western countries towards the region altogether.<sup>24</sup>

**Exploiting nationalist sentiment.** Russia exploits nationalist sentiment in Western Balkans countries in order to shape bilateral and multilateral alliances, as part of its broader geopolitical objectives. A prime example is Russia’s approach to the recent referendum in Bosnia’s Republika Srpska. The leader of RS, Milorad Dodik, proposed to make January 9 an official holiday, implicitly celebrating the day the Bosnian Serbs declared a republic in 1992, sparking the Yugoslav wars. The referendum was widely seen as a test run for a 2018 plebiscite on independence for the RS. The international community warned against the referendum, Bosnia’s own Constitutional Court ruled against it, and even Serbia refused to support it. However, the referendum was still explicitly sanctioned by Russia.<sup>25</sup> Another example is in Macedonia, where Russia has exacerbated tensions between the Macedonian majority and the Albanian minority in order to further destabilize the country in the midst of its political crisis. In particular, Russia has worked to discredit the opposition by portraying them as

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<sup>23</sup> Semi-structured discussion with Metamorphosis, 9 September, 2016, Sjopje, Macedonia.

<sup>24</sup> Semi-structured discussion with Dragan Kremer, 5 September 2016, Belgrade, Serbia.

<sup>25</sup> Milivoje Pantovic, Danijel Kovacevic, and Srecko Latal, “Russia Lends Full Backing to Bosnian Serb Referendum,” BIRN, September 20, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/disputed-bosnian-serb-referendum-divides-russia-and-serbia-09-19-2016>.

insidious foreign agents<sup>26</sup> and spread rumors that Albania and Bulgaria were trying to partition the country.<sup>27</sup>

**Historical narratives of Western maltreatment.** Russia consistently emphasizes the NATO bombing of Serbia and Montenegro in 1999 to stop the ethnic cleansing of Kosovar Albanians as an example of the West's bad intentions towards the Slavic people of the Western Balkans. These narratives resonate among Serbs in particular, helping reinforce a sense of collective victimization. For example, to explain the Montenegrin government's refusal to hold a referendum on the country's likely NATO membership, Russia's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov claimed that "they know that most likely the people whom NATO bombarded a couple of decades ago have not forgotten it, and that will be difficult to accept with enthusiasm the idea of their leadership to forget many things by joining NATO."<sup>28</sup>

**Cultural and religious influence.** Russian overtures resonate among many Serbian communities across the Western Balkans who share pan-Slavic ideals and the traditions of Orthodox Christianity. Russia often relies on the Orthodox Church to spread its message throughout the region and encourage solidarity. For example, the head of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church opposed the government's decision to join sanctions against Russia by stating, "May he who is not loyal to the same language, same-blood Russia, have the living flesh fall off him, may he be cursed thrice and 3,000 times by me."<sup>29</sup> In Macedonia, the Russian Patriarchate has been building its own churches.<sup>30</sup> Given that Russia finances Orthodox churches elsewhere in Europe, this approach is likely to give Russia additional levers of influence in the country.<sup>31</sup> In addition, Russia finances and promotes NGOs and cultural organizations throughout the Western Balkans, but most prominently in Serbia,

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<sup>26</sup> "The Problems Foreign Powers Find in the Balkans," Stratfor, May 19, 2015, <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/problems-foreign-powers-find-balkans>; Gordana Knezevic, "Russia Sowing Doubt and Fear in Belgrade," RFE/RL, July 7, 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-sowing-doubt-fear-in-be/27844519.html>

<sup>27</sup> Franciso de Borja Lasheras, *Return to Instability: How Migration and Great Power Politics Threaten the Western Balkans*, European Council on Foreign Relations, March 21, 2016, [http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/return\\_to\\_instability\\_6045](http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/return_to_instability_6045)

<sup>28</sup> "Lavrov: Montenegrins have not forgotten NATO bombs," B92.net, February 10, 2016, [http://www.b92.net/eng/news/region.php?yyyy=2016&mm=02&dd=10&nav\\_id=96995](http://www.b92.net/eng/news/region.php?yyyy=2016&mm=02&dd=10&nav_id=96995).

<sup>29</sup> de Borja Lasheras, *Return to Instability*.

<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Braw, "Mixed Feelings in Macedonia As A Russian Orthodox Church Rises," RFE/RL, June 25, 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/content/macedonia-russian-orthodox-church-skopje/27093507.html>

<sup>31</sup> "Ecclesiastical diplomacy: A new Orthodox church next to the Eiffel Tower boosts Russian soft power," *The Economist*, December 5, 2016, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/erasmus/2016/12/ecclesiastical-diplomacy>.

Montenegro, Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania.<sup>32</sup> Russia has provided technical assistance to organizations opposing integration into the EU and NATO, particularly in Montenegro.<sup>33</sup> It is also suspected that Russia conducts covert intelligence activities under the guise of humanitarian support—for example, through the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Centre in Nis, in southern Serbia.<sup>34</sup>

**Political influence.** Russia exerts political influence by having a close relationship with pro-Russian/anti-Western political parties and politicians. Moscow retains close ties to Serbia’s and Macedonia’s ruling parties, Aleksandr Vucic’s Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and Nikola Gruevski’s VMRO DPMNE, respectively. In Serbia, President Tomislav Nikolic, a member of SNS, has repeatedly emphasized that Serbia and Russia have “exceptional political relations,” and SNS signed a cooperation agreement with Putin’s United Russia party in September 2011. Russia has consistently supported Serbia’s positions on its wartime conduct and on Kosovo’s independence. In return, Serbia awarded Putin the country’s highest decoration and sent officials to Victory Day celebrations in Moscow in defiance of a broader European boycott in the aftermath of Russia’s annexation of Crimea. More recently, Serbia refused to join Europe in sanctioning Russia, despite EU pressure in the midst of accession talks. In Macedonia, Russian flags have flown at pro-Gruevski rallies and the Russian Embassy’s staff in Skopje has increased by 25 percent.<sup>35</sup> Like Serbia, Macedonia has refused to join the sanctions regime against Russia. In Montenegro, which has a pro-Western government, the Kremlin used its connections to the small,

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<sup>32</sup> Jane Bojadzievski, “Experts: Russia Aims to Curb NATO, EU Aspirations in Balkans,” *Voice of America*, February 11, 2016, <http://www.voanews.com/a/experts-russia-aims-curb-nato-eu-aspirations-balkans/3187018.html>. See also, Jasmina Cesik. “Russia’s Orthodox Warrior Comes to the Aids of Kosovo’s Serbs.” February 2, 2014. RFE/RL. <http://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-serbs-russian-orthodox-warrior/25250663.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Simon Shuster, “Q&A: Duško Marković, the Prime Minister Stuck Between Putin and Trump in the Balkans,” *Time*, February 16, 2017, <http://time.com/4673038/dusko-markovic-montenegro-russia-nato/>; *Caught Between the East and West: The ‘Media War’ Intensifies in Serbia and Montenegro*, Center for International Media Assistance, March 10, 2016, <http://www.cima.ned.org/blog/serbia-and-montenegro/>.

