ÖZGÜN ARAŞTIRMA / ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Beyond Negative Peace: The Limits of NATO's Role in Fostering Sustainable Peace in the Western Balkans*

Negatif Barışın Ötesinde: Batı Balkanlar'da Sürdürülebilir Barışı Teşvik Etmede NATO'nun Rolünün Sınırları

Yusuf FİDAN (ID)

Res. Asst., Dr., Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Department of International Relations Nevşehir, Türkiye
✉ yusuffidan@nevsehir.edu.tr

Abstract

Aim: This research aims to examine the association between the Balkan Peace Index (BPI), Galtung's theoretical framework of positive peace, and sustainability dimensions in order to critically asses the effectiveness and long-term viability of NATO's peacebuilding initiatives in the Western Balkans region.

Method: The study applies a mixed-methods research design, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative analytical approaches. The methodological framework encompasses the examination of environmental sustainability indicators, democratic governance structures, and regional cooperation patterns. It is supported by qualitative data analysis from sources such as NATO policy documents, EU Enlargement Reports, and analyzing news related to the topic.

Results: The empirical findings demonstrate that NATO has achieved considerable success in establishing negative peace throughout the Western Balkans via systematic conflict resolution mechanisms. However, the study reveals significant limitations regarding the establishment of sustainable and positive peace results. The research identifies substantial inadequacies within NATO's traditional security architecture when confronting contemporary multifaceted challenges, including climate related security threats, persistent economic disparities, and deteriorating social cohesion across the region.

Conclusion: The study reveals that NATO needs to review its operational approach in order to achieve lasting and sustainable peace in the Western Balkans. In this context, it is crucial to adopt comprehensive and region-specific strategies that systematically integrate security requirements with development goals and environmental considerations, operating specifically within Galtung's positive peace theoretical framework.

Keywords

NATO, Sustainable Peace, Western Balkans, EU, Sustainability, Peacebuilding

Öz

Amaç: Bu araştırma, Balkan Barış Endeksi (BPI), Galtung'un pozitif barış kuramsal çerçevesi ve sürdürülebilirlik boyutları arasındaki ilişkiyi inceleyerek NATO'nun Batı Balkanlar bölgesindeki barış inşa girişimlerinin etkinliğini ve uzun vadeli sürdürülebilirliğini eleştirel bir perspektifle değerlendirmeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Yöntem: Araştırma, nicel ve nitel analitik yaklaşımları içeren karma yöntem araştırma tasarımını kullanmaktadır. Metodolojik çerçeve, çevresel sürdürülebilirlik göstergelerinin, demokratik yönetişim yapılarının ve bölgesel işbirliği örüntülerinin incelenmesini kapsamaktadır. Bu, NATO politika belgeleri, AB Genişleme Raporları ve ilgili haber ve raporların analizleri gibi kaynaklardan elde edilen nitel veri analizleriyle desteklenmektedir.

Bulgular: Ampirik bulgular, NATO'nun sistematik çatışma çözüm mekanizmaları aracılığıyla Batı Balkanlar genelinde negatif barışın tesisinde kayda değer başarı elde ettiğini göstermektedir. Ancak çalışma, sürdürülebilir ve pozitif barış sonuçlarının elde edilmesi konusunda önemli sınırlılıklar ortaya koymaktadır. Araştırma, iklimle ilgili güvenlik tehditleri, kalıcı ekonomik eşitsizlikler ve bölge genelinde kötüleşen sosyal uyum dahil olmak üzere çağdaş çok boyutlu zorluklarla karşılaştığında NATO'nun geleneksel güvenlik mimarisinde önemli yetersizlikler ortaya koymaktadır.

Sonuç: Çalışma, NATO'nun Batı Balkanlar'da kalıcı ve sürdürülebilir barışa ulaşmak için operasyonel yaklaşımını gözden geçirmesi gerektiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Bu çerçevede, Galtung'un pozitif barış kuramsal perspektifi içinde faaliyet göstererek güvenlik gereksinimlerini kalkınma hedefleri ve çevresel değerlendirmelerle sistematik olarak bütünleştiren kapsamlı ve bölgeye özgü stratejilerin benimsenmesi kritik önem taşımaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

NATO, Sürdürülebilir Barış, Batı Balkanlar, AB, Sürdürülebilirlik, Barış İnşası

Introduction

The Imperative of Positive and Sustainable Peace in the Western Balkans

The Western Balkans has been one of the most conflict-prone regions in recent decades, its geographical position within the European continent necessitating increased attention (Gül, 2015, pp. 252-257). Emerging from the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the devastating wars of the 1990s, the region has grappled with unresolved ethnic tensions, fragile state institutions, and persistent socio-economic vulnerabilities (Heywood, 2013, p. 223; Pejković & Lazić, 2024, p. 56). While armed conflicts have largely ceased in the region over the past two decades, leading to a state often termed "negative peace"— merely the absence of war—the pursuit of a deeper and more enduring "positive peace" has been crucial for Europe and NATO (NATO, 2010; Kulkova, 2019, p. 28).

Recent studies based on Galtung's (1969) fundamental distinction between negative and positive peace have increasingly emphasized the "sustainability-peace nexus" as a critical analytical lens for understanding post-conflict transitions (Sharifi et al., 2021a; Simangan et al., 2021). This link acknowledges that sustainable peace cannot be achieved solely through the cessation of direct violence (negative peace), but requires the simultaneous addressing of structural violence manifested as systemic inequalities, environmental degradation, and institutional weaknesses, as well as cultural violence embedded in social norms and belief systems that legitimize injustice (Galtung, 1990, 1996).

"Negative peace," as conceptualized by Johan Galtung, refers to the absence of direct violence or the cessation of overt armed conflict. Simply put, it signifies a ceasefire and a period free from active warfare, though the risks of war and conflict may still persist. Within this context, a fundamental area of inquiry is how to achieve the transition to positive peace, as conceptualized by Galtung. Alternatively, the core question is how Galtung's definition of positive peace can be attained, which necessitates a multi-dimensional, holistic approach encompassing justice, environment, and development, among other factors. In contrast, "positive peace" transcends this narrow definition, embracing the absence of indirect and structural violence, and emphasizing the importance of social justice, equality, and the integration of human society (Galtung, 1969).

This study argues that while NATO's interventions and proactive policies have been largely successful in achieving negative peace (the immediate cessation of direct violence and armed conflict), they have faced significant challenges in building sustainable peace. The concept of sustainable peace or positive peace goes beyond the mere absence of war to include the elimination of structural violence, the promotion of social justice and reconciliation, and the establishment of robust, equitable institutions that can prevent future conflicts by addressing their root causes (Galtung, 1969; Chandler, 2017). The fundamental argument of this study is that, in order to fully understand this transition, it must be examined within a rich theoretical framework supported not only by Galtung's binary distinction but also by approaches such as liberal peace, hybrid peace, and local ownership. "Sustainable peace," built upon the concept of positive peace, refers to a continuous process aimed at preventing the risk of conflict emerging, escalating, persisting, and recurring (Chandler, 2017). Essentially, sustainable peace is actively pursuing positive peace and maintaining its sustainability. In this context, regarding peace operations and peacebuilding architecture, the "sustainable peace" agenda launched by the United Nations[1] in 2015 represents a paradigm shift from post-conflict reconstruction to preventive, comprehensive peace processes (UN, 2015, pp. 8-11; de Coning, 2016). This agenda explicitly acknowledges that peace is not a linear endpoint but a continuous political process requiring constant attention to the root causes of conflict across political, economic, social, and environmental dimensions (Fung et al., 2021, p. 105).

Based on this premise, the central question of this research is: To what extent has NATO's post-Cold War engagement contributed to the establishment of positive and sustainable peace in the Western Balkans, as measured by multi-dimensional sustainability indices and qualitative assessments of peace quality? Furthermore, what are the fundamental challenges and opportunities for enhancing these contributions in the context of evolving geopolitical and socio-environmental dynamics?

