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The Western Balkan Security and Defence College and its benefits for the region

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study explores the benefits of the proposal developed by the Central European Defence Cooperation (CEDC) to establish a Western Balkan Security and Defence College (WBSDC), for the partners within the region as well as the European Union at large. The analysis advises that establishing and operating a College focussed on security and defence for military, civilian, and diplomatic staff would greatly enhance the capacity building in the participating partner countries while contributing to overcoming historical grievances.

Through pooling resources and drawing on best practices from pre-existing similar institutions such as the Baltic Defence College, benefits in both the quality and efficiency of education can be realised. In turn, this would also provide partners with limited resources with the necessary tools to contribute more effectively and sustainably to regional as well as European security and stability. A College of this nature could thus serve as a stepping stone towards transforming the Western Balkans region from a recipient of security measures to a contributor to the European security architecture. Additionally, the College has the potential to uniting of the relevant personnel within the same educational facility, contribute to the development of a common strategic culture and understanding of security policy in the long-term, and supporting partners to addressing and solving multiple challenges related to security and defence.

At the same time, the shared educational experience could help mitigate animosities between nations in the region by fostering a sense of unity and shared identity among peers from diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, this initiative would not only strengthen the links between the Western Balkan partners and the EU, but also represent a further advance towards their EU accession. This would also result in strengthening the EU's role and active involvement in the region and curb the influence of foreign actors, namely Russia, China and Turkey. The regional interference of Russia, as well as to a lesser extent China and Turkey, jeopardises the strategic trajectory of the region and hinders the Western Balkans region Euro-Atlantic integration. Efforts must be made to counter this influence, while focusing on building resilience within the region. Finally, establishing the WBSDC could yield positive effects in terms of democratic development and political stability in participating countries through placing emphasis on the conveyance of European values and identity.

The most suitable country in the Western Balkans region to host the WBSDC would be Montenegro, based on the findings of this study paper. After analysing and accessing the advantages and risks of each country in the region, Montenegro emerged as the most strategic and best equipped country to host the College. This conclusion is based on the country's solid economic framework, strategic and readily accessible position, coupled with a persistent and strong inclination towards European integration, elements which together reduce potential risks that may impede the establishment the College.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Central European Defence Cooperation (CEDC) and the format's proposal to establish a Western Balkan Security and Defence College (WBSDC)

The Central European Defence Cooperation (CEDC) is the primary central European forum focused on security and defence matters. The format was established in 2010 and consists of the Ministries of Defence from six countries (Austria, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia and Croatia), with the aim of enhancing regional security within the EU and the NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) while remaining in line with the countries' national priorities and strategic interests.¹ The projects and initiatives of the CEDC focus on strengthening interoperability, resilience, and cultural exchange and by the latter, promote regional cooperation. By adopting this approach, the format aspires to establish a foundation for the development of a common strategic defence and security culture among the member states.²

One of the most important focal points of the CEDC lies in the Western Balkans, as deepening and broadening of cooperation with the partners of the Western Balkans represents a shared goal. One way to facilitate and support this objective is by fostering increased cooperation among the CEDC countries and the Western Balkans through dialogues and exchange formats at the civilian and military level. The establishment and maintenance of a shared security and defence culture is a crucial strategic ambition, as it creates an additional window to prepare and facilitate the EU accession of the Western Balkans region. "The future of the Western Balkans is in our Union."³ The European interest to integrate the Western Balkans into the EU could not have been expressed in a more explicit and confident way, than by Ursula von der Leyen's State of the Union Address in 2023. In this context, the CEDC, along with its initiatives and projects, supports comprehensive reforms, strengthens the resilience of the Western Balkans, and facilitates advanced regional cooperation – efforts that pave the way towards EU accession.⁴

Given the current geopolitical developments, increasing authoritarianism, and the heightened insecurities caused by the recent escalation of violent conflicts in the European geographic periphery, the EU's ambition to forge closer relations with the Western Balkans and integrate its countries more closely into the Union is more relevant than ever before. As laid out in the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, the EU remains "committed to improve the resilience of societies and democratic processes, political institutions and critical infrastructure in the Western Balkans."⁵ In this context, the successful efforts of the CEDC can be identified as instrumental drivers to implement this commitment by establishing stronger ties with the Western Balkan partner countries through reinforcing measures to continue and expand fruitful collaboration.⁶

¹ Central European Defence Cooperation. 2022. "Info", A Security and Defence Platform for Seven Central European States.

² Central European Defence Cooperation. 2022. "Info", A Security and Defence Platform for Seven Central European States.

³ Von der Leyen, U. 2023. „2023 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen“.

⁴ Central European Defence Cooperation. 2022. "CEDC+ Western Balkans" CEDC.

⁵ European Western Balkans. 2022. „Tailored partnership with the Western Balkans part of the EU's new Strategic Compass“.

⁶ Central European Defence Cooperation. 2022. "Non-paper on potential EPF assistance measure in BIH to establish a Western Balkan Defence College."

Against this background, one concrete novel initiative is particularly promising, as it combines inclusive cooperation in the security and defence sector among the Western Balkan partners with building capacities and resilience to overcome historic divides while simultaneously reducing foreign interference. In the framework of Austria's 2022 CEDC presidency, while being faced with the drastic and wide-ranging implications of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, Austria reinforced the aim of implementing defence cooperation through joint projects, with special emphasis on the Western Balkans region.⁷ This ambition and the increasing insecurity in Europe gave birth to the proposal for the establishment of a Western Balkan Security and Defence College (WBSDC), which has been positively received by all CEDC Member States. The Czech Republic, which took over the rotating CEDC presidency in 2023, continues the efforts initiated by Austria and supports the formation of the WBSDC.⁸

This study explores the current stage of the proposition and focusses on identifying the potentials of the Western Balkan Security and Defence College for the region and the EU. On the one hand, lessons and best practices are being drawn from already existing platforms and facilities. Thereby, the Baltic Defence College is highlighted as a relevant role model due to its inclusive regional characteristic and the combination of security and defence components in its training programmes designed for civilian and military personnel. On the other hand, the paper offers country specific analysis in order to provide a brief insight into the current stage of military education and training institutions in the Western Balkans while investigating advantages and risks of the WBSDC for the individual countries. In addition, the study advocates for a more secure and stable Western Balkans region, through intensified EU rapprochement and minimised authoritarian interference. The establishment and successful implementation of the Western Balkan Security and Defence College is a concrete and feasible measure to contribute to these ambitions.

2. THE WESTERN BALKAN SECURITY AND DEFENCE COLLEGE (WBSDC) – THE CONCEPT IN DETAIL

To further increase interoperability and intercultural exchange in the Western Balkans, the CEDC proposed the establishment of a Security and Defence College in and for the Western Balkans. Although the exact location where the College should be established has not yet been determined, this study concludes that Montenegro offers the ideal conditions, for numerous reasons mentioned in the country specific analysis chapter. Due to the lowest level of risks, it is the most suitable country for the establishment of the College.

The CEDC countries declared their readiness to support the operational aspects of the project by contributing teaching personnel (lecturers and trainers) in order to allow for a security and defence education based on European values and objectives. This would not only promote regional cooperation, but also strengthen national resilience, limit external influences, and secure

⁷ Honvedelem.hu. 2022. "Neighbors and Allies."

⁸ Honvedelem.hu.2022. 2022. "Neighbors and Allies."

a pro-European mind-set for the military elites and personnel. The proposed teaching language of the WBSDC is English.⁹

Security cannot be taken for granted; it requires active political and military engagement. Therefore, the primary objective should lie on assisting the Western Balkan partners in building up their military and civilian capacities through a professional security and defence College that offers standardised programmes for military personnel, police forces, as well as diplomatic officials. This would empower the Western Balkans to achieve more unified and efficacious responses in confronting the multiple security issues they encounter. Through applying not only a structured teaching approach but simultaneously integrating European standards and values into the capacity building measures, these efforts would also contribute to bringing the Western Balkan partners closer to the EU's common security and defence policy. The overall aim is to assist the regional governments to contribute to regional security from within, in order to enable and strengthen the local security apparatus and national border protection, which would in turn enhance the security of the EU in a synchronised fashion.

The WBSDC would unite the Western Balkans through a standardised higher military and security education based on European principles and proficiency. By providing the Western Balkans with a Security and Defence College, the EU would substantially enhance the region's resilience and its ability to act. Such a novel education and training system would increase the potential of the Western Balkan partners to participate in CSDP missions and EU defence initiatives (e.g. EDA, PESCO, and CARD). Overall, this approach would boost the EU's capacity to provide pro-European security and defence education to the Western Balkans, fostering regional cooperation and stability.

In line with these objectives, the establishment of the Western Balkan Security and Defence College would also diminish malign and anti-democratic influence from external authoritarian actors. The strategically important and politically volatile region of the Western Balkans has become a fertile ground for spreading disinformation and manipulating the public discourse. Through launching a higher education facility for security and defence for military and civilian personnel, regional stakeholders would gain a deeper understanding and increased awareness of the nature of such interference strategies. In addition, the WBSDC has the potential to facilitate an accurate assessment of multi-dimensional threats to the democratic principles and the self-determination of Western Balkan countries for the regional stakeholders. Thereby, the neighbourly relations of the region would be enhanced while simultaneously strengthening European values.