<sup>34</sup> “Russian overtures: Moscow is regaining sway in the Balkans,” *The Economist*, February 25, 2017, <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21717390-aid-warplanes-and-propaganda-convince-serbs-russia-their-friend-moscow-regaining-sway>.

<sup>35</sup> Leonid Bershidsky, “Macedonia, the New U.S.-Russia Battlefield,” Bloomberg, May 19, 2015, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2015-05-19/macedonia-the-latest-u-s-russia-battlefield>; Boris Georgievski, “Macedonia: A Pawn in the Russian Geopolitical Game?” Deutsche Welle, May 26, 2015, <http://www.dw.com/en/macedonia-a-pawn-in-the-russian-geopolitical-game/a-18476013>.

pro-Russian opposition party New Serbian Democracy (NOVA) to foment anti-NATO protests in Podgorica.<sup>36</sup>

**Perceptions of economic influence.** While the EU is the largest provider of economic assistance to Serbia, polls show that Serbian citizens consistently view Russia as having a disproportionately high and positive economic impact on the country.<sup>37</sup> In contrast, in Montenegro, Russia has indeed been an important economic player since 2005, especially through wealthy, well-connected Russians who have spent billions in the real estate and tourism sectors. Russia is also the largest single foreign direct investor in the country.<sup>38</sup>

**Energy dependence.** Russia is a key energy supplier to the Western Balkans, particularly of natural gas. As a result, energy has become a key instrument of influence. Macedonia and Serbia are especially dependent on Russia for natural gas. One Serbian journalist claimed that when he asked the mayor of Nis, Serbia's third-largest city, about city gas prices for the winter, the response was, "You'd have to ask the Russians."<sup>39</sup> The fact that Russia can control access to and cost of heating during cold Balkan winters gives Russia leverage over the ruling party, since the latter's popularity could decline if the government is not seen to be working effectively with the Russians to keep gas prices low, or if the Kremlin were to shut off all gas in a retaliatory action as it has done in Ukraine.

**Military cooperation.** Although Serbia is officially militarily neutral and has significantly more military cooperation with the United States than with Russia, its engagements with Russia have increased over the years.<sup>40</sup> Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia has shown more interest in military engagement with Serbia, and has always emphasized its historical role as Serbia's protector. While in reality, Serbia gets little of substance from its military engagement with Russia, joint military

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<sup>36</sup> Charles Recknagel, "Pro-Russian Parties Seek to Derail Montenegro's NATO Bid," RFE/RL November 28, 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/content/montenegro-opposition-protests-nato-bid/27395329.html>

<sup>37</sup> Gordana Knezevic, "Wanting the Best of Both Worlds: How Serbs View Russia and EU," RFE/RL May 13, 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/content/wanting-best-both-worlds-serbs-view-russia-eu/27733200.html>

<sup>38</sup> Dusica Tomovic, "Putin's Party to Foster Ties with Montenegro," BIRN< April 11, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/putin-s-party-offers-closer-ties-to-montenegro-04-08-2016>

<sup>39</sup> Semi-structured phone discussion with Južne Vesti, September 28, 2016.

<sup>40</sup> Damien Sharkov, "Russia Launches Drills in Serbia as NATO Tensions Increase," *Newsweek*, November 2, 2016, <http://www.newsweek.com/russia-launches-drill-serbia-amidst-nato-tensions-516172>.

exercises and equipment purchases are covered much more heavily in the Serbian press than military cooperation with the United States.<sup>41</sup> In addition, fears of an “arms race” have been developing in the region, with Serbia seeking to procure weapons from Russia, and Croatia seeking to procure artillery systems from the United States.<sup>42</sup>

**Intelligence gathering.** Russian intelligence agencies are active across the Western Balkans.<sup>43</sup> In Serbia, Russian services reportedly exercise considerable influence over their local counterparts.<sup>44</sup> The president of Republika Srpska, the Serbian entity within BiH, allegedly has deep ties to Russian intelligence.<sup>45</sup> In Montenegro, two purported Russian spies were accused in November 2016 of plotting to assassinate Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic and establishing a pro-Russia government.<sup>46</sup>

Looking holistically, Russia’s influence in the Western Balkans region is not uniform. Russia uses different levers of influence in the region to discredit Western institutions and foundations for democracy, and uses vulnerabilities in the

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<sup>41</sup> Sasa Drogojlo, “Serbia Joins US Military Drills in Germany,” BIRN, August 22, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/serbia-joining-military-drill-with-us-armed-forces-in-germany-08-22-2016>

<sup>42</sup> “Serbo-Croatian rivalry fueling an arms race in the Balkans,” DW, January 1, 2016. <http://www.dw.com/en/serbo-croatian-rivalry-fueling-arms-race-in-the-balkans/a-18983163>.

<sup>43</sup> “Albanian Daily: Brennan Thanks ShSh for 'Engagement' Against Russian Intelligence,” *Panorama* (Tirana), December 20, 2016, OSE EUL2016122234730243.

<sup>44</sup> Milivoje Pantovic, “Dadic Defends Serbian Arms Deal With Russia,” *BalkanInsight*, December 13, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/dacic-serbia-getting-arms-donation-from-moscow-12-12-2016>, accessed February 1, 2017

“Two Pro-Russian BIA Agents Discharged From High-Level Advisory Positions in Serbian Secret Police,” *Blic Online* (Belgrade) June 19, 2015, OSE EUN2015062260935250; and “Serbia’s Vucic, Russia’s General Patrushev Meet To Discuss Security, Cooperation,” *Vecernje Novosti Online* (Belgrade), June 19, 2013, OSE EUN2013062028656457.

<sup>45</sup> “Plans for a ‘Great Serbia’ and the Kremlin’s Hybrid War in the Balkans,” *Euromaidan Press*, January 24, 2017, <http://euromaidanpress.com/2017/01/24/plans-for-a-great-serbia-and-the-kremlins-hybrid-war-in-the-balkans/#arvlbdata>, accessed February 1, 2017.

<sup>46</sup> Gordana Knezevic, “Montenegro’s NATO-Russia Chess Match,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), January 2, 2017, <http://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-nato-russia-chess-match/28210094.html>, accessed January 22, 2017; and “Montenegro Releases Names of Suspected Russian Assassins,” *Moscow Times*, November 18, 2016, <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/montenegro-releases-names-of-russians-suspected-in-assassination-attempt-56211>, accessed January 22, 2017. For reasons unknown, the two men were deported back to Russia via Belgrade.

environments of these countries to decrease the internal cohesion of society. As U.S. and European partners engage in the Western Balkans, they will need to devise a tailored strategy that seeks to counter Russia's influence in the region, and help these countries decrease sources of instability that make it particularly vulnerable to this influence. Table 2 depicts Russia's influence in the Western Balkans. Three diamonds indicate greatest influence and one diamond indicates the least influence.

Table 2. Russia's Instruments of Influence in the Western Balkans

Country	Disinformation	National Sentiment	Western Maltreatment	Cultural Religious	Political	Economic	Energy Dependence	Military Cooperation	Intelligence Gathering
Bosnia and Herzegovina	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆
Macedonia	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆	◆	◆◆
Albania	◆	◆	◆	◆◆	◆	◆◆	◆	◆	◆
Serbia	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆
Montenegro	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆	◆	◆	◆◆◆
Kosovo	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆	◆	◆◆	◆◆
Croatia	◆	◆	◆	◆	◆	◆	◆	◆	◆

Source: Vera Zakem and Danielle Johnson, CNA.