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has played a critical role in shaping the Western Balkans' post-conflict trajectory (Çelikkan & Proganati, 2012). It can even be argued that NATO effectively took over a role from the UN in this context (US Department of State, 1997). NATO's initial military interventions, conducted through the Implementation Force (IFOR) and Stabilization Force (SFOR) in Bosnia and Herzegovina starting in 1995 (Hadžikadunić, 2022, p. 78), followed by Operation Allied Force in Kosovo in 1999 and the subsequent deployment of the Kosovo Force (KFOR), are widely credited with halting mass atrocities and creating fundamental security conditions (NATO, 1999b; Gheciu, 2005).

Establishing sustainable peace is essential. It requires addressing entrenched inequalities and systemic injustices (structural violence) as well as the social norms and belief systems that can give rise to violence in any society (Younes, 2024, p. 2). The Western Balkans, among its diverse and unique cultural characteristics, is marked by deep-seated ethnic divisions. Additionally, the region faces widespread corruption, institutional weaknesses, economic underdevelopment, and increasingly urgent environmental challenges that threaten long-term stability and human security (Uvalić, 2025). Active efforts to combat these issues are also necessary for the persistence of peace (Džuverović, 2023, p. 5).

While large-scale armed conflicts and hostilities have largely subsided across much of the region, the pursuit of a more resilient, self-sustaining, and lasting "positive peace"—rather than merely "negative peace" (the absence of war)—remains crucial for the EU (IISS, 2024, pp. 90-92; Kulkova, 2019, pp. 34-35). From another perspective, a more comprehensive and holistic approach is needed to move beyond the mere cessation of violence and to create conditions that foster human and societal development (Izzi et al., 2021).

Johan Galtung's innovative conceptualization of "positive peace" offers an important analytical lens (Galtung, 1969). According to Galtung, focusing on the root causes of conflict and preventing conflict risks is more important than merely preventing direct conflict (Galtung, 1969). Positive peace also encompasses the dimensions of structural and cultural violence (Galtung, 1969; Galtung, 1990; Galtung & Höivik, 1971). In this framework, structural violence can be defined as ingrained inequalities, injustices, and exploitative mechanisms within social systems that cause indirect harm through poverty,

---

[1]The UN concept of "sustainable peace" emphasizes that activities aimed at "preventing the outbreak, escalation, continuation, and recurrence of conflict; addressing its root causes; helping conflicting parties end hostilities; achieving national reconciliation; and advancing recovery, reconstruction, and development" must be integrated within the context of peace, security, and development. (UN General Assembly Resolution 70/262, 2016).

discrimination, and lack of access to basic resources (Galtung, 1969). Cultural violence, on the other hand, refers to aspects of a culture—such as ideologies, beliefs, or norms—that serve to legitimize or normalize direct or structural violence (Galtung, 1990; Galtung & Höivik, 1971).

Achieving meaningful and lasting positive peace in the post-conflict Western Balkans therefore requires rebuilding and reforming state institutions, fostering genuine democratic governance, strengthening the rule of law, encouraging inter-ethnic reconciliation, rebuilding trust among divided communities, and ensuring a fairer distribution of resources and opportunities. Furthermore, addressing escalating environmental challenges, which pose complex threats alongside sustainable socio-economic development, is necessary for achieving positive peace (Simangan et al., 2021, p. 1895).

Therefore, sustainable peace is not a static endpoint but a dynamic process that encompasses not only the absence of violence but also the establishment of a just, equitable, and environmentally sound order for present and future generations (Sharifi, 2021a). Sustainable peace is inextricably linked to the multiple dimensions of overall societal sustainability—economic viability, social equity, institutional resilience, and environmental integrity—and their complex interdependencies. This relationship is reciprocal. Peace is generally considered a prerequisite for sustainable development by preventing damage to human, social, economic, and environmental capital. However, if peace processes are not carefully managed, long-term sustainable peace and development can be hampered. For example, in post-conflict situations, states might accelerate economic development, which could increase pressure on natural resources and the environment (Ide et al., 2021).

NATO's Evolving Role in Post-Cold War Security

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, NATO faced existential challenges in a radically altered security environment. The Alliance's subsequent adaptation process involved significant institutional reforms, doctrinal revisions, and operational innovations that collectively repositioned NATO from a static collective defense organization to a more dynamic and multifaceted security actor (Gheciu, 2005; Karabulut, 2012, p. 137). This transformation encompassed both a response to existing threats and a reconceptualization of security that included responsibility for terrorism and humanitarian crises (Akgün, 2012, p. 251).

Key documents such as NATO's 1991 London Summit Strategic Concept (NATO, 1991)[2] the 1999 Washington Summit Strategic Concept (NATO, 1999a)[3] and the 2010 Lisbon Summit Strategic Concept

(NATO, 2010)[4] progressively articulated this expanded vision. The 1999 revision, developed during the Kosovo conflict, formally embraced crisis management operations beyond NATO's traditional

[2]NATO's 1991 Strategic Concept defines the Alliance's changing role in the post-Cold War era as follows: 'The great existential threat of the Cold War era has disappeared, but significant risks to NATO's security remain. These risks can originate from various sources, including ethnic and religious rivalries, territorial disputes, human rights violations, failed states, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction' (NATO, 1991).

[3] The 1999 Strategic Concept, developed during the Kosovo crisis, formally embraced NATO's crisis management operations beyond its traditional borders—known as 'out-of-area operations'. The most important statement put forth by this Strategic Concept was the Alliance's declaration that it would actively work to prevent crises, manage conflicts, and stabilize post-conflict situations. This strategic transformation legitimized NATO's interventions in the Western Balkans and defined the framework for the Alliance's long-term engagement in the region (NATO, 1999a).

[4]Published under the title "Active Engagement, Modern Defense," the 2010 Strategic Concept defines NATO's three core tasks as: "collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security." The concept further emphasizes: "The Alliance will actively work to prevent crises, manage conflicts, and stabilize post-conflict situations, doing so where necessary in close cooperation with our international partners, particularly the United Nations and the European Union." This strategic concept demonstrates NATO's evolving role in the Western Balkans, moving beyond negative peace towards positive peacebuilding (NATO, 2010).

[5]Published under the title "Active Engagement, Modern Defense," the 2010 Strategic Concept defines NATO's three core tasks as: "collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security." The concept further emphasizes: "The Alliance will actively work to prevent crises, manage conflicts, and stabilize post-conflict situations, doing so where necessary in close cooperation with our international partners, particularly the United Nations and the European Union." This strategic concept demonstrates NATO's evolving role in the Western Balkans, moving beyond negative peace towards positive peacebuilding (NATO, 2010).

borders (known as "out-of-area operations") (NATO, 1999a). The 2010 concept further broadened the Alliance's scope to include cooperative security through partnerships and an expanded threat concept covering cyber attacks, energy security, and climate change (NATO, 2010).

Institutional structures have been crucial pillars of this strategic transformation. NATO has developed new command structures, thereby increasing its rapid response capability. Additionally, specialized centers of excellence have been established, and partnership frameworks have been created to enhance interoperability with non-NATO member states. The 1994 Partnership for Peace (PfP) Framework Document (NATO, 1994) mandated the PfP program to play a significant role in encouraging internal reforms in former Warsaw Pact countries as they cooperated with NATO. The Mediterranean Dialogue and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative further extended NATO's partnership approach to the Middle East and North Africa, serving as concrete manifestations of its aspiration to be a global security organization. These institutional innovations demonstrate NATO's effectiveness not only through military deterrence but also through cooperation (Sperling & Webber, 2009).

This entire process of transformation has also drawn academic and political critiques. A significant reason for these criticisms is that NATO was not institutionally prepared for this transformation (Williams, 2013). Concerns have been raised regarding the suitability of NATO's institutional design, primarily geared towards conventional military operations, for addressing the multifaceted challenges of post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction. Williams (2013) offers a critical assessment of NATO's suitability for post-conflict reconstruction in multi-actor environments, arguing that the Alliance's military capabilities diminish in value. This analysis highlights the fundamental tension between NATO's military capabilities and the multi-dimensional nature of peacebuilding, which requires coordination with various civilian-led international organizations (Williams, 2013).