The country that would host the venue of this future institution would be obliged to work in close cooperation with the EU-authorities when implementing the project and operating the WBSDC as a regional education institution with the support of the CEDC Member States and other EU Member States willing to be involved in the project. The hosting country should show readiness to accommodate temporary and permanent administrative and teaching staff from the CEDC

⁹ Central European Defence Cooperation. 2022. "Non-paper on potential EPF assistance measure in BiH to establish a Western Balkan Defence College."

Member States and other contributing EU Member States, with all associated costs financed by the respective country.¹⁰

One of the biggest challenges that arises is seeking a suitable model that could serve for developing a multinational security and defence training capabilities for military and civilian personnel while at the same time maintaining an affordable cost in the Western Balkans region. Other obstacles included in the process are the history of the region, its geostrategic location but also not neglecting the potential financial and political constraints that presented as obstacles for the development of its armed forces. In order to identify effective strategies, lessons learned from initiatives such as the cooperative training and education efforts of the Baltic Defence College can serve as useful models for the development of training programmes in the Western Balkans region. In this regard, it is essential to develop a multinational military training and education base for a region with limited resources in the most long-lasting and efficient manner. Moreover, the Baltic example could serve as a useful model for the WBSDC.¹¹ The Western Balkans could make use of their valuable insights based on their experience and best practices and at the same time address shortcomings in order to successfully achieve the capacities of a modern armed force.¹²

3. THE BALTIC DEFENCE COLLEGE – LESSONS LEARNED

The Baltic Defence College (BALTDEFCOL) was established in 2000 and is the only English-language Professional Military Education (PME) institution in continental Europe with almost 1.900 graduates from 42 countries (as of January 2023).¹³ BALTDEFCOL is a modern, future-oriented, and also competitive international defence College that has a regional focus as well as Euro-Atlantic scope.¹⁴ It was established to create a high-quality military education institution for the three Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia with the aim of providing state-of-the-art military training in an interoperable manner. This approach, based on high-profile programmes, avoids inefficiencies that would have occurred if each of the three countries had conducted trainings separately.

It was essential to centralise the military needs of smaller countries and bring them closer together, in order to pool resources, increase interoperability, and enable intensified cross-border collaboration. This way, the personnel could be trained at one central venue, by the same lecturers, following one standardised curriculum, and receiving consistent and high-quality education. The main rationale behind setting up the Baltic Defence College was a need for one operational area, as the Baltic states are too small for separate defence education facilities. It is important that they work together as a region to achieve regional security and benefit from one highly professionalised joint institution. The Baltic Defence College is based in Tartu, Estonia, which was the most logical choice, as it is a university city with international credentials. A supporting factor to this was also Estonia's proximity to Finland, which, in line with its interests,

¹⁰ Central European Defence Cooperation. 2022. "Non-paper on potential EPF assistance measure in BiH to establish a Western Balkan Defence College."

¹¹ Kuci, Albert. 2020. "How Western Balkan Countries can Develop Multinational Military Training and Education Capabilities with an Affordable Cost."

¹² European Union External Action. 2022. "A 'security academy' for the region?"

¹³ Baltic Defence College. 2023. "Baltic Defence College Booklet".

¹⁴ Baltic Defence College. 2023. "Vision | Mission | Code of Conduct | Symbols | Badges | Medals."

provides security and defence aid in the region. In fact, the first commandant participating at the Baltics Defence College was from Finland, bringing in valuable knowledge and expertise.

“BALTDEFCOL is a professional military education institute covering operational and strategic levels, applying up-to-date educational principles, effective management, and best use of intellectual and material resources. It offers the following courses: Senior Leaders’ Course (SLC), Command Senior Enlisted Leaders’ Course (CSELC), Higher Command Studies Course (HCSC), Joint Command and General Staff Course (JCGSC) and Civil Servants’ Course (CSC).¹⁵ All three Baltic states provide tactical-level military education and have national defence academies for this purpose. However, for operational and strategic courses, the responsibility lies with the Baltic Defence College. The College provides coherent interoperable training and education in one language – English – and provides the same educational background. Most of the graduates succeed in attaining leading positions in the armed forces, which can be considered proof of the institution’s success. About 90 percent of the students receiving education at the Baltic Defence College have a military background, as there are only few civilian staff and police participants. In the past, the institution served predominantly to educate personnel from the Baltic countries, however, after years of experience and success, this has changed. Nowadays, the student body of the College is made up of 50 percent Baltic and 50 percent international personnel. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the strategic partners of the College are Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, as it was pointed out by a senior lecturer of the College, who was interviewed by the AIES. Hence, the common threat posed by Russia can be analysed and identified from the different countries’ perspectives, in order to integrate a comprehensive assessment into the teaching and training. Additionally, it is also a NATO-accredited institution.

The Baltic Defence College could serve as a best practice and role model for the WBSDC due to its inclusive regional characteristic and streamlined approach to optimise military education. The establishment of a similar College in and for the Western Balkans that proffers a rigorous and cohesive educational programme is instrumental in augmenting participation in EU and NATO missions. Such an institution can serve as a catalyst for the integration of the Western Balkan countries into the European Union, thereby contributing to regional stability and cooperation. Moreover, a College of this nature is particularly beneficial for smaller nations with constrained resources, as it affords them the means to enhance their capacity and capability. This, in turn, facilitates their transformation from passive recipients of security to active contributors to the European and Euro-Atlantic security architecture. The provision of a high-quality educational framework is pivotal in achieving these objectives, as it lays the groundwork for a more interconnected and secure Europe.

¹⁵ Baltic Defence College. 2023. “BALTDEFCOL Booklet.”.

4. THE EUROPEAN SECURITY AND DEFENCE COLLEGE

The structure of the European Security and Defence College (ESDC) could serve as a possible example for the superior governance body of the WBSDC. The ESDC, in the context of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), provides training and education at supranational level in the field of the Union's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The ESDC aims to develop a united understanding of CSDP amongst civilian and military personnel and via its training activities and good practices puts effort in finding and disseminating in relation to various CSDP matters; this complements the national efforts in the field of training and education.¹⁶ The ESDC ensures the availability of knowledgeable personnel that is able to work efficiently on all CSDP matters and support civilian crisis management and conflict prevention. To this end, the ESDC enhances the common European security and defence culture within the Union.¹⁷

The European Security and Defence College (ESDC) operates within a meticulously structured four-tier framework.¹⁸ At the pinnacle of this structure is the Steering Committee, which plays a pivotal role in orchestrating the coordination and strategic direction of ESDC's diverse training initiatives. In tandem, the Executive Academic Board (EAB) functions as the guarantor of the training activities' quality and coherence, ensuring that they adhere to the highest standards of academic rigor. Meanwhile, the Head of the ESDC is tasked with the crucial responsibilities of financial and administrative management. Finally, the ESDC Secretariat operates in concert with the Head of the ESDC, assisting in the execution of various tasks and facilitating the smooth operation of the institution. Given the comprehensive and stringent nature of its organisational structure, the ESDC could potentially serve as a paradigmatic example for other educational institutions aiming to deliver high-quality training programmes in the field of security and defence.

Thus, one key feature of the ESDC relevant for the establishment of the Western Balkan Security and Defence College is its overall structure. A governance structure similar to that of the ESDC, comprising an administrative head, a secretariat, and an Executive Academic Board, could serve as a pragmatic blueprint for the operational framework of the WBSDC. Such a model exemplifies a proven hierarchy that ensures strategic oversight, coordinated execution, and academic proficiency, potentially guiding the WBSDC towards achieving its educational and training objectives efficiently. Additionally, the ESDC works within a network that unites a wide range of entities focusing on security and defence policy matters in the EU. Its network includes over 160 national training institutes, among other things, defence academies, police colleges, and diplomatic training institutes.¹⁹ The established ESDC network, with its extensive reach and collaborative links, could significantly contribute to the promotion and networking efforts of the WBSDC, fostering a community of experts while enhancing its visibility and impact within the region.

¹⁶ European Security and Defence College. 2023. "Who we are."

¹⁷ European Security and Defence College. 2022. "Executive Academic Board (EAB)."

¹⁸ European Security and Defence College. 2021. "Who we are – What we do."

¹⁹ European Security and Defence College. 2022. "Executive Academic Board (EAB)".

5. THE NEED FOR A MORE SECURE WESTERN BALKANS AND LESS EXTERNAL INFLUENCE

The Western Balkans has consistently occupied a prominent position on the European Union's (EU) agenda, given the unequivocal European perspective espoused by the countries within this region. As such, it is imperative for the EU to allocate substantial resources towards strengthening security and defence of the Western Balkans. The stabilisation of this region is mutually advantageous, as it not only bolsters the security framework of the Western Balkan's partners, but also strengthens the EU's overarching security architecture. However, it is important to acknowledge the multiple challenges that confront the region, including pervasive political instability, endemic corruption, escalating inter-ethnic tensions, organised criminal networks, autocratic tendencies, and the curtailment of human rights.²⁰ Addressing and surmounting these challenges is of paramount importance, as doing so is integral to enhancing regional stability and, by extension, fortifying the security landscape of Europe as a whole.