# International Terrorism and the Western Balkans

The spread of extremist Islamic ideology, the flow of Islamic State foreign fighters to conflicts in the Middle East, and the possible role of the Western Balkans as a transit zone for terrorists into Western Europe have been the principal counterterrorism focus for American and Western European policy makers and military leaders responsible for the Western Balkans. The origins of extremist Muslim influences in the Western Balkans can be traced to the conflicts that followed the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1945-1992). Those conflicts were bloodiest in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where an estimated 100,000 people were killed and 2 million more were displaced from their homes.<sup>47</sup> The broad influence from Middle Eastern countries—including Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and the Gulf States—has particularly brought the issues of violent extremism and the flow of foreign fighters to and from the Middle East to the forefront of regional instability in the Western Balkans.

The challenges posed by Islamic extremism and the flow of foreign fighters through the Western Balkans are closely related, but distinct enough to merit separate analytical treatment. In this section, we describe violent extremism and trends in Islamic radicalization in the region, the efforts to date to counter violent extremism (CVE), the flow of fighters to conflict zones, and the countermeasures undertaken by Western Balkans states.

## Violent extremism

The defense of Bosnian Muslims became a cause across the Muslim world, and, as they did in Afghanistan during the 1980s and early 1990s, money, materiel, and militants flowed in to besieged communities, with an estimated 4,000 *mujahedin*

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<sup>47</sup> United Nations International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, “The Conflicts,” <http://www.icty.org/en/about/what-former-yugoslavia/conflicts>, accessed January 15, 2017.

(holy warriors) serving during the 1992-1995 period.<sup>48</sup> As they did in Afghanistan, many of these militants embraced an extremist Salafist ideology that demanded the overthrow of what they considered apostate Muslim regimes and the strict application of sharia law.<sup>49</sup> These foreign militants, according to one local scholar, saw Bosnia as a “very good opportunity to introduce that kind of rigid religion [and they] came to the war specifically to try to convert young Bosnian Muslims.”<sup>50</sup> After the signing of the Dayton agreement, at least 1,000 *mujahedin* remained in BiH.<sup>51</sup>

Today, there are an estimated 3,000 Salafists in BiH, a tiny fraction of the country’s 1.6 million Muslims.<sup>52</sup> Salafist communities are present elsewhere in the region, notably in Kosovo and in Serbia’s southern Sandzak region. Typically, these communities are closed to outsiders. According to one press account, the denizens of one town in BiH live according to sharia law, with “shariah police” conducting regular patrols to ensure public compliance.<sup>53</sup> Men with shaved heads, long beards,

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<sup>48</sup> *Srebrenica: A “Safe” Area*, Appendix II, *Intelligence and the war in Bosnia 1992-1995: The Role of the Intelligence and Security Services*, Netherlands Institute for War Documentation, April 2002, <http://niod.nl/sites/niod.nl/files/C.%20Wiebes%20-%20Intelligence%20en%20de%20oorlog%20in%20Bosni%C3%AB%201992-1995.%20De%20rol%20van%20de%20inlichtingen-%20en%20veiligheidsdiensten%20-%20Engels.pdf>, accessed October 5, 2016. That said, a long tradition of secularism among Bosnian Muslims dating back to the Ottoman period, made foreign fighters, particularly from the Arab world, less welcome than they had been in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Marie Juul Petersen, *For Humanity Or for the Umma?: Aid and Islam in Transnational Muslim NGOs* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2016), 49.

<sup>49</sup> Christopher M. Blanchard, *The Islamic Traditions of Wahhabism and Salafiyya*, Congressional Research Service, January 24, 2008, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RS21695.pdf>, accessed January 11, 2017.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Jeff Swicord, “Seeds of Jihad Planted in the Balkans,” *Voice of America*, November 17, 2015, <http://www.voanews.com/a/seeds-of-jihad-planted-in-balkans/3062376.html>, accessed February 5, 2017,

<sup>51</sup> Dragan Simeunović and Adam Dolnik, “Security Threats of Violent Islamist Extremism and Terrorism for South East Europe and Beyond,” in Sharyl Cross, et al. (eds.), *Shaping South East Europe’s Security Community for the Twenty-First Century: Trust, Partnership, Integration* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 92.

<sup>52</sup> Rory Mulholland, “Muslim Radicals in Mountain Villages Spark Fears in Bosnia,” *Telegraph* (London), April 30, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/04/30/muslim-radicals-in-mountain-villages-spark-fears-in-bosnia/>, accessed October 2, 2016.

<sup>53</sup> “B-H Weekly Report: Wahhabism Spreading, New Members Recruited From Students,” *Slobodna Bosna* (Sarajevo), October 2, 2008, OSE, EUP20081006018001.

and shorter trousers characteristic of some Islamic extremists reportedly are commonplace in these towns and villages.<sup>54</sup>

Extremist imams, who preach in “unofficial” mosques known locally as *paradzemati* or “para-mosques,” have found receptive audiences among young, unemployed, and disillusioned Muslims.<sup>55</sup> According to a senior Albanian counterterrorism official, “The younger generations are not happy with life in our region . . . They [youths] use the internet and they are easy to mislead and radicalize and [some of] these persons could pose a credible threat.”<sup>56</sup> Factors such as the growth of networks of ideological extremists, the influx of cash from Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf states to support Salafist mosques and imams, and the reported spread of Islamic radicalism within Roma communities, have sparked official fears in the Western Balkans about what one analyst terms “creeping Islamization.”<sup>57</sup>

Such fears notwithstanding, violent extremism in the region is hardly confined to Muslim communities. In Serbia, for example, the extremist landscape includes so-called clerico-fascism, a mélange of ultra nationalism, Serbian Orthodoxy, and the hatred of the usual suspects, including Jews and Croats.<sup>58</sup> The extremist firmament also includes violent neo-Nazi skinhead groups clustered around soccer clubs like Red Star and Partizan in Belgrade.<sup>59</sup> Reportedly, Serbian extremists have served

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<sup>54</sup> Authors’ semi-structured discussion with Serbian security analyst, Belgrade, September 8, 2016.

<sup>55</sup> Marija Ristic, Zoran Maksimovic, and Sasa Dragojlo, “Jihadists ‘Target Young, Marginalised Serbian Muslims,” *BalkanInsight.com*, March 28, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/jihadists-target-young-marginalised-serbian-muslims-03-27-2016>, accessed September 21, 2016; and ; and Rodolfo Toe, “Bosnia Struggles to Control ‘Rebel’ Mosques,” *BalkanInsight*, April 26, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/bosnian-islamic-community-struggling-to-control-parallel-mosques-04-25-2016>, accessed October 29, 2016.

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Rodolfo Toe, “Incomplete Analysis Hinders Anti-Extremism in the Balkans,” *Balkaninsight.com*, March 31, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/incomplete-analysis-hinders-anti-extremism-in-the-balkans-03-30-2016>, accessed October 1, 2016.