Research Methodology and Analytical Approach

This study employs a qualitatively-weighted mixed-methods research methodology, combining quantitative data from multi-dimensional peace and sustainability indices with a comprehensive qualitative analysis of NATO policies, regional dynamics, and scholarly assessments. The quantitative dimension of the analysis primarily relies on data from the Balkan Peace Index (BPI), which provides locally developed measurements of peace quality across seven areas specific to the regional context. The BPI methodology integrates quantitative indicators with qualitative expert assessments, forming a nuanced analytical tool that captures both measurable outcomes and contextual factors influencing peace dynamics (Džuverović, 2023, p. 2).

To provide comparative perspectives and situate developments in the Western Balkans within broader global trends, complementary quantitative data from the Global Peace Index (GPI) is also utilized. The integration of multiple indices ensures the triangulation of findings and helps identify areas where regional assessments diverge from global patterns, thereby providing important insights into the unique characteristics of peace and conflict dynamics in the Western Balkans.

The Conflict-Affected Countries Performance Indicators (PCPI), developed by the World Bank Group, assess the quality of a country's policy and institutional framework in supporting successful transition and recovery from conflict, promoting sustainable growth, reducing poverty, and effectively utilizing development assistance (World Bank Group, 2025). The PCPI criteria comprise four clusters: Economic Management and Structural Policies, Social Inclusion and Human Development, Governance, and Post-Conflict Risk. The Social Cohesion and Reconciliation Index (SCORE), developed by UNDP-ACT and SeeD, measures social cohesion and reconciliation as indicators of peace in multi-ethnic societies (UNDP, 2022).

While this study employs a mixed-methods approach, several methodological limitations must be acknowledged. First, the temporal scope (1999-2025) begins after NATO's major interventions—including Kosovo—but does not permit direct comparison with pre-intervention conflict dynamics, which constrains the ability to draw causal inferences. Second, reliance on aggregate index data (BPI, GPI, EPI) risks obscuring subnational and intra-state differences in peace quality. Third, the qualitative document analysis primarily examines NATO's official discourse and policy documents, which may reflect institutional self-justification rather than operational realities on the ground. To

partially address this limitation, the study compares NATO sources with independent assessments and data from international organizations and institutions such as European Commission, the World Bank, UNDP, and regional civil society organizations. Fourth, NATO's difficulty in distinguishing the contributions of other international actors (EU, UN, OSCE, bilateral donors) presents natural challenges in a crowded intervention environment characterized by overlapping jurisdictions and a lack of coordination (Anastasakis & Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2002, p. 26, Grillot et al., 2010). Where possible, this study identifies NATO-specific mechanisms (e.g., MAP conditionality, defense sector reform programs) to establish clearer causal links. Finally, the study's normative framework, based on the West's liberal democratic understanding of peace, may not fully reflect local understandings of peace, justice, and security. The integration of locally designed BPI, developed using participatory methodologies with the involvement of regional researchers and communities, helps to reduce this Eurocentric bias (Džuverović, 2025, pp. 46-50).

Qualitative analysis involves a systematic thematic review of official NATO documents, including Strategic Concepts, Summit Declarations, Partnership for Peace frameworks, and operational reports from missions such as KFOR and NATO Headquarters Sarajevo.

1. Institutional Policy Documents and Reports:

NATO Doctrines and Operations Reports (KFOR, SFOR etc.): To examine the evolution of NATO's mission from negative peace to positive peace and its institutional constraints (NATO, 2025; NATO, 2024d).

European Union (EU) Enlargement Reports: Used as empirical evidence highlighting structural deficiencies in the rule of law, anti-corruption, and fundamental rights in the Western Balkans, as well as the problem of reforms remaining "on paper" (European Commission, 2025a; European Commission, 2025c). Besides, World Bank and UNDP Reports are used to highlight gaps in environmental security and governance (World Bank Group, 2020).

2. Case Analysis and Examination of Causality Relationships:

Storchi (2021) integrated local actor/media discourses and case examples on corruption, media freedom, and judicial independence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Kosovo to analyze the causal relationships underlying quantitative index findings. These qualitative data were used to show how liberal reforms were distorted by local ethnic/patronage networks, in other words, to demonstrate the "illiberal consequences of hybrid peace."

Environmental Security Documents: World Bank and EU reports were examined to show the critical gap in environmental sustainability and how climate-security threats extend beyond NATO's traditional security framework (World Bank Group, 2020; Belis et al., 2024).

The analytical framework integrates Galtung's distinction between negative and positive peace with the eight fundamental pillars of positive peace identified by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP): 1) well-functioning government, 2) sound business environment, 3) equitable distribution of resources, 4) acceptance of the rights of others, 5) good relations with neighbours, 6) free flow of information, 7) high levels of human capital, and 8) low levels of corruption (Galtung, 1969; IEP, 2023). This integrated framework, based on the conceptual foundations of Galtung and IEP regarding positive peace, allowed us to operationally measure the BPI's seven socio-political areas and conduct a more comprehensive analysis of NATO's activities' impact on different peace components.

To empirically assess the quality and resilience of peace, this study draws on multi-dimensional sustainability indices. Traditional peace measures like the Global Peace Index (GPI) offer a global perspective but often lack the contextual nuance required for complex post-conflict regions such as the Western Balkans. The GPI, developed by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), measures peacefulness across three domains based on 23 indicators: ongoing domestic and international conflict, societal safety and security, and militarization (IEP, 2023). While useful, the aggregated nature of the GPI can obscure specific local dynamics (IEP, 2023).

The Balkan Peace Index (BPI) emerges as a more suitable tool for this region. Developed by researchers at the University of Belgrade, it is a locally designed and owned peace index that

incorporates a "local turn" approach to peace measurement (Džuverović, 2023). The BPI classifies countries along a peace continuum (Violent Conflict, Contested Peace, Polarized Peace, Stable Peace, Consolidated Peace), moving beyond simple rankings to assess the "quality and resilience of peace." Its methodology combines qualitative and quantitative data from local experts, surveys, focus groups, and international databases, enabling a context-sensitive and nuanced understanding of peace dynamics (Džuverović, 2023).

As an extension of the analytical framework, the BPI's seven socio-political domains correspond to Galtung's positive peace concept (specifically the absence of structural and cultural violence) and the operationalized pillars of IEP's positive peace. These domains reflect the multi-dimensional nature of positive and sustainable peace addressed in this study (economic, social, political, environmental, and relational dimensions). The seven socio-political domains assessed by the BPI are (Džuverović, 2023; Džuverović et al., 2025; Džuverović, 2025):

Negative Peace:

- **Political Violence (D1):** Measures armed conflicts, political terror, violent extremism, and terrorism.
- **Crime Control (D5):** Assesses the state's capacity to combat crime, the scale of crime, and public perception of security.

Positive Peace:

- **Regional and International Relations (D2):** Evaluates mutual relations, regional cooperation, and the influence of great powers.
- **State Capacity (D3):** Assesses the government's ability to implement policies, ensure welfare, and control territory.
- **Environmental Sustainability (D4):** Measures natural resource resilience, air quality, and energy system performance.
- **Political Pluralism (D6):** Measures democratic participation, civil liberties, elections, and political polarization.
- **Socio-Economic Development (D7):** Evaluates economic outlook, equality, and levels of corruption.

The temporal scope of the analysis spans from 1999, marking a turning point in NATO's engagement in the region with its intervention in Kosovo, up to 2025, covering the latest available data from peace and sustainability indices. This timeframe captures NATO's evolution from military intervention to partnership-based engagement, as well as recent developments in regional cooperation and Euro-Atlantic integration processes. The geographical scope encompasses seven Western Balkan countries and the broader region: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Kosovo. This selection reflects the BPI's coverage and allows for a comprehensive regional analysis, accounting for varying levels of NATO integration, ranging from full membership (Albania, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia) to partnership arrangements (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia) and Kosovo's unique status.