Numerous nations within the Western Balkans grapple with a pronounced democratic deficit, characterised by tumultuous political landscapes and a lack of robust democratic infrastructure that is a requisite for effective governance.²¹ Historically, these impediments have rendered the Western Balkans susceptible to external influences, thereby compromising the region's autonomy and self-determination. Some countries made progress in certain areas however, there are still notable fragilities present. The involvement of the EU could tackle and support improvements in the region. The countries of the Western Balkans have been aspiring to join the EU for a long time. However, full Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans is not likely to happen anytime soon. The rationale behind this is that many Western Balkan countries have not achieved sufficient political and economic progress as well as the existing enlargement fatigue within the EU.

For the EU and its Member States, it is nevertheless of importance to not neglect the region and continue its efforts to bring the Western Balkans closer in order to diminish the growing influence of external actors in the region. The involvement of external entities further complicates the already existing challenges (politically, economically, and security wise) and contributes to the widening disparity between the European Union and the Western Balkans. Specifically, actors such as China, Russia, and Turkey have subtly exploited the vacuum left by the EU's enlargement fatigue, seizing the opportunity to bolster their influence and solidify their presence within the region.²²

All the challenges mentioned above are potential triggers for renewed outbreaks of local violence and ethnic conflicts and political instability or Euro-scepticism. The current status quo of the region cannot be viewed as sustainable and continued stagnation will lead to a deterioration of the situation. Western Balkan countries must be supported in resolving their own security tasks

²⁰ Intelligence College in Europe, 2023. "Security Processes and Challenges in the Western Balkans and their impact on Europe – Executive Education Session" 6.-10. February.

²¹ Intelligence College in Europe, 2023. "Security Processes and Challenges in the Western Balkans and their impact on Europe – Executive Education Session" 6.-10. February.

²² Frank, Johann. 2019. "Vienna Security Dialogue 2019 – Perceptions on the EU Western Balkans Strategy," opening speech.

as well as in improving their resilience.²³ Setting up a Western Balkan Security and Defence College would provide such support and assist the Western Balkan countries in becoming security providers and active contributors to CSDP.²⁴ Another added value would be increased interoperability of the stakeholders involved in regional security, such as military personnel, police forces, and civilians.

A WBSDC would also help to decrease Russian, Chinese, and Turkish influence in the region. The Western Balkans have become a frontline for Russia's geopolitical confrontation with the West.²⁵ The war in Ukraine has increased the focus on the Western Balkans and slow EU accession processes²⁶ have allowed Russia to increase its footprint in the region.²⁷ Russia pursues a strategy intending to disrupt stability in the Western liberal system. This is done due to the fact that Russia fails to offer a proper political alternative to what the EU is offering in the region, Moscow's main efforts are to obstruct any further integration of the Western Balkans into the EU, moreover, focusing on also putting a hold to NATO expansion.

Another sphere of influence when it comes to Russia can be seen in Russia exercising its "soft power" in Serbia, in the Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro, this being due to its shared religious (Christian Orthodox), cultural, and historical ties. When it comes to arms, Russia exports only to Serbia, the sole Western Balkan country to have signed military cooperation agreements with Russia and China.²⁸ The Russian regime has kept relatively close ties with Serbia and the separatist Serb leadership in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the government of the entity mostly inhabited by Serbs, the Republika Srpska, is now taking steps to break away from the federal state structures.²⁹ When it comes to the energy sector, Russia exercises significant influence in the Western Balkans region. Remarkably, nearly 100% of the energy Serbia, North Macedonia and Bosnia needs is supplied Russia.³⁰ While Serbia has signed a three-year gas contract with Russia, Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro consume little to no Russian gas.³¹ Furthermore, strategic, cost-effective (asymmetric) activities in the information realm, like disinformation campaigns, cyber-attacks, and covert operations, supported by proxies and political influence, have successfully exploited weaknesses and divisions in six Western Balkan nations with the goals of maintaining Russia favoured status quo, hinder western integration, and protect its own economic interests.³²

²³ Frank, Johann. 2019. "Vienna Security Dialogue 2019 – Perceptions on the EU Western Balkans Strategy," opening speech.

²⁴ Frank, Johann. 2019. "Vienna Security Dialogue 2019 – Perceptions on the EU Western Balkans Strategy," opening speech.

²⁵ European Parliament. 2023. "Russia and the Western Balkans. Geopolitical confrontation, economic influence and political interference." Briefing.

²⁶ Dahrendorf Forum. 2020. „From Fatigue to Resistance. EU Enlargement and the Western Balkans“.

²⁷ European Parliament. 2023. "Russia and the Western Balkans. Geopolitical confrontation, economic influence and political interference." Briefing.

²⁸ Vulović, Marina. 2023. "Western Balkan foreign and security ties with external actors: An arena of geostrategic rivalry for the EU or a local power struggle?." SWP Comment.

²⁹ Szczerba, Michal, 2022. „The Western Balkans: Russia's War on Ukraine and the Region's Enduring Challenges" NATO Parliamentary Assembly – Economics and Security Committee Report, 19. November.

³⁰ European Parliament. 2023. "Russia and the Western Balkans. Geopolitical confrontation, economic influence and political interference." Briefing.

³¹ European Parliament. 2023. "Russia and the Western Balkans. Geopolitical confrontation, economic influence and political interference." Briefing.

³² European Parliament. 2023. "Russia and the Western Balkans. Geopolitical confrontation, economic influence and political interference." Briefing.

Another notable external actor influencing the region is China, whereby its activities are mainly focused on the economic sector (e.g., investments in infrastructure and mining projects). Via these economic connections, China wants to step up its foreign and security policy relevance in the Western Balkans. Particularly worth mentioning is China's arms trade with Serbia. Western concerns were heightened as Serbia marked a milestone by becoming Europe's first operator of Chinese military hardware, following the acquisition of HQ-22 surface-to-air missiles and CH-92 armed drones from China.³³ This significant procurement, valued at \$310 million, positioned China as Serbia's foremost supplier of armaments in terms of trade value for the year 2022, surpassing the long-established primacy of Russia in this sector.³⁴ In addition, China has taken an active role in supplying Serbia's surveillance infrastructure.³⁵ Huawei is in process of installing surveillance equipment within Serbian cities, for example 8.000 facial recognition cameras in Belgrade.³⁶ This marks the first case in Europe where such technology has been installed in a significant scope.³⁷ When it comes to cultural cooperation between China and the region this is mainly reflected in institutions such as the Confucius Institute, which exists at universities in every one of the Western Balkan countries.³⁸ Moreover China's business practices lack transparency and don't follow any kind of democratic scrutiny, which creates possibilities for corruption and one-sided deals.³⁹

Turkish influence in the region is also substantial.⁴⁰ Under the leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey has significantly stepped up its diplomatic and economic activities in the Western Balkans, a region with deep historical ties to Turkey. This renewed focus of interest was made evident through Erdogan's high-profile visits to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia in September 2022. These diplomatic efforts are in line with Turkey's strategy on leveraging historical, cultural, and social ties with former Ottoman territories to foster its political and economic interest.⁴¹ Moreover, Turkey has undertaken infrastructural projects, including roads and railways, further deepening its economic ties with the region. Numerous countries of the Western Balkan have good cultural ties with Turkey, and it is in the utmost interest of Ankara to nourish the Ottoman cultural heritage within the region. While doing so Turkey, is financially involved in the renovation of mosques and monuments, a good example being the Sandžak in Bosnia and Herzegovina and western North Macedonia.⁴² Turkey is also involved in the military training of the military personnel in the Western Balkans, in particular in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Currently, given the lack of a centralised training facility, countries in the region are sending their military personnel to Turkey to conduct further military training. This ought to be avoided in the future by creating alternative, EU-centred opportunities within the region.

³³ Knezevic, Jovan. 2023. "Serbia: the first and only operator of Chinese drones and missiles in Europe."

³⁴ Kastner, Jens. 2023. "Serbia relies on China for weapons as tensions with Kosovo rise".

³⁵ Vulović, Marina. 2023. "Western Balkan foreign and security ties with external actors: An arena of geostrategic rivalry for the EU or a local power struggle?" SWP Comment.

³⁶ Delbos-Corfield, G. 2022. "Surveillance technology on the rise in Serbia – A threat to human rights?"

³⁷ Jovanovic, Natalija. 2023. "How Serbia became blanketed in Chinese-made surveillance cameras."

³⁸ Vulović, Marina. 2023. "Western Balkan Foreign and Security Ties with External Actors: An arena of geostrategic rivalry for the EU or a local power struggle?" SWP Comment.