<sup>57</sup> de Borja Lasheras, *Return to Instability*; “Italian Daily Reports on Jihadi Centers in Bosnia, Kosovo,” OSE, EUL20160809292447015, *Il Messaggero* (Rome, August 9, 2016); Predrag Petrović, *Islamic Radicalism in the Balkans*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, June 2016, <http://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/detail/article/islamic-radicalism-in-the-balkans/>, accessed July 20, 2016; and authors’ interviews with NGO personnel, Skopje, Macedonia, September 14, 2016.

<sup>58</sup> Jovo Bakic, *Right-Wing Extremism in Serbia*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, February 2013, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/09659.pdf>, accessed September 28, 2016.

<sup>59</sup> Igor Mladenovic, “Partizan Belgrade Banner Highlights Ultra Problem That Is Not Going Away,” *The Guardian* (London), September 25, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2014/sep/25/partizan-belgrade-banner-ultra-problem>, accessed January 5, 2017.

alongside Orthodox comrades at war in eastern Ukraine—in the words of one analyst, fighting in the name of “Orthodox Christian, not Islamic, brotherhood.”<sup>60</sup>

By most accounts, relatively little has been done in any formal way by governments in the region to counter these extremist narratives or reduce incentives for participation in extremist activities.<sup>61</sup> This is not to say that the Western Balkans countries have ignored violent extremism. Rather, in a resource-constrained environment, the countries in the region have emphasized a subset of the problem—the flow of fighters out of the region and into the Middle East.

## Flows of fighters to the Middle East

The data on participation of Muslims from the Western Balkans in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq are incomplete.<sup>62</sup> But in the judgment of many policy makers, scholars, and journalists, Muslims from the region have been overrepresented in those wars. According to one analyst, roughly 1,000 fighters from the Western Balkans traveled to Syria and Iraq between 2012 and 2016 in order to fight on behalf of IS—a level five times higher than those from Western Europe relative to population size.<sup>63</sup> Among

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<sup>60</sup> Jasmin Mujanović, “The Terror of Southeastern Europe’s Failing States,” *Freedom at Issue*, June 20, 2016, <https://freedomhouse.org/blog/terror-southeastern-europe-s-failing-states>, accessed September 17, 2016.

<sup>61</sup> According to the U.S. State Department, American public diplomacy programs in Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Serbia address “conditions that give rise to extremist views” within Muslim communities. Other allied institutions in Macedonia, Kosovo, and Bosnia have been working with disenfranchised local populations, including the Roma population and young Muslim communities to address root causes that make these populations particularly vulnerable to violent extremism. However, these efforts are somewhat limited.

<sup>62</sup> For more on this point, see Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler, *Then and Now: Comparing the Flow of Foreign Fighters to AQI and the Islamic State* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, December 2016), <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Then-and-Now.pdf>, accessed February 15, 2017.

<sup>63</sup> Adrian Shtuni, “The Western Balkans’ Islamic State Problem,” *Jane’s Terrorism & Insurgency Monitor*, January 8, 2016 (subscription required); and Adrian Shtuni, *Dynamics of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kosovo*, United States Institute of Peace, December 2016, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR397-Dynamics-of-Radicalization-and-Violent-Extremism-in-Kosovo.pdf>, accessed January 17, 2017; and Soufan Group, “Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq,” December 2015, [http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG\\_ForeignFightersUpdate\\_FINAL.pdf](http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate_FINAL.pdf), accessed January 10, 2017. However, the overall flow of foreign fighters appears to be dropping. A senior U.S. military commander announced in April 2016 that coalition airstrikes against ISIS infrastructure had dramatically reduced the flow of foreign fighters from roughly 2,000 per month to approximately 200 a month in 2016. Other factors, including the shrinking

the countries in the region, Kosovo has contributed more fighters on a per capita basis than any other, although it appears that most of this outflow took place relatively early in the current Middle East conflicts.<sup>64</sup>

Macedonia has also been a fertile recruiting ground. Roughly one-quarter of the country's 2.1 million people are Muslim ethnic Albanians, yet an estimated 110 individuals have gone to Syria and Iraq, where 27 of them have died.<sup>65</sup> Between 2012 and 2016, an estimated 50 Serbians went to the Middle East to fight.<sup>66</sup> One hundred and fifty-six Bosnian men (as well as 36 women and 25 children) traveled to the conflict zones between December 2012 and December 2014.<sup>67</sup> According to press accounts, some local religious leaders have tolerated or urged participation in foreign jihads. In Kosovo, these include imams at mosques in Pristina, Pec, and Mitrovica.<sup>68</sup>

In addition, a number of foreign fighters from the Middle East have traveled through, or set up recruitment and radicalization cells in, the Western Balkans in order to carry out terrorist operations on behalf of the Islamic State in Western Europe. Many have used porous borders along the Macedonia-Greece, Macedonia-Kosovo, and BiH-Serbia corridors to transfer arms and travel in support of terrorist activities in Western Europe. For example, two foreign fighters from Syria came through

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ability of ISIS to pay militants, have also contributed to the reduced flow. Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "Number of Foreign Fighters Entering Iraq and Syria Drops by 90 Percent, Pentagon Says," *Washington Post*, April 26, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/04/26/number-of-foreign-fighters-entering-iraq-and-syria-drops-by-90-percent-pentagon-says/?utm\\_term=.9d2c2144f191](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/04/26/number-of-foreign-fighters-entering-iraq-and-syria-drops-by-90-percent-pentagon-says/?utm_term=.9d2c2144f191); and Dodwell, Milton, and Rassler, *Then and Now*.

<sup>64</sup> "Commentary Views Factors for Increased Islamic Radicalization in Albania, Kosovo," OSE, EUL2017011035094621 Tirana *Gazeta Shqiptare* (Tirana), January 9, 2017.

<sup>65</sup> Sinisa Jakov Marusic, "Ethnic Tensions Complicate Counter-Extremism in Macedonia," *BalkanInsight.com*, March 29, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/ethnic-tensions-complicate-counter-extremism-in-macedonia-03-28-2016>, accessed September 26, 2016.

<sup>66</sup> Ristic, Maksimovic, and Dragojlo, "Jihadists 'Target Young, Marginalised Serbian Muslims.'" Muslims make up 3.1 percent of Serbia's population of 7.1 million people.

<sup>67</sup> Vlado Azinović and Muhamed Jusić, *The Lure of the Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters' Bosnian Contingent*, Atlantic Initiative, 2015, [http://atlanticinitiative.org/images/THE\\_LURE\\_OF\\_THE\\_SYRIAN\\_WAR\\_THE\\_FOREIGN\\_FIGHTERS\\_BOSNIAN\\_CONTINGENT/The\\_Lure\\_of\\_the\\_Syrian\\_War\\_-\\_The\\_Foreign\\_Fighters\\_Bosnian\\_Contingent.pdf](http://atlanticinitiative.org/images/THE_LURE_OF_THE_SYRIAN_WAR_THE_FOREIGN_FIGHTERS_BOSNIAN_CONTINGENT/The_Lure_of_the_Syrian_War_-_The_Foreign_Fighters_Bosnian_Contingent.pdf), accessed November 1, 2016. According to the report's authors, a considerable number of foreign fighters from BiH, as well as their families, "have at some point either resided or visited well-known Salafist communities in Gornja Maoča, Ošve, and Dubnica, or frequented Salafist mosques that operate outside the official structures of the Islamic Community in BiH, usually in and around major cities such as Sarajevo, Zenica, and Tuzla." Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> "Italian Daily Reports on Jihadi Centers in Bosnia, Kosovo," OSE, EUL20160809292447015, *Il Messaggero* (Rome), August 9, 2016.