Theoretical Framework

Applying Galtung's positive peace framework to NATO's presence in the Balkans requires evaluating broader peacebuilding paradigms within the scope of this study. In this context, Galtung's dual distinction, liberal peace, hybrid peace, and local ownership approaches will be synthesized and used to increase the theoretical depth of the article and analyze NATO's impact beyond negative peace, within the framework of sustainable peace.

The liberal peace framework, which dominated international peacebuilding in the post-Cold War period, argues that sustainable peace emerges from the combination of democratic governance, market economies, and the rule of law (Wilson, 1965; Richmond, 2006, pp. 291-292). NATO's institutional approach in the Western Balkans—emphasizing security sector reform, democratic conditionality, and Euro-Atlantic integration—reflects this fundamental philosophy of liberal peace

(Chandler, 2017, pp. 34-37). This approach aims to achieve lasting stability (which also means sustainable peace) by transforming the root causes of conflict, namely authoritarian regimes and closed economic structures (Doyle, 1986, pp.1161-1162). However, there are serious criticisms that liberalization processes can have destabilizing effects in post-conflict societies and can increase internal tensions (Paris, 2004, pp. 45-46).

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the liberal peace paradigm that dominated international peacebuilding interventions was based on the assumption that democratization, market liberalization, and the strengthening of civil society were the most appropriate paths to sustainable peace (Paris, 2004). This perspective, implemented in the Western Balkans through NATO and EU conditionality mechanisms, has been increasingly criticized for its top-down, externally driven structure and for not paying sufficient attention to local contexts, power dynamics, and indigenous peace capacities (Džuverović, 2025).

On the other hand, according to the concept of "hybrid peace" sustainable peace emerges from the interaction between international norms and local institutions (Mac Ginty, 2025, pp. 3-4). This framework helps explain NATO's successes in creating security architectures and its limitations in promoting deeper social transformation. Hybrid peace implies a situation where international liberal norms coexist with local, illiberal, or traditional actors, institutions, and practices, often in conflict (Belloni, 2012, p. 22). This situation is seen as an arena of interaction where international peacebuilding is constantly distorted and reshaped by local institutions that can be more compatible with local expectations and needs than externally imposed standards (Mac Ginty, 2010, p. 392).

The concept of "hybrid peace" questions the binary distinction between international and local actors and acknowledges that post-conflict orders are spaces of negotiation where formal liberal institutions coexist with, and often clash with, informal, traditional, and customary governance structures (Gropas, 2004, pp. 13-14). In the Western Balkans, this hybridity manifests itself in the persistence of "negative social capital" (ethnic systems of patrimony, and informal economies), which provides functional security to the population while simultaneously undermining official state legitimacy and the rule of law (Gropas, 2004, pp. 7-13). Additionally, the approaches of "local ownership" and "local turn" emphasize the capacities of local actors and institutions and their own adoption of the process for the success of international interventions (Džuverović, 2023, p. 127). This perspective helps explain why externally imposed liberal peace models often fail to provide sufficient legitimacy and sustainability in local contexts (Džuverović, 2025, pp. 44-65; Donais, 2009, pp. 145-148).

The concept of "development peace," derived from alternative peace paradigms that emphasize state capacity and socioeconomic stability as prerequisites for lasting peace, offers a complementary analytical perspective (Fung et al., 2021, p. 51). Although this perspective has not been explicitly adopted by NATO, it aligns with the Alliance's growing awareness that security cannot be considered separately from development and governance challenges. The analytical theories and concepts used in this study aim to bring together these different theoretical currents (liberal peace, hybrid peace, and development peace) to address NATO's peacebuilding impact in the Western Balkans in a multidimensional and contextual manner.

NATO's Interventions and the Establishment of Negative Peace

NATO's intervention in the Western Balkans began with direct military interventions, crucial for halting immediate violence and establishing negative peace. The Bosnian War, characterized by ethnic cleansing and genocide, exposed the limitations of international intervention mechanisms. Furthermore, criticisms arose regarding both the UN Security Council and NATO for their belated response to ethnic cleansing. NATO's initially cautious intervention escalated in 1995 with Operation Deliberate Force, aimed at deterring Serb attacks on UN safe areas. The intervention, combined with diplomatic efforts, effectively ended the war and led to the fragile peace established by the Dayton Peace Accords in November 1995 (Daalder, 1998; NATO, 2024d).

Post-Dayton, NATO deployed the Implementation Force (IFOR) and later the Stabilization Force (SFOR) to oversee the military aspects of the agreement, including force cantonment and establishing

a secure environment. While NATO support continues through NATO Headquarters Sarajevo (NHQSa), this mission was transferred to the EU-led EUFOR Althea in 2004 (Hadžikadunić, 2022, p. 79). NHQSa's focus is on defense reform, counter-terrorism, and supporting BiH's Euro-Atlantic integration path. Despite successfully halting open hostilities, the Dayton Accords have been criticized for institutionalizing ethnic divisions and creating a complex, often dysfunctional governance structure in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Cousens & Cater, 2001; Yapıcı, 2007, pp. 4-11). This initial phase can be seen as primarily establishing negative peace by preventing further bloodshed, but leaving deep structural problems unresolved.

In the Kosovo crisis, NATO again played an active role following severe human rights violations against ethnic Albanians by Serb forces. Unlike in Bosnia, NATO launched its air campaign, Operation Allied Force, in March 1999 without explicit UN Security Council authorization, sparking intense debate over the legality versus legitimacy of humanitarian intervention (Ignatieff, 2003). Despite these debates, the intervention forced Serb forces to withdraw and led to the deployment of the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR) under UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999). KFOR's mandate was broad, including deterring hostilities, ensuring a secure environment for civilian returns, and supporting public safety. As of May 2025, the NATO-led KFOR mission continues its operations aimed at maintaining a secure environment and freedom of movement in Kosovo under UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (NATO, 2025; Yannis, 2001). The KFOR Commander's engagements with ambassadors, local authorities, and the OSCE mission, as well as cooperation with the Kosovo Security Force (KSF) on hazardous material disposal, demonstrate ongoing engagement. While NATO's presence in Kosovo is contested by Serbia and Russia, it effectively ended large-scale violence (negative peace) and facilitated Kosovo's path towards its internationally disputed independence.

The third and final crisis in the Western Balkans began in 2001 with clashes between Macedonian forces and ethnic Albanian insurgents in North Macedonia. Unlike the previous two crises, NATO intervened rapidly in this relatively smaller conflict, launching Operation Essential Harvest to disarm the insurgents (NATO, 2001). NATO's quicker intervention, drawing lessons from Bosnia and Kosovo, prevented a full-scale civil war and led to the Ohrid Framework Agreement. The agreement, which involved constitutional amendments and granted more rights to the Albanian minority, demonstrated NATO's evolving role in conflict prevention and political resolution. These interventions were vital in halting direct violence and laying a foundation for stability, thus establishing negative peace (Risso, 2022).

Beyond military interventions, NATO's long-term engagement has aimed at fostering democratic values, institutional reforms, and regional cooperation to secure a deeper, more sustainable peace. This transition aligns with positive peace efforts by addressing the structural issues that could reignite conflict. NATO's "Open Door Policy" and the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program (NATO, 1994) have been key mechanisms for this broader engagement. Launched in 1994, PfP facilitated military cooperation, crisis management training, and defense reforms in aspiring countries, gradually integrating them into Euro-Atlantic security structures (NATO, 1994). The Membership Action Plan (MAP), introduced in 1999 (NATO, 1999a), provided a structured roadmap for aspirants to align their political, economic, and military systems with NATO standards (NATO, 1999a; Gheciu, 2005).