³⁹ Szczerba, Michal. 2022. „The Western Balkans: Russia's War on Ukraine and the Region's Enduring Challenges" NATO Parliamentary Assembly – Economics and Security Committee Report, 19. November.

⁴⁰ Szpala, Marta. 2022. "Bromance. Turkey's activity in the Western Balkans." Centre for Eastern Studies.

⁴¹ Szpala, Marta. 2022. "Bromance. Turkey's activity in the Western Balkans." Centre for Eastern Studies.

⁴² Vulović, Marina. 2023. "Western Balkan Foreign and Security Ties with External Actors: An arena of geostrategic rivalry for the EU or a local power struggle?" SWP Comment.

6. COUNTRY SPECIFIC ANALYSIS OF THE WESTERN BALKANS REGION

This chapter provides a comprehensive and detailed country-specific analysis of the Western Balkans region, delving into the current status, main challenges, risks, and inherent strengths of each country within this geopolitically significant area. In addition to a holistic assessment of the prevailing conditions, the analysis outlines the existing military training and educational facilities in these nations. The primary objective of this chapter is to underscore the numerous advantages and multifaceted benefits that would accrue from the establishment of the Western Balkan Security and Defence College (WBSDC). Furthermore, this chapter aims to determine the most feasible and apt host nation for this esteemed College.

6.1. BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA



Bosnia and Herzegovina is characterised by a complex and divided political architecture, encompassing two distinct entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Republika Srpska. This intricate structural composition has the potential to present considerable challenges in launching a unified Defence and Security College for the Western Balkans inside Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, such a College, if successful, could help strengthen security cooperation between the different entities and promote stability in the country and the wider region. Ongoing disputes between ethnic groups, namely the Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats, can result in political deadlock and hamper the proper functioning of the federal government.

On one hand, it can be stated that Bosnia and Herzegovina has made notable progress in stepping up its infrastructure and economy, however, on the contrary unemployment and emigration rates remain high. Furthermore, economic stagnation continues to feed conventional and organised crime. While democratic features are present, Bosnia and Herzegovina has to cope with weak institutions,⁴⁵ the hybridity of the model was reflected in the general elections in October 2022.

⁴³ Freedom House. 2023. "Freedom in the World 2023: Bosnia and Herzegovina".

⁴⁴ Belgrade Centre for Security Policy. 2023. "Balkan Defence Monitor 2023."
<https://bezbednost.org/en/publication/balkan-defence-monitor-2022/> (accessed October 30, 2023).

⁴⁵ Anđelić, Neven. 2023. "Nations in Transit 2023 - Bosnia and Herzegovina."

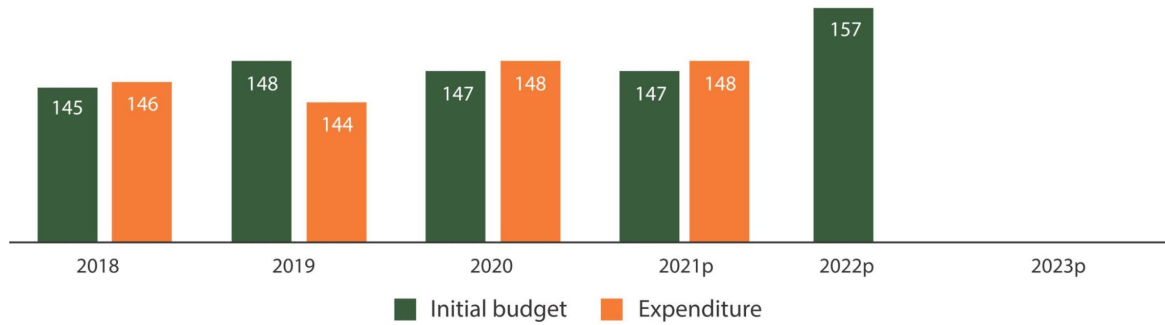


Image 1: Initial budgets and defence expenditure in Bosnia and Herzegovina (in million Euro)⁴⁶

The defence expenditure of Bosnia and Herzegovina has not changed much in the last 5 years, be it either nominally or concerning the share of GDP. In 2021, almost 90% of the defence budget was used on personnel as a result of the political deadlock while the arms and equipment share has not exceeded 4% since 2017.⁴⁷ The latter led to hindering the planning and allocation of resources.

Moreover, due to the political crisis, the Parliamentary Assembly failed to adopt a federal budget in a timely manner since 2018, with the federal budget for 2021 not being adopted at all. When it comes to the 2022 budget, this was adopted only later in July, while the budget for 2023 has not been adopted yet at all.⁴⁸

Military education and training institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina:

The training and military education in the Armed Forces (AF) of Bosnia and Herzegovina are conducted under the Policy of Training and Military Education and the AF Bosnia and Herzegovina Training Doctrine.

The overarching aim of the Doctrine is to cultivate individuals and units that are proficiently trained and adequately prepared for the effective accomplishment of their missions. The training programme is designed to achieve three primary objectives: the development of professional soldiers and cohesive units, the nurturing of command personnel capable of adeptly adapting to diverse situations, and the structuring of authentic training sessions that encompass a comprehensive range of domains, including institutional, operational, and self-development.⁴⁹

Programmes of the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina⁵⁰

- Career and functional education of officers in the Armed Forces Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Career and functional education of non-commissioned officers in the AF Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Career and functional education of officers and non-commissioned officers in the AF Bosnia and Herzegovina outside BiH

⁴⁶ Belgrade Centre for Security Policy. 2022. "Balkan Defence Monitor 2022."

⁴⁷ Belgrade Centre for Security Policy. 2022. "Balkan Defence Monitor 2022."

⁴⁸ Belgrade Centre for Security Policy. 2022. "Balkan Defence Monitor 2022."

⁴⁹ Ministry of Defense of Bosnia and Herzegovina. "Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina – Career and functional education of officers in the AF BiH."

⁵⁰ Ministry of Defense of Bosnia and Herzegovina. "Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina – Career and functional education of officers in the AF BiH."

- Military specialist training
- Training with EUFOR, Programme M2M, NATO

The training and military education of the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina encompasses of three types of training areas.⁵¹ Institutional Training Area plays a foundational role in the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina, providing initial and progressive training to individuals across various ranks, from soldiers to officers. The training encompasses both basic military training and specialised courses tailored to develop necessary skills and knowledge for higher responsibility roles. In the Operational Training Area, units engage in comprehensive training exercises designed to enhance their capabilities in executing complex, mission-specific tasks. These exercises range from situational training exercises to live-fire exercises, all aimed at achieving full combat readiness. The Self-Development Area, on the other hand, focuses on personal and professional growth, offering a spectrum of opportunities including academic education, literature study, and various courses, all pivotal for the holistic development of military personnel in today's complex operational environment.

Advantages (long and short term):

- + Support for integration into international security structures:** The creation of a Defence College can help Bosnia and Herzegovina's integration into international security structures. This is particularly important if the country wants to become a member of the EU.
- + Strengthening regional defence cooperation:** Bosnia and Herzegovina is located in a geopolitically sensitive region in the Balkans. A Security and Defence College could help Bosnia and Herzegovina to strengthen defence cooperation between the partner countries of the Western Balkans. By training security experts and conducting joint exercises and training, cross-border challenges such as terrorism, organised crime and illegal migration could be better addressed.
- + Promoting stability and security in Bosnia:** Bosnia and Herzegovina has struggled with political tensions and ethnic conflicts in the past. A Security and Defence College could support the country's security capabilities and stabilise the political and social situation. Well-trained security experts could help identify potential conflicts at an early stage and have a de-escalating effect.
- + Strengthening the EU integration of Bosnia:** The EU has an interest in promoting security and stability in its neighbourhood. A Security and Defence College in Bosnia could help bring partners in the Balkans and the region as a whole closer to the EU.⁵²
- + Strengthening of the state structures:** Bosnia and Herzegovina has the most volatile state structures in the region, which need to be strengthened by EU support and predominantly by the perspective of EU integration. Bosnia and Herzegovina is a decentralised and increasingly fragmented state, consisting of two sub-state entities. Bosnia and Herzegovina is challenged by weak institutions, and the decision-making mechanism is based on consent of all entities, as well as ethnic veto mechanisms. The latter is impeding the institutional functionality.⁵³ In this context, the College would not only enhance regional integration but would also foster the inner-Bosnian institutionalisation by providing a common educational platform that encourages collaboration and understanding among the country's divided

⁵¹ Ministry of Defense of Bosnia and Herzegovina. "Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina – Career and functional education of officers in the AF BiH."

⁵² Crisis24. 2022. "Bosnia and Herzegovina Country Report" 14. September.

⁵³ BTI Transformation Index. 2022. "Bosnia And Herzegovina Country Report 2022".