Macedonia en route to France to engage in the 2015 Paris attack. Authorities discovered additional informants that contributed to the Paris attack from Macedonia.<sup>69</sup> For the same attack, authorities discovered explosives, Kalashnikov AK-47 rifles and a machine pistol from Croatia in Reda Kriket's apartment. Similarly, authorities discovered that other AK-47s used in the Paris attack were traced back to Zastava, a Serbian manufacturer.<sup>70</sup>

Under international pressure, and the fear that fighters who return from the Middle East will continue to engage in violent extremism, all of the Western Balkans states have passed legislation that criminalizes foreign fighters and support for them.<sup>71</sup> According to one estimate, at least 100 individuals have been prosecuted since 2014, when the criminal codes in most of the region were revised.<sup>72</sup> These include Husein "Bilal" Bosnic—deemed a "central figure" for BiH radicals—who received a seven-year sentence in November 2015.<sup>73</sup>

Although some observers welcomed the closing of what they considered loopholes in the criminal code, others criticized states in the region for focusing on criminalization rather than prevention. In the view of some experts, regional governments have exaggerated the threat and in so doing, compounded the problem. According to some scholars, preventive arrests, particularly in Kosovo, are "propelling victimization discourse that only fuel radicalism."<sup>74</sup> In addition, critics say, governments in the region have done little to engage Muslim civil society organizations and religious leaders, many of whom have publicly denounced violent

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<sup>69</sup> Semi-structured discussion with law enforcement representatives. Skopje, Macedonia, 10 September, 2016. In addition, some of the foreign fighters who have traveled to Western Europe did not have perceived grievances, but rather were esteemed members of society. For example, one of the fighters who engaged in the 2015 Paris attacks was a Macedonian doctor.

<sup>70</sup> "The Balkan Arms Trade: Ask now from whom the AK-47s flow," *The Economist*, April 16, 2016, <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21697019-answer-often-serbia-croatia-or-bulgaria-ask-not-whom-ak-47s-flow>

<sup>71</sup> Timothy Homan, "Foreign Fighters from the Western Balkans in Syria," *CTC Sentinel*, June 30, 2014, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/foreign-fighters-from-the-western-balkans-in-syria>, accessed January 20, 2017.

<sup>72</sup> Petrović, "Islamic Radicalism in the Balkans," 2.

<sup>73</sup> Valery Perry, *Countering the Cultivation of Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina: The Case for Comprehensive Education Reform* (Sarajevo: Democratization Policy Council, September 2015), p. 2.

<sup>74</sup> Austrian National Defence Academy, *Countering the Culture of Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans*, September 27-29, 2015, [http://www.bundesheer.at/pdf\\_pool/publikationen/pfpc\\_31st\\_rssee\\_policy.pdf](http://www.bundesheer.at/pdf_pool/publikationen/pfpc_31st_rssee_policy.pdf), accessed September 7, 2016; and Perry, *Countering the Cultivation of Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, p. 2.

extremism.<sup>75</sup> Finally, analysts have highlighted the absence of official interest in the challenge of rehabilitating and reintegrating those who have returned home.<sup>76</sup>

Regional politicians have claimed that their police and intelligence agencies are professional and highly skilled.<sup>77</sup> But hyperbolic claims about the scale of the terrorist threat—for example, the assertion by BiH's Intelligence Security Agency that there are 3,000 “terrorist-sleepers” afoot in that country—suggest that these agencies are incompetent, cynically seeking foreign aid, thoroughly politicized, or all three.<sup>78</sup> To be sure, terrorist groups, particularly small ones, can be notoriously difficult to penetrate.<sup>79</sup> But across the Western Balkans, internal security services lack the ability to conduct terrorist investigations, and must rely heavily on support from external agencies.<sup>80</sup> In BiH, as elsewhere, interagency fragmentation and distrust is deep.<sup>81</sup> The security-intelligence problem is compounded by the fact that security services, including the police, are unable (or unwilling) to recruit personnel within minority communities, where suspicion of the state is already high. In many instances, agencies responsible for combatting terrorism know relatively little about vulnerable Muslim communities.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Walter Mayr, “Sharia Villages: Bosnia’s Islamic State Problem,” *Spiegel Online*, April 5, 2016, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/islamic-state-presence-in-bosnia-cause-for-concern-a-1085326.html>, accessed September 20, 2016.

<sup>76</sup> Andreja Bogdanovski, *We Did Criminalize it: Now What? Western Balkans Response to the Foreign Fighters Threat*, Analytica, September 2014, [http://www.analyticamk.org/images/stories/files/2014/Foreign\\_Fighters.pdf](http://www.analyticamk.org/images/stories/files/2014/Foreign_Fighters.pdf), accessed September 15, 2016. A number of external actors are working to build the capacity of Western Balkans states to fight terrorism. These include the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, UNODC, and the United States, which provides specialized police training, technical advice, and “case-based mentoring” to help investigators and prosecutors to prosecute terrorism cases. U.S. Department of State, “Statement Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Europe,” April 29, 2015, <https://m.state.gov/md241335.htm>, accessed January 5, 2017.

<sup>77</sup> See, for example, “Minister Says Macedonia Has ‘High Professional Capabilities’ to Tackle Terrorism,” *MIA* (Skopje), OSE, July 29, 2016. In addition, while a number of external actors are working to build capacity in the Western Balkans to fight terrorism, a number of gaps remain with respect to security services.

<sup>78</sup> “B-H: Foreign Intelligence Officers Arrive to Search for ‘Terrorist-Sleepers,’” *Dnevni List Online* (Mostar), Open Source Enterprise (OSE), EUL2015050536959186, May 5, 2015.

<sup>79</sup> Marusic, “Ethnic Tensions Complicate Counter-Extremism in Macedonia.”

<sup>80</sup> Ebi Spahiu, “Militant Islamists, Organized Crime and Balkan Diaspora in Europe,” *Jane’s Terrorism Monitor*, December 2, 2015 (subscription required).

<sup>81</sup> “B-H: Foreign Intelligence Officers Arrive to Search for ‘Terrorist-Sleepers.’”

<sup>82</sup> Semi-structured discussions with journalists, analysts, and NGOs, Belgrade, September 8-9, 2016, and Skopje, September 12-13, 2016.