This process has stimulated significant internal reforms across the Western Balkans. Countries like Albania, Croatia, and Montenegro, through their pursuit of NATO (and later EU) membership, undertook comprehensive security sector reforms (SSR), including civilian control over armed forces, increased transparency, and anti-corruption measures. Albania and Croatia successfully joined NATO in 2009, followed by Montenegro in 2017, and North Macedonia in 2020, demonstrating the tangible incentives of the "Open Door Policy" (NATO, 2024a).

NATO's own assessments of its operations in the Western Balkans often tend to highlight successes while downplaying challenges. For instance, NATO's official assessment of its SFOR operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina emphasizes achievements in 'establishing and maintaining a secure environment' but inadequately addresses persistent structural issues like ethnic divisions and weak state institutions. In contrast to this perspective, NATO's success in establishing negative peace through military interventions is undeniable. The cessation of large-scale wars across all targeted regions,

a significant reduction in civilian casualties, and the provision of fundamental security conditions enabling refugee returns, humanitarian aid, and initial reconstruction efforts are also supported by Global Peace Index (GPI) rankings.

Indeed, according to the GPI 2023, Western Balkan countries have shown significant improvements in peace levels compared to the conflict period of the 1990s, with most countries classified as having "high" or "very high" peace in terms of absence of organized violence. For example, rankings for North Macedonia (38th), Albania (40th), Montenegro (45th), Bosnia and Herzegovina (61st), Serbia (65th), and Kosovo (70th) demonstrate the region's progress. However, the quality and sustainability of this negative peace present a more problematic picture. Findings from the Balkan Peace Index (BPI) reveal that Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Serbia remain in the "contested peace" category rather than stable or consolidated peace, indicating that underlying tensions, political instability, and conflict potential remain significant concerns.

Specifically, the BPI 2023 report notes that Serbia has regressed from "polarized peace" to "contested peace" (joining Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina), while Montenegro has progressed from "polarized peace" to "stable peace." This situation clearly indicates that despite NATO's military capabilities being highly effective in ending hostilities, military tools are insufficient to address fundamental problems in the region, such as structural inequalities, institutional weaknesses, and social divisions, that persist in the transition from externally imposed negative peace to internally sustained positive peace.

Assessment of NATO's Contributions to Positive Peace Dimensions

Through Partnership for Peace programs, Membership Action Plans, and direct advisory roles, NATO has supported comprehensive transformations of defense institutions across the Western Balkans, leading to institutional renewal beyond the armed forces (Đokić, 2019). These efforts, guided by the Alliance's conditionality, have driven significant institutional reforms and increased civilian control over military forces, proving particularly successful in countries that have achieved NATO membership (Albania, Croatia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia) (European Commission, 2025b; 2025d; 2025e). The Partnership for Peace framework is also important in demonstrating NATO's military and civilian defense capabilities. Within this framework, NATO member states have established joint training exercises, personnel exchanges, and cooperative planning processes with non-member states. This has fostered mutual understanding and trust among former adversaries, positively influencing regional stability and cooperation on security issues. Countries undergoing MAP processes have internalized democratic values and practices, entering into defense governance that reflects these principles. Measurable improvements in transparency and accountability have been observed within this framework. Furthermore, NATO's promotion of Integrity Building (anti-corruption, transparency) in defense ministries and the Women, Peace, and Security agenda (new national action plans in BiH, Serbia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo) are crucial for establishing inclusive, accountable institutions (key pillars of positive peace) (NATO, 2024b; NATO, 2024c).

While NATO's security reforms in the Western Balkans have achieved considerable success, the Alliance's impact on fundamental governance issues facing the region's states remains limited and indirect. Corruption, structural weaknesses in the rule of law, and deficiencies in public administration efficiency continue to be chronic problems in most countries in the region (Vachudova, 2014, pp. 123-125). The primary reason for this situation is the risk that NATO's more active involvement in these areas could be perceived as interference in the internal affairs of member states. Such a perception could significantly curtail the Alliance's legitimacy and operational scope.

Within the framework of security reforms, significant progress has been made in strengthening democratic civilian control over armed forces. However, these developments cannot be expected to automatically lead to improvements in other governance areas critical for establishing positive peace. Empirical findings from the Balkan Peace Index clearly support this observation. As the index indicates, chronic issues such as corruption, weak state capacity, and inadequate crime control persist across a large part of the region (Džuverović, 2023, p. 5). These findings demonstrate that security-focused reform approaches are insufficient to close systemic governance gaps.

These structural limitations in the governance sphere also shape the nature of NATO's economic contributions in the Western Balkans. When viewed through the lens of positive peace, the Alliance's economic impact on the region is largely indirect. The establishment and maintenance of stable security environments have created the necessary conditions for attracting foreign investment, fostering commercial activities, and implementing reconstruction processes, thereby contributing to post-conflict economic recovery.

However, NATO's capacity to directly address structural economic problems, which are fundamental conditions for positive peace, is quite limited. Interventions concerning deep-rooted economic challenges such as unemployment, poverty, income inequality, and underdevelopment fall outside NATO's core mandate and institutional capacity. The necessary expertise, resources, and institutional structure are not present within NATO's organizational architecture to tackle these issues. Therefore, the comprehensive economic transformation required for positive peace is beyond what the Alliance can achieve alone, highlighting the need for additional mechanisms for sustainable peacebuilding (Hadžikadunić, 2022, pp. 77-81; Chandler, 2017, pp. 88-90).

Table 1. Democratic Indicators of Western Balkan Countries (2019-2020)

Country	Corruption Perception Index (Transparency International)	Government Effectiveness (World Governance Indicators)	Control of Corruption (World Governance Indicators)	Economic Freedom Index (Heritage Foundation)	Corruption Score (Freedom House)	Democracy Score (Freedom House)
Bosnia-Herzegovina	35/100 (111th rank)	-0.63 (133rd rank)	-0.61 (130th rank)	62.9/100 (82nd rank)	3.00/7.00	3.32/7.00
Serbia	38/100 (94th rank)	0.02 (88th rank)	-0.45 (120th rank)	67.2/100 (54th rank)	3.50/7.00	3.96/7.00
Kosovo	36/100 (104th rank)	Data Not Available	Data Not Available	66.5/100 (58th rank)	2.25/7.00	3.14/7.00
Montenegro	36/100 (104th rank)	0.16 (75th rank)	-0.03 (82nd rank)	63.4/100 (80th rank)	3.00/7.00	3.82/7.00
North Macedonia	35/100 (111th rank)	0.00 (90th rank)	-0.41 (82nd rank)	68.6/100 (46th rank)	3.25/7.00	3.82/7.00

Source: Mulalić, M., & Karić, M. (2022). Cosmopolitanism, Global Risks, and Framing of the Western Balkans Relations. In M. Mulalić, E. Topcu, & J. Muhasilović (Eds.), The Western Balkans: Cooperation, Geopolitics and Economic Transitions and Relations. International University of Sarajevo. (Compiled from Table 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 data).

The data presented in Table 1 is significant in that it shows a critical disconnect between NATO's successes in the area of security sector reform and broader governance implications. Although countries such as Serbia and Montenegro have made measurable progress in establishing defense institutions and civilian control of the armed forces, corruption perception scores remain highly low across all indicators (Transparency International CPI: 35-38/100; Freedom House Corruption: 35-38/100). This trend shows that security sector governance reforms do not automatically spread to broader areas of public administration, the judiciary, or political governance (Vachudova, 2014).

The persistence of dynamics and/or competition of "state capture," where political and economic elites systematically distort institutional functions for their own interests, actively undermines state capacity and public trust, the two pillars of positive peace (Gola, 2023, pp. 4-5; Csaky, 2024). For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, ethnically based political parties control key state institutions to distribute resources among ethnic groups using patronage networks and to block reforms that threaten their power (Bieber, 2006, pp. 48-52). Similarly, in Serbia, despite EU candidacy and NATO partnership, investigative journalism consistently exposes high-level corruption cases involving public procurement, organized crime connections, and judicial interference (Storchi, 2021).