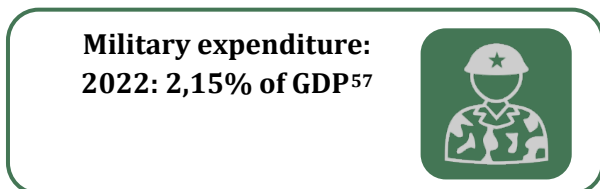
entities. This unified approach to military education could serve as a powerful channel for reconciliation. By bridging divides, the College would contribute significantly to strengthening national cohesion and building a more united and resilient society in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

- + **Boosting the local economy:** Bosnia and Herzegovina has one of the weakest economies in the region. The GDP of Bosnia and Herzegovina, is expected to decrease to 2.5 percent in 2023, due to poor private consumption growth, a negative development in net exports and weakening of the real disposable income.⁵⁴

Risks:

- ▲ **Overcomplicated decision-making process and non-functional institutions:** The decision-making process requires approval of all entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, therefore reaching a consensus is many times difficult, which hinders proper implementation of processes.
- ▲ **Risk of rejecting the idea of the WBSDC:** A risk arises here that Bosnia and Herzegovina will reject using the WBSDC and oppose the idea given that it is an EU project. If the WBSDC is not located directly in Bosnia and Herzegovina that might reduce this risk.
- ▲ **Lack of transparency:** of procedures and weak judicial structures in Bosnia and Herzegovina, further problematic factors are the dual nature of the state and insufficient protection when it comes to property rights. Bosnia and Herzegovina also has to address overly complex and unclear labour and pension laws while dealing with the lack of a unified economic space.
- ▲ **Ethnic tensions:** Bosnia and Herzegovina has a complex ethnic structure, with political institutions constructed in a power-sharing manner with the aim to represent the three prevailing ethnic groups-Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs. Possible resulting ethnic tensions can spill over into political instability and hamper the government's ability to function.
- ▲ **European integration uncertainty:** Bosnia and Herzegovina has the status of a potential EU accession candidate, but the integration process is slow, which can be explained by disagreements between political leaders regarding crucial reforms and the inability to comply with EU standards. These obstacles are all diminishing the population's trust in political institutions.⁵⁵

6.2. SERBIA



Serbia operates under a parliamentary democracy, characterised by its multiparty electoral system. However, in recent times, the prevailing dominance of the Serbian Progressive Party

⁵⁴ Worldbank. 2023. "Bosnia and Herzegovina Shows Resilience Despite Slowing Growth and Continued Price Rises."

⁵⁵ Standard Bank. 2023. "Bosnia and Herzegovina: Investing in Bosnia and Herzegovina."

⁵⁶ Freedom House. 2023. "Freedom in the World 2023: Serbia".

⁵⁷ Belgrade Centre for Security Policy. 2023. "Balkan Defence Monitor 2023."

(SNS) has progressively undermined the political rights and civil liberties. This has manifested in increased constraints on independent media outlets, as well as on the activities of the political opposition and non-governmental organisations, all of which are facing intensifying pressure.⁵⁸

This includes continuous progovernment bias regarding the media sphere, insufficient campaign finance oversight, and non-existent sanctions for cases of possible electoral violations. Further obstacles include impeding independence of the judiciary due to political influence over judicial appointments, with numerous cases reported by judges who had to face external pressure over their ruling decisions.⁵⁹ Lastly, academic freedom has largely been upheld, however recent practice and legal changes have pointed out concerns regarding political influence.⁶⁰

Serbian defence expenditure has experienced a steady increase since 2016, with the most noticeable rise in 2021.⁶¹ Budget reserves serve for the allocation of resources, in particular for arms and equipment.⁶² Serbia is actively participating and contributing to Common Security and Defence Policy military missions and operations, the country also takes part in the roster of the EU Battle Groups.

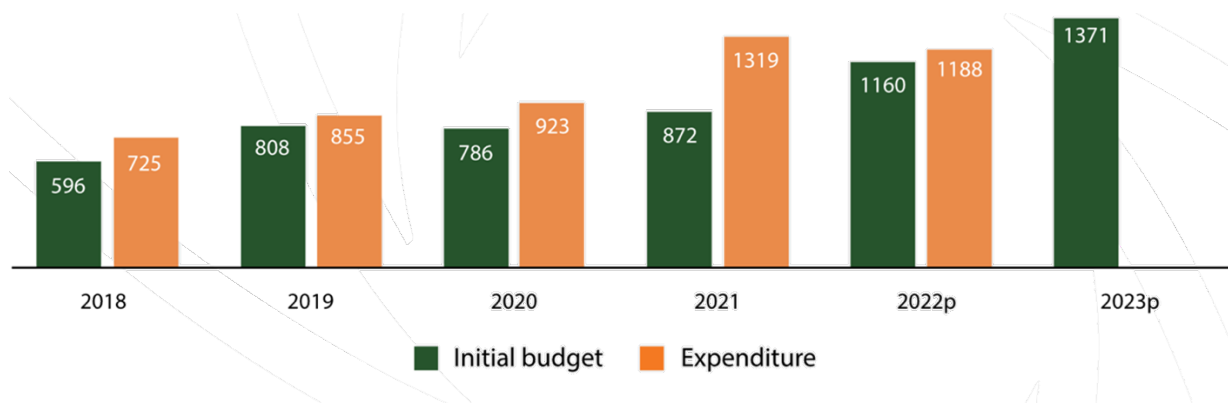


Image 2: Initial budgets and defence expenditure in Serbia (in million Euro) ⁶³

Military education and training institutions in Serbia:

Within the Serbian Armed Forces, the Training Command serves as a peacetime operational division, dedicated to the individual training of volunteers, prospective professional soldiers, and active reserve members, as well as the preparation of non-commissioned officer candidates and the specialised collective training of territorial units.⁶⁴

University of Defence Military Academy

The University of Defence Military Academy presents a comprehensive portfolio of educational opportunities, featuring undergraduate degrees in Land Forces, Military Electronic Engineering,

⁵⁸ Freedom House. 2020. "Freedom in the World 2020."

⁵⁹ Freedom House. 2020. "Freedom in the World: Serbia."

⁶⁰ Freedom House. 2020. "Freedom in the World 2020."

⁶¹ Belgrade Centre for Security Policy. 2022. "Balkan Defence Monitor."

⁶² Belgrade Centre for Security Policy. 2022. "Balkan Defence Monitor."

⁶³ Belgrade Centre for Security Policy. 2023. "Balkan Defence Monitor 2023."

⁶⁴ Serbian Armed Forces. 2022. "Training Command."

Military Mechanical Engineering, Technological Engineering of Materials and Protection, Defence Logistics, Traffic Engineering, and Military Aviation. Advanced studies include Master's Programmes with specialisations in Management in Defence, Military Management, Military Electronic Engineering and Cyber Defence, Military Mechanical Engineering, Defence Logistics, Security Management in Defence, and Technological Engineering of Materials and Protection. Furthermore, the academy extends its academic offerings to the doctoral level, providing PhD programmes in Management in Defence, Military Mechanical Engineering, Military Electronic Engineering, and Technological Engineering of Materials and Protection.

Advantages (long and short term):

- + Notable experience in the field of military training:** Serbia has significant experience in the field of military training. It has the biggest army in the region and of benefit is the Military Academy functioning as a higher education and scientific research institution that adds to the strength of Serbia.⁶⁵

Risks:

- ▲ Strong proximity to Russia:** The influence of Russia in Serbia is stronger than in other countries of the Western Balkans. The Russian war in Ukraine has not changed much when it comes to how Serbia views Russia. Serbia still remains largely pro-Russian oriented, with as many as 63 percent of Serbs agreeing that the West is responsible for the Russia-Ukraine war.⁶⁶ This factor would significantly complicate the European Union's ability to fund and implement such an initiative in Serbia.
- ▲ Already existing Military Academy in Serbia:** Serbia has a very good Defence University in place, which offers education and training for future military officers, offering education up to PhD level, resulting in no real need for establishing the WBSDC within Serbia. Nonetheless, the Serbian Armed Forces would benefit from a standardised military and defence education system for the entire Western Balkans.
- ▲ Escalated issues with Kosovo:** The tensions between Kosovo and Serbia have been a long existing problem, however, the situation escalated after a recent incident in 2023, where Serb paramilitaries killed a police officer in the northern part of Kosovo.⁶⁷ These existing animosities would complicate the plan to set up a WBSDC in Serbia.
- ▲ Authoritarianism:** One political risk in Serbia is concern about an increasing concentration of power in the hands of President Aleksandar Vučić and his party, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). Critics accuse the government of weakening democratic institutions, restricting press freedom, and intimidating political opponents.
- ▲ Democratic deficits:** In Serbia, there are concerns about the independence of the judiciary, government influence over the media, and restrictions on political opposition. This can lead to a restriction of political plurality and democratic rights.
- ▲ Corruption:** Corruption remains a serious problem in Serbia. The lack of transparency and accountability in political affairs have weakened the population's trust in the government and political institutions.

⁶⁵ Military Academy Serbia. "About the Military Academy."

⁶⁶ Carnegie. 2023. "Untarnished by War: Why Russia's Soft Power Is So Resilient in Serbia."