## Transnational Crime in the Western Balkans

In this section, we discuss the threat of transnational organized crime in the Western Balkans. For the purposes of this paper, we define organized crime as a “serious criminal activity involving three or more people that is profit-driven.”<sup>83</sup> Organized crime is no longer confined to ethnic enclaves or bounded by individual countries—it is a transnational phenomenon.<sup>84</sup> According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), organized crime has “gone global and reached macro-economic proportions: illicit goods are sourced from one continent, trafficked across another, and marketed in a third.”<sup>85</sup>

The illicit flow of goods, people, and weapons has been part of the political economy of the Western Balkans for centuries. For hundreds of years, this mountainous region sat on a political, cultural, social, and economic fault line where the Russian,

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<sup>83</sup> John de Boer and Louise Bosetti, *The Crime-Conflict ‘Nexus’: State of the Evidence*, United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, Occasional Paper 5, July 2015, [http://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:3134/unu\\_cpr\\_crime\\_conflict\\_nexus.pdf](http://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:3134/unu_cpr_crime_conflict_nexus.pdf), accessed October 30, 2016.

<sup>84</sup> See, for example, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), “Organized Crime,” undated, <https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/organized-crime>, accessed January 10, 2016; and Peter Gastrow, *Transnational Organised Crime: The Stepchild of Crime-Fighting Priorities*, Institute for Strategic Studies, October 2013, <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/PolBrief46.pdf>, accessed January 3, 2017.

<sup>85</sup> UNODC, “The Globalization of Crime.” Organized crime could also be seen as a form “deviant globalization,” that is, “the portion of the global economy that meets demand for good and services that are illegal or considered repugnant in one place by using a supply from some other part of the world where morals are different or law enforcement is less effective.” Nils Gilman, Jesse Goldhammer, and Steven Weber, “Deviant Globalization,” in Michael Miklaucic and Jacqueline Brewer (eds.), *Convergence: Illicit Networks and National Security in the Age of Globalization* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2013), p. 5.

Ottoman, and Austrian empires converged, and functioned as a gateway that linked Europe, Asia, and the Middle East.<sup>86</sup>

This geography has been a curse as well as a blessing. In the words of one scholar, the Western Balkans functioned as a “rural buffer zone” between competing powers, which gave the region considerable strategic importance. At the same time, as a bridge connecting Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, the Western Balkans provided a transit zone for suppliers of illicit goods (such as heroin) and highly lucrative markets in Western Europe—the so-called Balkan route.<sup>87</sup> Its external inaccessibility created few incentives for economic development, further strengthening its geographic position as a buffer zone.<sup>88</sup>

Factors other than geography also contributed to the region’s position as a haven for organized criminal enterprises. Mutual distrust between citizens and the state, pervasive corruption, weak civil society, and a culture of impunity with respect to crime are a reflection of, and a response to, pervasive criminal behavior. The corrosive effects of these factors further erode serious efforts to control organized crime—indeed, they enable it.<sup>89</sup>

In the judgment of Europol, organized crime “encourages other forms of criminality, decreasing tax revenues and reducing respect for the law and state institutions in a vicious circle that increases vulnerability to further exploitation and

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<sup>86</sup> Misha Glenny, “The Refugee Crisis Has Produced One Winner: Organized Crime,” *New York Times*, September 20, 2015, [https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/21/opinion/the-refugee-crisis-has-produced-one-winner-organized-crime.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/21/opinion/the-refugee-crisis-has-produced-one-winner-organized-crime.html?_r=0), accessed June 12, 2016.

<sup>87</sup> Dafne Papandrea, “Introduction: The General Situation of Organised Crime in the Western Balkans,” in Roberto Forte (ed.), *Organised Crime and the Fight Against Crime in the Western Balkans: a Comparison with the Italian Models and Practices: General Overview and Perspectives for the Future*, undated, <http://www.tecla.org/files/1123.pdf>, accessed October 4, 2016.

<sup>88</sup> Giulia Tarantini, *The Balkan Route: Organized Crime in South-Eastern Europe - Root Causes, Current Developments and Future Prospects*, United Nations University-Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies, WW--201 2014/ 6/4, <http://cris.unu.edu/sites/cris.unu.edu/files/W-2016-4.pdf>, accessed December 4, 2016. Moreover, the peculiarities of Ottoman rule led to a complex array of import and export tariffs, varying levels of taxation, a web of regulations—and rich opportunities for arbitrage, smuggling, and speculation. Such activities are rife today, with cigarettes and gasoline among the most important goods being smuggled to avoid taxation. Aida A. Hozic, “The Balkan Merchants: Changing Borders and Informal Transnationalization,” in Denisa Kostovicova and Vesna Bojicic-Dzelilovic (eds.), *Transnationalism in the Balkans* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 35.

<sup>89</sup> Peter van Ham, *Gridlock, Corruption and Crime in the Western Balkans: Why the EU Must Acknowledge its Limits*, Netherlands Institute of International Relations, October 2014, <https://www.clingendael.nl/sites/default/files/Gridlock%20Corruption%20and%20Crime%20in%20the%20Western%20Balkans.pdf>, accessed November 2, 2016.

destabilization.”<sup>90</sup> Put another way, persistent and pervasive organized crime has a toxic impact on the social order. This is certainly the case in the Western Balkans, where organized crime both reflects and contributes to norms against vice, violence, and predation.<sup>91</sup>

Finally, organized crime in the region has been strongly influenced by the turbulent political events of the 20th century, and, in particular, the decade of war that followed the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the transition to a post-Communist society. Indeed, organized crime can be viewed, at least in part, as a rational response to 10 years of war, its messy aftermath, and an incomplete political reconciliation.<sup>92</sup> International sanctions heightened incentives for smuggling; black markets became means for survival; normative obstacles to the use of violence to settle disputes collapsed; the backwash of weapons produced a heavily armed citizenry; and the hardening of in-group identities—a typical byproduct of civil war—“allowed violent entrepreneurs and organized criminals to cloak themselves in the mantle of community protection.”<sup>93</sup>

## The current threat

The most powerful organized crime groups in the Western Balkans occupy the same geographical positions they did in the 1990s. Ethnic Albanian gangs operate in Kosovo, northern Macedonia, and southern Serbia. These groups have played a major role in the trafficking of women for sexual exploitation, and have exerted considerable control over the “Balkan route.”<sup>94</sup> Serbian criminals ply their trades in

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<sup>90</sup> Europol, “EU Drug Markets Report: In-Depth Analysis,” 2016, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/eu-drug-markets-report-2016>, accessed December 5, 2016.

<sup>91</sup> For more on anomic organized crime, see Joseph L. Albin and Jeffrey Scott McIlwain, *Deconstructing Organized Crime: An Historical and Theoretical Study* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2012), 166-167.

<sup>92</sup> Rosa Balfour and Corina Stratulat, *The Democratic Transformation of the Balkans*, European Policy Center (EPC), EPC Issue Paper No. 66, November 2011, [http://www.epc.eu/documents/uploads/pub\\_1363\\_the\\_democratic\\_transformation\\_of\\_the\\_balkans.pdf](http://www.epc.eu/documents/uploads/pub_1363_the_democratic_transformation_of_the_balkans.pdf), accessed November 10, 2016.

<sup>93</sup> James Cockayne, *Hidden Power: The Strategic Logic of Organized Crime* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 313.