NATO's institutional limitations in addressing these governance failures stem from three interrelated elements: (1) The Alliance's jurisdictional limitations — corruption and the rule of law fall outside NATO's core areas of competence and require specialized expertise; (2) sovereignty

sensitivities — NATO's direct involvement in governance reforms risks creating perceptions of neo-colonial intervention; and (3) lack of coordination with better-equipped civilian actors (EU, OSCE, World Bank) to implement governance programs (Williams, 2013; Smith, 1999). The EU's own struggle to use its expansion conditions to encourage anti-corruption reforms, despite having much more comprehensive policy tools at its disposal, highlights the limits of external pressure without internal political will (Csaky, 2024; European Commission, 2024).

NATO's military success in establishing negative peace can be explained through the concept of hybrid peace, which addresses why it has not triggered progress in the areas of the rule of law and transparency, which form the basis of positive peace. EU Enlargement Reports and local media discourse provide concrete qualitative data showing how the externally imposed norms of liberal peace are distorted by local illiberal practices. For instance, the European Commission's Bosnia and Herzegovina 2025 Report notes that limited progress has been made in judicial reform and that shortcomings in the functioning of the judicial system continue to negatively affect citizens' rights and the fight against corruption (European Commission, 2025a, p. 7). The report emphasizes that economic and financial governance has deteriorated due to politically motivated impediments and that public confidence in the justice system has been seriously undermined by continuing violations of the rules (European Commission, 2025a, p. 8). Similarly, it is reported that although the media environment in Kosovo is pluralistic, it faces challenges in terms of transparency and financial sustainability, while in northern Kosovo, the restrictive environment encourages self-censorship (European Commission, 2025c, p. 6). The power of these illiberal local actors is also supported by concrete incidents involving judicial irregularities and threats against journalists (Storchi, 2021). This situation points to a "negative hybrid peace" outcome, where local ethnic elites and political-economic networks distort Western liberal norms to maintain their patronage systems, despite pressure from international actors such as NATO and the EU.

The socio-economic development domain of the Balkan Peace Index reveals persistent vulnerabilities across the region, indicating "low" or "medium" levels of development characterized by high unemployment (especially among youth and women), limited access to quality education and healthcare services, and significant informal economies. For instance, youth unemployment stands at 33% in Kosovo and 46% in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Despite some economic improvements in the region, including historically low unemployment rates in 2022, structural challenges such as deindustrialization, inflexible labor markets, and high levels of corruption continue to undermine prospects for sustainable development (Pejković & Lazić, 2024, p. 65).

NATO's influence on social cohesion and inter-group reconciliation, critical dimensions of positive peace in ethnically divided societies, is a complex and multifaceted topic in academic literature. Military-to-military cooperation mechanisms and multinational exercises can create opportunities for professional interaction among personnel from different ethnic backgrounds, thereby contributing to mutual understanding and trust, particularly at the elite level. NATO's peace support operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which began in 1995 (NATO, 2024d), and its interventions in North Macedonia played a significant role in the formation of multi-ethnic armed forces in these countries, marking concrete progress in building inclusive institutional structures that transcend ethnic divisions. However, achieving broader societal reconciliation and the principle of "acceptance of the rights of others" requires a comprehensive approach that extends far beyond security sector cooperation (Watkins, 2007). This approach includes addressing historical grievances, effectively operating transitional justice mechanisms, and fostering sustainable dialogue processes among communities.

Countries that have joined NATO have demonstrated their commitment to collective security principles by contributing to Alliance missions worldwide. This has transformed them from security consumers to security providers in the region. However, significant challenges persist in regional relations, especially regarding unresolved bilateral disputes and historical grievances related to past conflicts. The Balkan Peace Index's assessment of regional and international relations indicates ongoing diplomatic tensions and limited concrete cooperation beyond security matters, suggesting that functional military cooperation has not automatically translated into broader political and economic integration (Džuverović, 2023, p. 2).

Findings

Environmental Sustainability as a Critical Gap in NATO's Peacebuilding Approach

Despite environmental degradation being increasingly recognized as a fundamental threat to long-term stability and human security, its environmental dimension is a significant gap in NATO's traditional peacebuilding approach in the Western Balkans. In this context, environmental problems can trigger various security threats, including public health issues, food and water insecurity, social instability, and regional tensions (Lirëza, 2023). The inclusion of environmental sustainability as a core domain in the Balkan Peace Index reflects regional awareness of these challenges.

However, findings indicate concerning outcomes across the region, undermining expectations for sustainable peace. The BPI 2023 and 2024 findings reveal that environmental sustainability is "alarming and weak" across all Western Balkan countries, indicating specific issues such as new temperature records, intense heatwaves, sudden floods, inadequate wastewater treatment, deforestation, and natural resource problems that can destabilize air quality (Džuverović, 2025). The Yale Environmental Performance Index (EPI) 2024 rankings show all Western Balkan countries in the lower half globally, with Albania (52.2), North Macedonia (50.3), Serbia (49.8), Montenegro (47.7), and Bosnia and Herzegovina (46.0) receiving low scores, reflecting problems like pollution, deforestation, and limited clean energy (Yale Environmental Performance Index, 2024). The EPI 2024 scores for Western Balkan countries are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Environmental Performance and Peace Continuum Data for Western Balkan Countries (2024)

Country	EPI 2024 Score	BPI 2024 Peace Continuum Category
Albania	52.2	Consolidated Peace
Bosnia-Herzegovina	46.0	Contested Peace
Croatia	Data Not Available	Consolidated Peace
Montenegro	47.7	Stable Peace
Kosovo	Data Not Available	Contested Peace
North Macedonia	50.3	Consolidated Peace
Serbia	49.8	Contested Peace

Sources: For EPI Score: Yale School of the Environment. (2024). Environmental Performance Index; For BPI Category: Džuverović, N. et al. (2025). BPI 2025 Findings: Environmental Sustainability in the Western Balkans. University of Belgrade; General Source: Džuverović, N. et al. (2025). BPI 2025 Findings: Environmental Sustainability in the Western Balkans. University of Belgrade.

The environmental sustainability scores presented in Table 2 should be evaluated within the broader climate-security nexus, which is gaining increasing recognition in international peace and security discourse (NATO, 2022; Ide et al., 2021; Krampe et al., 2024). The Western Balkans region is experiencing more frequent and intense heatwaves (the 2023 "Cerberus" heatwave broke all historical temperature records), catastrophic flash floods alternating with prolonged droughts, and declining agricultural productivity (Džuverović et al., 2025, p. 36). These environmental stresses directly threaten human security through several causal pathways: (1) water scarcity exacerbates tensions over shared transboundary river basins (Danube, Sava, Drina), particularly given weak regional cooperation mechanisms; (2) agricultural disruptions threaten rural livelihoods and increase urbanization pressures; (3) health crises stemming from air pollution (the Balkans ranks among Europe's worst regions in terms of PM2.5 levels) undermine productivity and strain health systems; (4) energy insecurity stemming from continued dependence on outdated coal infrastructure, which is vulnerable to climate impacts and international decarbonization pressures; and (5) climate-induced internal and cross-border migration is straining already fragile inter-ethnic relations (World Bank Group, 2020; Belis et al., 2024).

NATO's recognition of climate change as a "defining challenge" in its 2022 Strategic Concept marks significant rhetorical progress, but translating this awareness into operational capacity in the Western

Balkans is still in its infancy. The Alliance's Climate Change and Security Action Plan and Science for Peace and Security (SPS) program have funded some regional environmental security projects (NATO, 2024), but these initiatives remain marginal compared to traditional security priorities and are not systematically integrated into partnership frameworks, defense planning assistance, or capacity development programs. Furthermore, NATO's institutional expertise and resources for addressing environmental challenges are insufficient compared to those of specialized agencies (UNEP, World Bank, EU Directorate-General for Environment), highlighting the need for enhanced inter-agency coordination (Sharifi et al., 2021b).