⁶⁷ Al Jazeera. 2023. „Analysis: Are Kosovo and Serbia on the brink of war?“.

- ▲ **Economic Challenges:** Serbia faces several economic challenges, including high unemployment, poverty, and a structural reform agenda. Addressing these problems requires political stability and consensus on economic matters.

6.3. MONTENEGRO



The continuous political instability, characterised by the failure of two governments, led to a downgrade in the National Democratic Governance rating, moving from a moderate position to a lower one amid a constitutional crisis.⁷⁰ Simultaneously, Montenegro faced a contraction of its Democracy Score, reflecting unconstitutional measures that obstructed electoral proceedings, impeded the functioning of the Constitutional Court, and curtailed the establishment of a new government. Throughout 2022, this instability has compromised the integrity and perceived legitimacy of Montenegro's crucial governing institutions.⁷¹ In late October 2023, after extensive negotiations and political obstacles since the electoral process, Montenegro's legislative assembly successfully endorsed a fresh administration, anticipating this coalition government to pilot the country towards political stability. The new governance framework, a coalition of pro-European, pro-Serb, and Albanian minority factions, will be under the leadership of the former finance minister and figurehead of the centrist Europe Now Movement Milojko Spajić.⁷² This development has the potential to stabilise the volatile political situation in Montenegro.

Due to the fact that Montenegro sought to meet the commitments made to NATO the country's defence spending experienced an increase in 2018 and 2019 immediately after the country became part of NATO. However, this was followed by a decrease to pre-NATO accession levels in 2020. It has to be pointed out, that the overall budget and defence planning have been strongly affected by the change of government after the 2020 elections and the following political crisis. Even though Montenegro's defence budget reflects a relatively high level of transparency compared to the other Western Balkan countries it still lacks sufficient transparency and disaggregation.⁷³

⁶⁸ Freedom House. 2023. "Freedom in the World 2023: Montenegro"

⁶⁹ Belgrade Centre for Security Policy. 2023. "Balkan Defence Monitor 2023."

⁷⁰ Freedom House. 2023. "Nations in Transit: Montenegro 2023".

⁷¹ Freedom House. 2023. "Nations in Transit: Montenegro 2023".

⁷² Starcevic, S. 2023. "Montenegro finally gets new government and PM".

⁷³ Belgrade Centre for Security Policy. 2022. "Balkan Defence Monitor 2022."

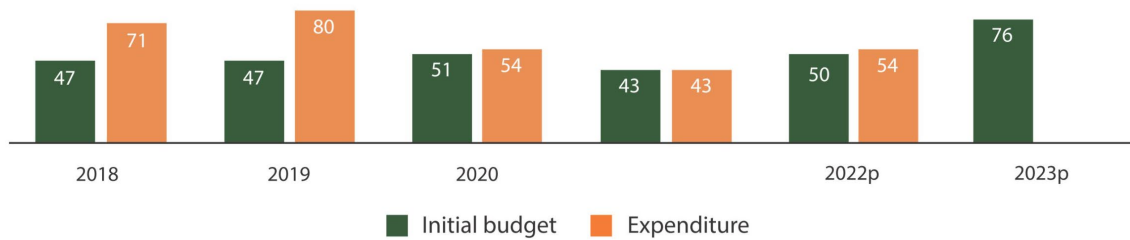


Image 3: Initial budgets and defence expenditure in Montenegro (in million Euro)⁷⁴

Advantages (long and short term):

- + Bringing Montenegro closer to the EU:** Montenegro is actively taking measures to harmonise with the EU standards across various sectors in a bid to accelerate its integration process and fulfil the conditions of EU membership.⁷⁵ Prevailing limitations and hurdles in this process could be addressed by the closer collaboration enabled through the WBSDC, especially when established in Montenegro.
- + Central location in the Western Balkans region:** Montenegro's central and strategic location in the Western Balkans, sharing borders with all countries in the Western Balkans except North Macedonia, makes it an easily reachable meeting point for partners in the region.
- + Very strong EU orientation:** Montenegro applied for EU membership in 2008, received candidate status in 2010, and started the accession negotiations in 2012.⁷⁶ Montenegro is working on speeding up the reforms needed for the country to become part of the European Union. This is even more visible after Jakov Milatović, won the presidential election.⁷⁷ Thus, Montenegro is actively expediting the reforms necessary to secure its accession to the European Union, with significant advancements already positioning it as the frontrunner among Western Balkan nations pursuing EU membership. Montenegro will likely complete all the necessary reforms regarding the EU accession by 2025.⁷⁸
- + Most stable economy among the Western Balkans:** Montenegro's economy has been the most stable among the countries' economies in the region. Montenegro's economy performed exceptionally in the first half of the year of 2023, showing an increase by 6.5%. This is due to the positive effects of the new social reform issued last year which increased household consumption. Adding to the positive development was also a strong tourist season, and investment in hotel facilities and energy infrastructure.⁷⁹ Since the Euro has been introduced as the official currency, the symbolic and tangible economic ties with the EU have been strengthened.
- + Montenegro operates with high military standards:** The country's membership in NATO has opened new ways for military cooperation and a possible dominant political influence. Joining NATO has ensured security guarantees and stability for Montenegro's small military

⁷⁴ Belgrade Centre for Security Policy. 2023. "Balkan Defence Monitor 2023."

⁷⁵ European Commission. 2022. "Key findings of the 2022 Report on Montenegro" 12. October.

⁷⁶ Euronews. 2023. "Montenegro wants to join the EU but something needs to be done."

⁷⁷ Intelli News. 2023. "Montenegro expected to speed up EU membership talks as Milatovic takes presidency."

⁷⁸ Euractiv 2022. "Montenegro likely to complete all reforms for EU accession by 2025."

⁷⁹ WIIW. 2023. "Montenegro."

force, „which has only 2,400 active-duty personnel. The country has modernised its weaponry and has participated in several military and crisis management drills that have provided advanced professional training for its military“. ⁸⁰ The country also has experience with EU-related military training through officer training in Austria.

Risks:

- ▲ **Volatile political situation:** Despite the newly formed government, Montenegro is challenged by a long-lasting political fragility. The political and institutional framework is still entangled in a crisis, characterised by an unstable parliamentary majority, alongside a paralysed Constitutional Court. Endemic corruption within both political spheres and judicial mechanisms continues to pose significant challenges.

6.4. ALBANIA



Albania is a parliamentary republic holding competitive elections, however the country is experiencing high polarisation when it comes to political parties, which are in many instances tied to leading personalities. With regards to religious freedom and freedom of assembly, these are shown to be generally well respected. A serious problem on the other hand that the country needs to tackle is high corruption and organised crime.⁸³

On the political level, the situation is slowly evolving towards greater consideration of the criteria of democracy, transparency, and rule of law. This is occurring in the context of Albania's candidacy for membership of the European Union, which was submitted in 2009. Since 2014, it has been granted EU candidate status, supporting the efforts towards greater stability and prosperity. However, Albania still faces major obstacles that pose risks and make perspectives in the country relatively uncertain.

Corruption is one of the main challenges that Albania must tackle to strengthen transparency and confidence in the institutions. In 2022, it was ranked 101 out of 180 countries in the Corruption Perceptions Index established by Transparency International regarding bribery, corruption in the public sector or nepotism.⁸⁴ Efforts have been made at the political and judicial levels to combat these malpractices, and they have been successful in some high-profile cases. However, by EU standards, the fight against corruption in Albania remains insufficient and inadequate to the scale of the phenomenon.⁸⁵ Albania's situation is also marked by notable weaknesses in management

⁸⁰ New Eastern Europe. 2021. "The political consequences of NATO membership for Montenegro."

⁸¹ Freedom House. 2023. "Freedom in the World 2023: Albania".

⁸² Belgrade Centre for Security Policy. 2023. "Balkan Defence Monitor 2023."

⁸³ Freedom House. 2023. "Freedom in the World 2023: Albania".

⁸⁴ Transparency International. 2022. Albania.

⁸⁵ European Commission. 2022. "Key findings on the report of the 2022 on Albania".

and recruitment within the public services.⁸⁶ This contributes to creating mistrust in the country's institutions, hampering the capacity for reform, and increasing risks.⁸⁷

Albania's defence spending has been steadily growing since 2017, with a down-turn in 2020, this stagnation can be a possible result of the COVID pandemic. The defence expenditure share of the country's total government expenditure increased from 2017 to 2022, however, it failed to meet the NATO goal of the 2% of GDP.