<sup>94</sup> NATO Parliamentary Assembly, “Organised Crime - Drug and Human Trafficking in Europe,” 141 CCDG 03 E rev. 1, November 9, 2003, 03 E rev. 1, <http://www.nato-pa.int/default.asp?SHORTCUT=368>, accessed January 30, 2017.

and around Belgrade. And, slightly farther afield, Bulgarian groups work along their borders with Macedonia and Serbia.<sup>95</sup>

Cross-border illegal trade is the lifeblood of the region's organized crime groups. In the words of two prominent analysts:

Borders are heaven—they are nirvana for traffickers and for the illicit networks in which they function. National borders are what create the price differentials that drive the immense profits of illicit commerce.<sup>96</sup>

In the Western Balkans, this illicit trade occurs along a normative spectrum. At one end are the damaging and perhaps repugnant crimes involving the smuggling and arbitrage of consumer goods. At the other end are crimes that are utterly transgressive, such as trafficking in human beings, particularly for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Somewhere between these two poles are the illegal small-arms and light weapons trade, drug trafficking, and the trade in stolen goods—each a steady and reliable source of income.

In general, the Western Balkans remains a transit zone rather than a final destination. For example, the region was an attractive and lucrative market for arms dealers during the wars of the 1990s, but that market has essentially disappeared. Instead, weapons cached after the wars are today flowing out of the Balkans and into the hands of combatants in the Middle East and Africa.<sup>97</sup> The exception to this trend is the illegal drug trade. According to the UNODC, the region itself is becoming a market as the demand for drugs appears to be increasing.<sup>98</sup>

The global reach of organized crime groups in the Western Balkans is perhaps best illustrated by the cocaine trade. Criminals in the Balkans have allied themselves with cocaine producers in South America. Organized crime groups in the region play a key role in facilitating the transcontinental movement of the drug into Western and

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<sup>95</sup> Glenny, "Refugee Crisis Has Produced One Winner."

<sup>96</sup> Michael Miklaucic and Moisés Naim, "The Criminal State," in Michael Miklaucic and Jacqueline Brewer (eds.), *Convergence: Illicit Networks and National Security in the Age of Globalization* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2013), 151.

<sup>97</sup> Dejan Anastasijevic, "Organized Crime in the Western Balkans," undated, [http://www.etc-graz.at/cms/fileadmin/user\\_upload/humsec/Workin\\_Paper\\_Series/Working\\_Paper\\_Anastasijevic.pdf](http://www.etc-graz.at/cms/fileadmin/user_upload/humsec/Workin_Paper_Series/Working_Paper_Anastasijevic.pdf), accessed October 17, 2016.

<sup>98</sup> UNODC, "The Illicit Drug Trade Through South-Eastern Europe," March 2014, [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/Illicit\\_DT\\_through\\_SEE\\_REPORT\\_2014\\_web.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/Illicit_DT_through_SEE_REPORT_2014_web.pdf), accessed September 15, 2016.

Central European ports, according to the UN's International Narcotics Control Board.<sup>99</sup>

## Response efforts to date

Given the factors outlined in the earlier parts of this section, it is easy to see why these countries' police, prosecutors, and judiciary have made few inroads against organized crime groups. States in the region lack the will and the capacity to target and fight organized crime in a sustained way. It is widely assumed that criminal groups have suborned policemen and other officials. Corruption permeates all aspects of society. Widespread distrust of government authorities makes the public reluctant to cooperate in the arrest and prosecution of suspected criminals.<sup>100</sup>

With the luster of the EU greatly reduced, the enthusiasm of local elites for the membership of countries such as Serbia has waned greatly. As a result, the reforms demanded by the EU, which among other things could have improved the capacity and will of states to fight organized crime, are unlikely to be implemented. Nor can states in the region look to Western Europe for much wherewithal to combat crime, as many European countries are suffering from "Balkan fatigue" after decades of involvement in the region.<sup>101</sup> The deep financial crisis in the region further diminishes prospects for more vigorous efforts against the challenges posed by organized crime.

Despite official pledges to embrace community-oriented policing—the dominant law-enforcement paradigm in Western Europe—it has gained little traction in the countries of the region.<sup>102</sup> At the regional level, prospects appear somewhat brighter.

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<sup>99</sup> United Nations, "International Narcotics Control Board Report, 2015," [https://issuu.com/uniccanberra/docs/report\\_of\\_the\\_international\\_narcoti](https://issuu.com/uniccanberra/docs/report_of_the_international_narcoti)," accessed November 4, 2016.

<sup>100</sup> In Kosovo, for example, only 14 percent of those surveyed in 2016 expressed trust in the country's government institutions. Kosovo Security Barometer, *Special Edition: The Citizen's Views Against Violent Extremism and Radicalization in Kosovo*, Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, June 13, 2016, <http://www.qkss.org/en/Reports/The-citizens-views-against-violent-extremism-and-radicalization-in-Kosovo-710>, accessed September 9, 2016.

<sup>101</sup> de Borja Lasheras, *Return to Instability*.

<sup>102</sup> Semi-structured discussions with U.S. government officials, US embassy, Skopje, Macedonia, September 10, 2016; and Republic of Serbia, "Development Strategy of the Ministry of Interior, 2011-2016," December 2010, [http://arhiva.mup.gov.rs/cms\\_eng/home.nsf/2011-\\_2016\\_DEVELOPMENT\\_STRATEGY\\_OF\\_THE\\_MINISTRY\\_OF\\_INTERIOR\\_rev\\_210211-01.pdf](http://arhiva.mup.gov.rs/cms_eng/home.nsf/2011-_2016_DEVELOPMENT_STRATEGY_OF_THE_MINISTRY_OF_INTERIOR_rev_210211-01.pdf), accessed October 19, 2016.

For example, the Southeast European Law Enforcement Center, whose members include all of the Western Balkan countries except Kosovo, works to enhance international coordination on fighting transborder crime. In the view of some experts, this organization has had some successes in developing enhanced responses to organized crime threats.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Southeast European Law Enforcement Center, <http://www.selec.org/m106/About+SELEC>, accessed December 19, 2016; and James Cohen, Joyce Kasee Mills, and Leanne McKay, *Building Regional Border Security Cooperation: Lessons from the Maghreb*, United States Institute of Peace, September 19, 2016, <http://www.usip.org/publications/2016/09/19/building-regional-border-security-cooperation-lessons-the-maghreb>, accessed January 10, 2017. The UNODC has provided considerable technical assistance in the region. In its programs in Serbia and Montenegro, UNODC is working to build local criminal intelligence capacities within the criminal police and other law enforcement agencies such as the border police and the tax authorities. UNODC, “Support to Criminal Intelligence Capacity in Montenegro and Serbia,” <http://www.unodc.org/southeasterneurope/en/xce/t86.html>, accessed January 15, 2017.

## Findings and Implications

Having examined internal vulnerabilities in the Western Balkans countries that have given an opening to external and transnational threats such as Russia’s influence, international terrorism, and transnational organized crime, our findings and implications highlight a number of worrying trends that merit additional scrutiny by U.S. and European policy makers and military leaders. Unaddressed, these challenges will contribute to increased regional instability, and may directly affect U.S. and European interests as state and non-state actors seek to gain preeminence in the international system. In this section, we summarize our findings, and present overarching implications for U.S. and European partners to consider when engaging in the Western Balkans region.

### Summary of findings

Summary points of our findings are discussed in turn below.