Environmental conditions in the Western Balkans pose serious problems for human health, economic development, and social stability. Air quality across the region consistently ranks among the worst in Europe, with citizens regularly exposed to pollution levels exceeding World Health Organization guidelines. The qualitative findings presented in the EU Enlargement Reports indicate that no concrete progress has been made in resolving these issues. For example, it is noted that Bosnia and Herzegovina has not yet adopted a strategy to systematically combat air pollution nationwide, and that there is a lack of a consistent national plan for waste management and water quality (European Commission, 2025a, p. 84). Similarly, it is emphasized that no progress has been made in air quality in Kosovo and that dust emissions exceed the threshold values, while in Montenegro, the environmental restructuring of the Pljevlja coal-fired power plant has not solved the fundamental problems (European Commission, 2025c, p. 85; European Commission, 2025d, p. 94).

Continued reliance on old coal-fired power plants, inadequate industrial emission controls, and limited regulatory enforcement create conditions that directly threaten public health and quality of life, and can potentially generate social grievances that destabilize political arrangements. Water resources face multiple pressures from inadequate wastewater treatment, industrial pollution, and agricultural runoff, compounded by increasing variability due to climate change impacts such as prolonged droughts and extreme flood events. These water challenges affect domestic consumption and agricultural productivity. Furthermore, given the region's complex hydro-political geography and weak regional cooperation mechanisms, there are potential interstate tension lines over shared river basins (World Bank Group, 2020).

Deforestation represents another critical environmental challenge with direct impacts on climate resilience, biodiversity conservation, and economic sustainability. Illegal logging, often linked to organized crime networks, undermines both environmental protection and the rule of law, while destroying natural capital that could otherwise support sustainable economic development through ecotourism, sustainable forestry, and ecosystem services. The link between environmental crimes and organized crime networks highlights how environmental degradation intersects with other dimensions of insecurity and institutional weakness (Lirëzas, 2023, pp. 39-40).

Energy systems in the Western Balkans remain heavily reliant on fossil fuels, particularly coal, leading to vulnerabilities related to price volatility, supply disruptions, and international climate commitments. Governments in the Western Balkans often politicize energy issues, prioritizing short-term gains over public health or environmental protection. This situation is particularly pronounced in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia, where coal-fired power generation continues despite severe air pollution problems (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2024; Belis et al., 2024).

It is unlikely that NATO's traditional security framework can successfully address these environmental challenges, which require integrated approaches that combine environmental protection, sustainable development, and governance strengthening. The Alliance began to recognize climate change as a "threat multiplier" in its 2010 Lisbon Summit Strategic Concept (NATO, 2010) and further defined it as a "defining challenge for defense and security" in the 2022 Madrid Summit Strategic Concept (NATO, 2022), increasing awareness of the issue. Additionally, NATO's Climate Change and Security Agenda aims to translate this commitment into operational action. However, despite these developments, the concrete operational impact on environmental security in the Western Balkans remains quite limited. The disconnect between environmental realities and security frameworks reflects broader limitations in traditional peacebuilding approaches that prioritize political and military stability

over comprehensive sustainability. If environmental challenges are not addressed, they can create conditions for future conflicts that destabilize existing peace arrangements over resources, public health, and environmental justice (Stojkovski & Bazerkoska, 2024, pp. 15-18). While the region's states are the primary actors in addressing environmental challenges, comprehensive success without NATO's support currently seems difficult.

Recent research on the peace-sustainability nexus emphasizes the necessity of integrating environmental considerations into peacebuilding processes from the outset, rather than treating them as separate or secondary concerns (Krampe et al., 2024, pp. 1115-1118). This integration requires acknowledging that environmental degradation can act as both a cause and a consequence of conflict, creating feedback loops that perpetuate instability and undermine peace consolidation efforts. In the Western Balkans context, environmental challenges intersect with other dimensions of vulnerability—such as weak governance, economic underdevelopment, and social inequality—creating complex networks of fragility that demand comprehensive, not merely sectoral, responses. The environmental dimension also highlights the limitations of NATO's dual approach to partnership and cooperation, which characterizes much of its engagement in the region. Environmental challenges like air pollution, water management, and climate adaptation require cross-border cooperation and regional coordination that transcend individual country partnerships (Lirëzas, 2023, pp. 37-39). The absence of robust regional environmental cooperation mechanisms limits the effectiveness of national-level efforts and undermines collective responses to shared challenges.

Addressing environmental sustainability in the context of positive peace necessitates a fundamental paradigm shift in how security organizations conceptualize and respond to threats to human security and stability. This requires developing early warning mechanisms that can identify environmental risks before they escalate into social and political instability, supporting regional cooperation mechanisms for environmental governance, and integrating environmental considerations into security sector reform and capacity building efforts. For NATO, this implies broadening its traditional concepts of security provision to include environmental security as a fundamental component of sustainable peacebuilding.

Regional Dynamics and External Influences

Russia's multi-faceted influence in the Western Balkans poses a critical geopolitical challenge to Euro-Atlantic integration processes. Its hegemonic position in the energy sector serves as Russia's strongest leverage; Serbia's almost complete reliance on Russian natural gas and a significant portion of its oil needs grants Moscow substantial political influence. Although this energy dependency has become more pronounced with the onset of the war in Ukraine, diversification efforts, such as Serbia's 2023 natural gas agreement with Azerbaijan, have accelerated. Cultural ties based on Orthodox Christianity form a key pillar of Russia's soft power strategy, while proxy relationships with leaders like Milorad Dodik threaten Bosnia and Herzegovina's institutional stability and hinder NATO membership processes (Samorukov, 2023).

The escalation of geopolitical tensions, particularly with the war in Ukraine, transforms unresolved ethnic and territorial disputes in the region into potential opportunities for proxy conflicts. The violent clashes in northern Kosovo in 2023 and ongoing political crises in Bosnia and Herzegovina are tangible manifestations of this situation. Serbia's declared position of military neutrality while pursuing EU membership is particularly noteworthy within these complex dynamics. The strong anti-NATO sentiment in Serbian public opinion, stemming from the traumatic social impact of the 1999 NATO intervention, significantly limits the Serbian leadership's maneuverability in Euro-integration processes, forcing a pragmatic balancing act (Džuverović, 2023, pp. 130-131).

The European Union's enlargement policy provides a comprehensive framework for institutional transformation, economic development, and regional integration. EU conditionality mechanisms have been effective in guiding reforms in areas such as the rule of law, minority rights, regional cooperation, and migration policies. However, progress in these areas has been uneven, and the credibility of enlargement commitments has fluctuated with changing political dynamics within the EU. The interaction between NATO and EU enlargement processes is generally positive and complementary.

Both organizations promote similar values and institutional standards, but coordination challenges sometimes create competing priorities and timelines (Fierke & Wiener, 1999; Schimmelfennig, & Sedelmeier, 2004, pp. 662-664).

Bosnia and Herzegovina exemplifies another source of regional instability, reflected in persistent political crises, institutional paralysis, and ethnic polarization, which limit comprehensive cooperation and create opportunities for destabilizing interventions. The country's complex constitutional structure, established by the Dayton Peace Accords, has increasingly become a mechanism for ethnic parties to obstruct decision-making and pursue separatist agendas that challenge state integrity and Euro-Atlantic integration aspirations (Bieber, 2006, pp. 48-52). For instance, the Bosnian Serb entity, Republika Srpska, boycotting defense reforms at the state level, has hindered NATO MAP activation since 2010 (Džuverović, 2023, p. 129).

The pervasive issue of weak institutions across much of the region fuels vulnerability to external influence and calls into question the effectiveness of partnership and conditionality mechanisms. High levels of corruption, weak rule of law, and limited media freedom allow both local and external actors to manipulate political processes and undermine democratic governance. These institutional weaknesses affect the region's capacity to absorb international aid and utilize it effectively. Furthermore, these weaknesses make societies vulnerable to disinformation, hybrid warfare, and other forms of malevolent influence (Tepšić, 2024, p. 123; Gola, 2023, pp. 4-5). Russia's disinformation campaigns are spreading throughout the region via Serbian-language media outlets, demonizing NATO and fueling ethnic tensions. This situation has a powerful impact due to the weakness and vulnerability to political influence of the local media environment (Sunter, 2020; Balkan Insight, 2024).