Albania's defence budget is the least transparent and detailed within the region.⁸⁸ Furthermore, the delineation of the Albanian defence budget, particularly the expenditures on personnel, arms, and equipment, continues to lack clarity. Reports furnished to NATO reveal that the steady increment in Albania's defence outlays is primarily due to marginal annual enhancements in funding for military hardware and equipment.⁸⁹

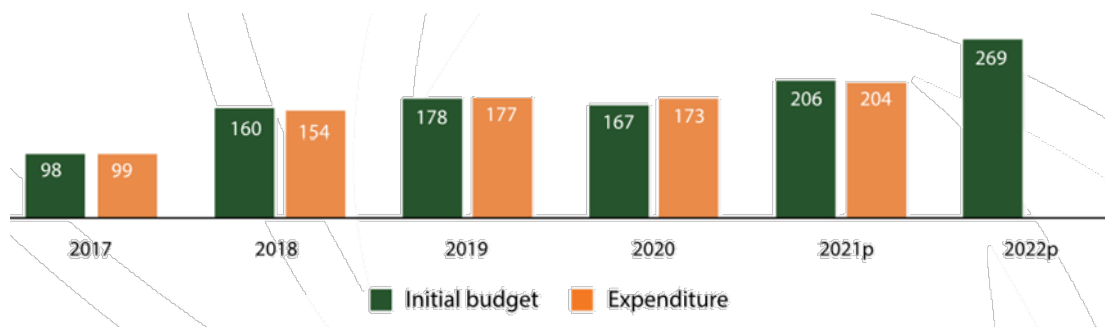


Image 4: Initial budgets and defence expenditure in Albania (in million Euro)⁹⁰

Military educational and training institutions in Albania:

According to its website, the Albanian Defence and Security College “functions as a high military education institution, at the operational and strategic levels applying latest educational principles”.⁹¹ No detailed public information could be found on the exact composition of the military education in Albania.

Advantages (long and short term):

- + **Stable government:** Albania is politically stable, despite occasionally experiencing periods of anti-government political unrest.⁹²
- + **Clear European orientation:** Albania is considered as one of the most pro-EU partners in the region. After the collapse of communism Albania chose Brussels and has done everything to meet the membership application.⁹³ Albania applied for EU membership in

⁸⁶ United Nations. 2020. “Common country analysis 2020”.

⁸⁷ European Commission. 2022. “Key findings on the report of the 2022 on Albania”.

⁸⁸ Belgrade Centre for Security Policy. 2022. “Balkan Defence Monitor.”.

⁸⁹ Belgrade Centre for Security Policy. 2023. “Balkan Defence Monitor 2023.”.

⁹⁰ Belgrade Centre for Security Policy. 2023. “Balkan Defence Monitor 2023.”.

⁹¹ Albanian Defence and Security College. 2023. “General Information.”.

⁹² Crisis 24. 2022. “Albania Country Report.”.

⁹³ Rama, Edi. 2021. “Albania is getting ready for the EU, no matter what.”.

April 2009 and was given EU candidate status in June 2014.⁹⁴ Accession negotiations between the EU and Albania started in July 2022.⁹⁵

- + **NATO country operating with high military standards:** Albania is trying to reach the needed 2% of NATO spending target by 2024.⁹⁶ The NATO membership perspective had a boosting effect for Albania's armed forces. The preparation period for joining NATO intensified the efforts of Albania to deepen defence reforms and strengthened the Armed Forces of the Republic.⁹⁷ Albania joined the Alliance in 2009.

Risks:

- ▲ **The question of Kosovo:** Relations between Serbia and Kosovo have escalated into mutual hostilities in the last months. In September 2023, new violent incidents occurred in Northern Kosovo and resulted in a military build-up along the borders. Given the strong cultural and historical affinity between Albania and Kosovo, with ethnic Albanians comprising the majority in both territories, establishing the Western Balkans Security and Defence College in Albania poses significant risks and would strategically not be advisable. Serbia's non-recognition of Kosovo's independence and the support Kosovo receives from Albania complicate diplomatic interactions within the region, which hinders Albania to be a suitable host for the College.⁹⁸
- ▲ **Weak economy:** Albania suffers from a weak economy and 2023 is not an easy year as it is foreseen that citizens will have to face hardships with an increasing poverty level. The Russian war in Ukraine, alongside ecological transition challenges, sanction regimes, protectionist tendencies, and inflationary pressures, have profoundly impacted the Albanian economy. However, the Ministry of Finance forecasts that Albania's economic expansion for 2023 is projected to be at 4%.⁹⁹

⁹⁴ European Council. 2023. "EU Enlargement Policy Albania."

⁹⁵ European Council. 2023. "EU Enlargement Policy Albania."

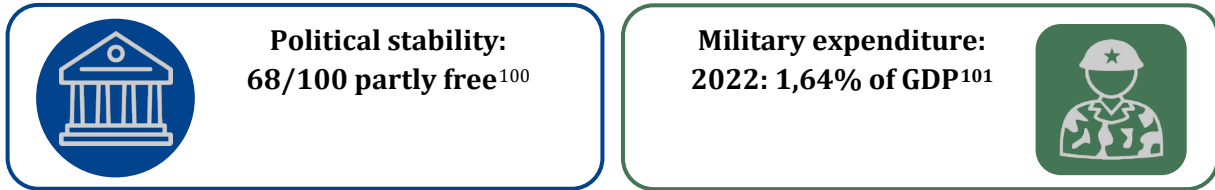
⁹⁶ Taylor, Alice. 2023 "Albania pledges to reach 2% NATO spending target by 2024." Euractiv.

⁹⁷ Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs Albania. 2023. "Albania in NATO."

⁹⁸ CNBC. 2023. „A second war could easily erupt in Europe – while everyone's distracted by Ukraine.“

⁹⁹ China CEE-Institute. 2023. "Albania economy briefing: Albanian economy in 2023, beyond projections and forecasts."

6.5. NORTH MACEDONIA



A challenge for North Macedonia was the long-standing name dispute with neighbouring Greece. This was resolved in 2019 with the entry into force of the Prespa Agreement, which led to the renaming of the country "Macedonia" to "North Macedonia".¹⁰² North Macedonia is a parliamentary republic. The tensions caused by the parliamentary crisis in 2017 have retreated, with follow-up polls being held in a more stable environment. Pivotal challenges for North Macedonia have been corruption and clientelism as well as journalists and activists continuously facing pressure and intimidation.¹⁰³ In the year 2022, North Macedonia was positioned at the 85th place out of 180 nations on the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index (Transparency International 2022). North Macedonia has been dealing with a pervasive issue of corruption across all aspects of its society since the transition period from the fall of Yugoslavia. This corruption has significantly hindered the country's development progress. The Index remained high throughout the years. In 2020 North Macedonia held even the 106th position.¹⁰⁴ Labour force in North Macedonia is relatively cheap and the tax credits are generous. The Social standards in the country have improved in recent years, due to social protection reforms as well as an overall reduced poverty.¹⁰⁵

Military education and training institutions in North Macedonia:

The General Mihajlo Apostolski Military Academy in Skopje is the most important educational institution for officers of the North Macedonian army,¹⁰⁶ as well as an essential part of the defence system of the country. "The Military Academy is a higher education institution that trains personnel for the defence and the Army, crisis management and protection and rescue. The Academy organises education for all study cycles, and the teaching staff continuously participates in international research projects, conferences, and workshops."¹⁰⁷

The Defence expenditure of North Macedonia experienced a 30% increase between the years 2017 and 2020. The sharpest growth happened after the country joined NATO in 2020, compared

¹⁰⁰ Freedom House. 2023. "Freedom in the World 2023: North Macedonia".

¹⁰¹ Belgrade Centre for Security Policy. 2023. "Balkan Defence Monitor 2023."

¹⁰² BMEIA. 2023. "Künftige Erweiterungsschritte."

¹⁰³ Freedom House. 2023. "Freedom in the World 2023: North Macedonia".

¹⁰⁴ Angeloska-Dichovska, Monika. 2022. „Southeast European Review of Business and Economy.“ Vol.2 Issue 2.

¹⁰⁵ OECD iLibrary. 2021. "12. Overview: Identifying strategic opportunities for North Macedonia."

¹⁰⁶ Military Academy General Mihailo Apostolski; University Goce Delcev. 2023 "Academy – About us".