**Unaddressed sources of instability in the Western Balkans have made the region more vulnerable and susceptible to external influence and threats, including from Russia, terrorism, and transnational organized crime.** In recent years, internal vulnerabilities such as the rise of nationalism, historical grievances, corruption, weakened state institutions and media, and unemployment have impacted the fabric of society in the Western Balkans countries. These vulnerabilities have left these countries unstable and set conditions for state and non-state actors to influence them.

**The West has disengaged from the Western Balkans due to transnational challenges facing Western Europe, such as migration, international terrorism, and a resurgent Russia.** It is now experiencing “*Balkan fatigue*.” Given the severity of internal vulnerabilities and regional instability, the Western Balkans countries are unlikely to resolve these challenges on their own. Without greater investment and support from the United States and Europe, the Western Balkans may continue to be susceptible to greater influence from Russia, violent extremists, and/or transnational criminal organizations.

**The Western Balkans are likely to become a significant playing field for the competition between Russia and the West.** Russia has played a “spoiler role” by

using information, political, economic, and military tools in order to discredit Western institutions, including NATO and the EU, discredit foundations for Western democracy, and strategically project and alter elements of power in Western Balkans countries. Russia has chosen to intervene and take advantage of internal vulnerabilities in the Western Balkans by aligning with nationalist and corrupt elements, and interfering in their internal affairs such as elections.

**Violent extremist ideology has taken root among select Muslim communities in the Western Balkans due to influence from the greater Middle East, including Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States.** Due to relatively weak institutions and other sources of instability, the governments, civil society, and religious institutions of Western Balkans countries have taken limited steps to work with disenfranchised populations.

**Porous borders are a transit zone for criminal networks and are used to transfer drugs, people, and weapons.** Transnational criminal organizations routinely exploit the poorly secured borders in the region to transfer and ship weapons, drugs, and humans from the Western Balkans to global destinations, including Western Europe, the Middle East, and South America. Corruption, distrustful and ill-prepared security and intelligence services, lack of border patrol, and lack of economic opportunity have enabled porous borders to become a fertile ground for criminal operations in the region.

Looking holistically at the Western Balkans, the table below depicts the extent of external influence and internal vulnerabilities.

Table 3. External Influence and Internal Vulnerabilities in the Western Balkans

Countries	Influence			Internal Vulnerabilities					
	I1	I2	I3	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6
Bosnia and Herzegovina	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆	◆	◆◆◆	◆◆	◆◆◆
Macedonia	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆
Albania	◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆	◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆
Serbia	◆◆◆	◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆
Montenegro	◆◆◆	◆	◆	◆	◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆
Kosovo	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆	◆◆◆
Croatia	◆	◆	◆	◆◆	◆◆◆	◆	◆	◆◆	◆

I1: Russian Influence  
 I2: Terrorism, including radicalization, violent extremism, and the flow of foreign fighters  
 I3: Transnational organized crime

V1: Nationalism  
 V2: Historical grievances  
 V3: Corruption  
 V4: Weakened state institutions  
 V5: Weak media  
 V6: Economic instability

◆ Least severe  
 ◆◆ Moderately severe  
 ◆◆◆ Most severe

Source: Vera Zakem, CNA.

## Implications

Given limited engagement in the region, the U.S. and its European partners will need to employ a proactive strategy in the Western Balkans in order to address root causes of instability driven by internal vulnerabilities and external threats from Russia, international terrorism, and transnational organized crime. Below, we discuss implications for U.S. and European military and policy leaders to consider in order to mitigate these vulnerabilities and threats.

1. **Greater investment is needed in civil society institutions** in order to make the Western Balkans less vulnerable and susceptible to external influence from Russia, to international terrorism, and to transnational organized crime. Such programs may include development of independent media and higher

standards of professional journalism; increased educational opportunities; and development of religious, cultural, and professional non-government organizations.

2. **Greater investment in economic growth and employment opportunities is needed** in order to prevent “brain drain” out of the Western Balkans, reduce the ongoing migration crisis in Europe, and make vulnerable populations less susceptible to radicalization, violent extremism, and organized crime. Such investment by U.S. and European partners may include providing micro-loans, direct and multilateral economic assistance, job training, and tailored economic opportunities for targeted disenfranchised segments of the population in the Western Balkans countries.
3. **Greater investment in discrediting disinformation and propaganda in the region from Russia, ISIS, and criminal actors is needed** in order to counter negative and malign messages and perceptions coming from these adversary actors in an effort to promote stability in the region. U.S. and European partners should consider investing resources in developing positive narratives and actions targeted towards independent voices and vulnerable populations in the region in an effort to promote Western democracy and institutions.
4. **Greater investment in initiatives that focus on law enforcement, border security, intelligence, community policing, interdiction, and collaboration is warranted** in order to counter transnational organized crime and address vulnerabilities in civil society that make individuals and groups more susceptible to engaging in criminal activities in the region. Such initiatives should focus on anti- and counter-corruption programs and the development of good governance of state institutions.
5. **Further research is needed in order to assess competition for influence, and the likelihood of effectiveness of U.S. and European programs and initiatives** that aim to strengthen internal vulnerabilities in the Western Balkans, and mitigate external and transnational threats posed by Russia, international terrorism, and transnational organized crime. This includes analysis of how these actors manipulate sources of instability in the Western Balkans countries, and ways that U.S. and European programs and initiatives seek to strengthen the environment as a way to counter external threats.

## Conclusion

Having survived the end of Ottoman rule, the disintegration of Yugoslavia, and the wars of the 1990s, the countries in the Western Balkans region are currently plagued by internal vulnerabilities and external influences that have made them particularly unstable. This instability is characterized by weak civil societies and institutions that are plagued by internal vulnerabilities. As a result, these countries have been the target of influence and support from state and non-state actors such as Russia, international terrorists and their supporters, and organized criminal organizations. Further, lack of engagement by U.S. and European partners has created an opening in the Western Balkans countries for these and other external forces to take advantage of vulnerabilities in the environment in order to discredit Western institutions and way of life.

In order to fully assess competition for influence in the Western Balkans region, further research and analysis is necessary to better understand the environment, external influencers, and U.S. and European actions in the Western Balkans. First, through additional fieldwork to other countries in the region, such as Croatia, Montenegro, Albania, and Bosnia, it is important to examine the full extent of internal vulnerabilities in the environment. Second, further examination must focus on external state influence from countries beyond Russia, including Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf States, as well as China and Turkey. Third and finally, an evaluation of current U.S. and European programs and initiatives is needed in order to understand what actions may be successful in deterring, countering, and preventing external actors from manipulating internal vulnerabilities of the Western Balkans countries, and how to best strengthen the environment in order to make it less susceptible to external influence. Such an evaluation would position U.S. and European partners well in developing a comprehensive strategy to keep the Western Balkans and Europe at large “whole and free.”

## Appendix: Organizations Contacted in Macedonia and Serbia

Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, Serbia

Open Society, Serbia

Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)

U.S. Embassy, Serbia

U.S. Embassy, Macedonia

Association of Journalists of Macedonia

Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, Macedonia

Metamorphosis Foundation, Macedonia

Media Development Center, Macedonia

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