¹⁰⁷ Ministry of Defence North Macedonia. 2023. "Minister Petrovska visiting the Military Academy: The Academy remains our priority, it is the place where future military leaders are created."

to the spending before the accession which was roughly 1%. Defence expenditure of the total government spending, increased from 2.7% in 2017 to 5% for 2022.¹⁰⁸

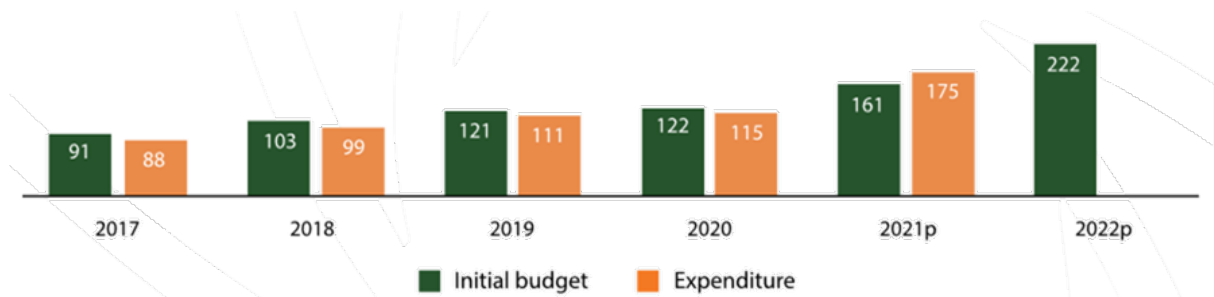


Image 5: Initial budgets and defence expenditure in North Macedonia (in million Euro)¹⁰⁹

North Macedonian defence budget has seen a change in 2021, after signing the contract to purchase the Stryker light armoured vehicles. The latter changed the budget structure in favour of arms and equipment. “Similar to other countries in the region, North Macedonia uses programme budgeting, which is not sufficiently disaggregated. Budgets and balance sheets show highly aggregated sums for different programmes, and sources of funding are presented for the entire MoD budget.”¹¹⁰

Advantages (long and short term):

- + **Clear Pro-European orientation of the country:** North Macedonia has a strategic orientation and commitment to EU integration, as manifested by the continued implementation of accession-related reforms and the work on resolving bilateral issues with neighbouring countries.¹¹¹
- + **NATO Member State:** North Macedonia is operating with high military standards and experience given the fact that it is a NATO member. The country joined NATO in 2020 as the 30th ally of the group.¹¹² It is increasing its defence spending and has a plan to invest 2 percent of its gross domestic product in defence by 2024.¹¹³ Furthermore, the Krivolak Military Training Center in North Macedonia has a positive impact on increasing the level of the military standards. The Center hosted a number of US and other NATO soldiers.¹¹⁴

Risks:

- ▲ **Ongoing activities to change the Constitution:** The political scene in North Macedonia remains largely divided over the constitutional changes. The current government is strongly in favour of the changes, to improve the recognition of the country’s Bulgarian minority, while the opposition is opposing such a change. However, pursuing these constitutional changes is needed in order to accomplish the EU integration of North Macedonia. The coalition is therefore engaged in a debate with the opposition in order to achieve

¹⁰⁸ Belgrade Centre for Security Policy. 2022. “Balkan Defence Monitor 2022.”

¹⁰⁹ Belgrade Centre for Security Policy. 2023. “Balkan Defence Monitor 2023.”

¹¹⁰ Belgrade Centre for Security Policy. 2022. “Balkan Defence Monitor 2022.”

¹¹¹ David McAllister. 2021. “David McAllister: The European Parliament’s report on North Macedonia”.

¹¹² Vermont National Guard. 2020. “News. North Macedonia joins NATO as its 30th member.”.

¹¹³ U.S. Department of Defense. 2019. “3 Things to Know: The U.S.-North Macedonia Defense Relationship.”.

¹¹⁴ TPQ. 2020. “Macedonia in NATO: What has changed.”

compromise and reach progress.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, according to Bulgaria this reform is the key to maintain EU accession talks, as North Macedonia would otherwise risks a Bulgarian veto.¹¹⁶

7. THE RESULTS OF THE ANALYSIS

Based on the results of the country specific analysis, considering the advantages and shortcomings of establishing the Western Balkan Security and Defence College, Montenegro was identified as the most feasible and suitable country to host the College. Montenegro emerges with a notably low risk profile coupled with plenty of benefits that would enable the successful implementation and sustainable operationalisation of the College. The country exhibits a consistent pro-European stance, enjoys a central location within the region, without any unresolved animosity with its neighbouring countries, and maintains a relatively stable economy that has adopted the Euro as its currency. The only notable risk that could hamper the establishment of the Western Balkan Security and Defence College in Montenegro is the insufficient political stability in the country, which is likely to continue in the near future. However, the newly formed government can be seen as a positive development that has the potential to improve the performance of the political institutions and the permanence of the political system.

In contrast, Bosnia and Herzegovina has one of the weakest state structures in the region, which is characterised by decentralised and increasingly fragmented state structures, and an overcomplicated decision-making process, based on the consent of all state entities.¹¹⁷ Whilst these circumstances illustrate strong obstacles why the WBSDC should not be located in Bosnia and Herzegovina, they uncover the need for inclusive initiatives such as the WBSDC and portray the potential advantages the College could have on the future stability of Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as on the entire region.

When it comes to Serbia, the mentioned strong proximity to Russia,¹¹⁸ also excludes the country from serving as a suitable host for the WBSDC. Additionally, the fact that Serbia already has an existing and functioning Military Academy demonstrates that there is no pressing requirement for hosting an additional institution of similar nature. However, it would nonetheless be beneficial for the Serbian Armed Forces to develop their education and training capabilities by intensifying collaboration and standardisation with the entire Western Balkans region. Despite the capable Serbian military, the regional security challenges cannot be met by single countries alone.

In addition to ongoing constitutional challenges and Albania's fragile economic situation, the connection of the Kosovo issue to Albania makes it a less suitable candidate for hosting the WBSDC. The latter could provoke diplomatic difficulties and increase regional divisions, which contradicts the essential purposes of the WBSDC's establishment.

Despite the fact that North Macedonia does not presenting severe risks, its aspiration towards a pro-European stance is overshadowed by persistent political hurdles and instabilities. Among

¹¹⁵ Atlantic Council. 2023. "#BalkansDebrief – Will North Macedonia change its constitution? A debrief with H.E. Bojan Maricikj."

¹¹⁶ Constitutionnet. 2023. "In North Macedonia, parliament begins debates on constitutional change to list Bulgarians among state's founding peoples."

¹¹⁷ BTI Transformation Index. 2022. "Bosnia and Herzegovina Country Report 2022."

¹¹⁸ Carnegie. 2023. "Untarnished by War: Why Russia's Soft Power Is So Resilient in Serbia."

these, constitutional amendments pose a recurrent challenge, which could deem the country less suitable for hosting a Western Balkan Security and Defence College.

8. CONCLUSION

The current status quo of the Western Balkans region cannot be viewed as sustainable and continued stagnation will lead to a deterioration of the situation. Western Balkan partners must be supported in resolving their own security tasks as well as in improving their resilience.¹¹⁹ The region is dealing with manifold problems, such as increased corruption, weak institutions, political instability, weak economies as well as ethnic tensions. Many political systems in the region are also fragile and prone to the influence of foreign actors.

These challenges could be mitigated by enhanced involvement of the EU in the region. Establishing a Security and Defence College in and for the Western Balkans would result in many benefits, tackling the above-mentioned issues, and would result in positive changes not only for the region itself but also for the EU. A College of such kind would boost capacity building in the region, leading to increased efficiency and higher quality of resources by pooling them together. The complicating factors that need to be taken into consideration are, the conflicting history of the Western Balkans, given the relatively recent hostilities from the 90s and persisting destabilising factors in certain countries, the different sizes of the countries and their respective strategic outlooks present a complicating factor, as is the fact that not all are part of NATO. Therefore, working together and providing interoperability could pose a challenge.

However, if successfully implemented, the WBSDC would give smaller countries with limited resources more opportunities and abilities to contribute to European security. Thus, it would offer the Western Balkan partner countries the opportunity to transition from being security consumers to developing capacities that contribute to the overall security of Europe as a whole. Another added value could be increased interoperability of the stakeholders involved in regional security, such as military personnel, police forces, and civilians. Being united within the same educational facility would, over the long-term, contribute to a common understanding of security policy and help create similar models for problem solving in a unified manner. A WBSDC could also help to mitigate animosities amongst nations. Furthermore, supporting European integration could be enhanced by bringing the Western Balkan partners closer to the EU and speeding up the integration process. This would also result in strengthening the EU's role in the region and decreasing the influence of foreign actors, namely Russia, China, and Turkey. The influence of Russia, and to a lesser extent China and Turkey, jeopardises the strategic course of the region and hinders the Western Balkans region Euro-Atlantic integration. This influence needs to be countered and resilience has to be enhanced. Another added value could be a positive democratic development and political stability in some countries. Overall, the establishment of an institution such as a Western Balkan Security and Defence College can be deemed crucial for the region, as it would help streamline strategic cultures of participating states, overcome political and societal differences, and present the EU as a respected and credible security actor in the region. Especially

¹¹⁹ Frank, Johann. 2019. "Vienna Security Dialogue 2019 – Perceptions on the EU Western Balkans Strategy." Opening speech.

the latter is of vital importance, if the EU wants to provide a credible alternative to other actors who are competing for influence in the Western Balkans.

The precise site for the WBSDC remains undecided; nevertheless, the preceding analysis suggests that Montenegro emerges as a potentially optimal host. This conclusion rests on its stable economy, strategic and accessible location, and a consistently robust pro-European stance, factors that collectively minimise risks that could otherwise hinder the founding of such an establishment.

Security must be actively pursued through diligent political and military engagements and developments; it is not an assured state. Consequently, the foremost aim is to support Western Balkan nations in enhancing their military capabilities, an endeavour critical to devise and implement efficient strategies against their unique security challenges. Furthermore, such an initiative would advance their alignment with the EU's common security and defence policy, transforming the Western Balkan partners into 'security producers' capable of not only ensuring safety within their own territories but also contributing to the broader European security landscape.

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