Demographic challenges such as population decline, youth emigration, and brain drain further complicate regional development and constrain prospects for sustainable peace. The emigration of educated youth to Western Europe reduces the existing human capital for internal development and creates labor shortages in key sectors. This demographic decline can undermine long-term economic viability and social cohesion, while potentially diminishing political constituencies for reform and European integration (Gropas, 2004, p. 7).

There is a fundamental tension between sustainable peacebuilding and the nature of international interventions. It is argued that achieving sustainable peace requires an organic process that cannot be externally imposed. This approach emphasizes that the success of peacebuilding largely depends on the capacities of local societal structures and the extent to which these structures own the process. However, NATO's historical presence in the Western Balkans has been shaped by significant external military intervention and international security guarantees. While well-intentioned, peace processes driven by external pressures and inducements carry risks of hindering the organic development of peace structures (Donais, 2009, pp. 145-148). This situation highlights the necessity of striking a delicate balance between the international community's intervention capacity and the principle of local ownership. Consequently, developing local actor capacities and strengthening state institutions become more prioritized policy areas (Džuverović et al., 2024).

Finally, the multi-dimensional nature of peace, as reflected in various indices, contradicts the potential for interventions to be disjointed. Positive and sustainable peace definitions inherently encompass economic development, human rights, the rule of law, environmental sustainability, and social cohesion. Indices like PCPI and BPI are designed to measure peace across these diverse domains by explicitly linking security with political, economic, and social spheres. However, some studies and observations indicate that various international actors have not worked in a coordinated manner, and military success is often more easily measurable compared to civilian and political sectors. This underscores the disconnect between a holistic conceptualization of peace and international interventions. For an truly effective peacebuilding strategy, a comprehensive and highly coordinated approach that acknowledges complex causal relationships and addresses all relevant dimensions is required (Džuverović, 2023). In other words, much more coordinated and consensual approaches are essential for sustainable or positive peace.

According to the BPI 2024 findings, Croatia, Albania, and North Macedonia have reached "Consolidated Peace," while Montenegro has achieved "Stable Peace." Meanwhile, Serbia, Kosovo,

and Bosnia and Herzegovina continue to remain in the "Contested Peace" category (Džuverović, 2025). The environmental sustainability domain is rated as "Alarmingly Weak" across all countries, highlighting a critical vulnerability (Džuverović, 2025). Political pluralism varies from "Good" in Croatia to "Weak" in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, reflecting significant inequalities in democratic functioning. The high socio-economic development in Croatia contrasts with its "Weak" standing in Bosnia and Herzegovina, indicating uneven economic progress. These findings suggest that while NATO's engagement has contributed to maintaining negative peace across the region, significant challenges persist in achieving positive peace, particularly in environmental sustainability, state capacity, and political pluralism (Džuverović, 2023). For example, the Positive Peace Index (PPI) 2023 data indicates that North Macedonia (approx. 2.866) and Albania (approx. 2.884) are leaders in the region regarding systemic capacity, while Bosnia and Herzegovina (approx. 3.195) and Serbia (approx. 3.001) lag somewhat behind (IEP, 2023).

Conclusion and Recommendations

NATO's presence in the Western Balkans during the post-Cold War era has been a necessary, yet insufficient, condition for achieving sustainable peace. While the Alliance successfully intervened to halt direct violence and initiate significant reforms, a more comprehensive and locally focused approach is required for positive peace. Key challenges include strengthening state capacities, combating entrenched corruption, reducing socio-economic inequalities, promoting environmental sustainability, and ensuring genuine public safety and inter-ethnic reconciliation. Opportunities for NATO to enhance its contributions lie in moving beyond an elite-centric approach to support grassroots initiatives, invest in robust civil society organizations, and promote transparent and accountable governance that prioritizes the welfare of all citizens. Therefore, for lasting peace, a more civilian-oriented NATO, which is increasingly civilianized post-Cold War, is crucial for the stability of peace in the region.

For peace to take root, the international community, including NATO, must adapt its strategies to address the structural and cultural dimensions of violence, internalizing that peace is not merely the absence of war, but a dynamic process rooted in justice, equality, and shared values, as envisioned by positive peace. Thus, the future of a truly peaceful and stable Western Balkans depends on the collective ability of both internal and external actors to commit to these deeper, transformative changes (Džuverović, 2023).

The study reveals challenges that limit NATO's effectiveness in promoting positive peace. Firstly, initial success in establishing negative peace through military means has, in some cases, inadvertently led to large-scale open conflict being mistaken for comprehensive stability. Moreover, this negative peace can allow fundamental structural problems like corruption, ethnic favoritism, and weak governance to fester and become more deeply entrenched. Secondly, there is an inherent tension between the often externally driven, top-down nature of international interventions and the fundamentally internal, locally-owned character of truly sustainable peace. While external actors like NATO are important for ensuring initial stability and providing resources, their involvement can inadvertently hinder the development of local agency, institutional capacity, and societal resilience in the long run.

Thirdly, despite the multi-dimensional conceptualization of positive peace in academic discourse, international interventions on the ground have often been fragmented, disproportionately focusing on measurable security outcomes (such as troop deployments or ceasefire adherence) rather than more complex, long-term, and harder-to-measure dimensions like governance reform, socio-economic development, transitional justice, deep reconciliation, and environmental protection. This fragmented approach can undermine overall progress by creating systemic vulnerabilities, as gains in one critical area (e.g., security) are negated by deficiencies in others (e.g., widespread corruption or unaddressed environmental degradation). Finally, the dual nature of NATO enlargement, while providing a framework for security integration and promoting reforms, has also functioned as a geopolitical tool, particularly in the context of broader great power competition with Russia. This has at times exacerbated internal divisions within Western Balkan states and complicated regional cooperation efforts due to the reflection of external rivalries in local political landscapes, presenting one of the risks to sustainable peace.

To enhance future peacebuilding efforts and more effectively promote genuine positive and sustainable peace in the Western Balkans, several key recommendations emerge for NATO, alongside the EU and other international partners, and for regional actors themselves:

Strategic Shift: There must be a strategic shift from merely "managing negative peace" to actively "building positive peace." This requires a sustained, integrated, and well-resourced focus on fundamentally strengthening democratic institutions, promoting comprehensive rule of law (not just in the security sector), vigorously combating corruption and organized crime, and ensuring governance is accountable, transparent, and responsive to the needs of all citizens. Efforts should prioritize developing robust, independent judiciaries, effective anti-corruption mechanisms, and a vibrant, protected civil society that can hold power to account.

Foster Local Ownership: A critical element is the necessity of fostering genuine local ownership and building sustainable local capacities. International actors, including NATO, must strategically transition from direct intervention and top-down imposition to providing robust, flexible, and long-term support for local agency and initiatives. This involves empowering local civil society organizations, supporting indigenous peace initiatives and reconciliation processes, investing in local expertise (including academic research like BPI), and ensuring reforms are driven by national and local political will and societal consensus, rather than being perceived as externally imposed.

Comprehensive and Coordinated Approach: Peacebuilding strategies must adopt a truly comprehensive, holistic, and coordinated approach that systematically integrates security, political, economic, social, and environmental dimensions into all planning and operations, fully embracing the multi-dimensional nature of sustainable peace. This requires significantly enhanced coordination, information sharing, and strategic alignment among all relevant international actors (NATO, EU, UN, OSCE, IFIs, bilateral donors, and international NGOs) to prevent fragmented efforts, duplication, or conflicting policies, and to ensure that progress in one area is not undermined by shortcomings in another. Indeed, one of the most significant obstacles to positive peace in the Western Balkans has been the occasional disagreements and lack of coordination within NATO itself. Furthermore, it is crucial for a tripartite NATO-EU-CSO dialogue forum, which monitors peace and sustainability indicators together (Sharifi et al., 2021b) and amplifies civil society voices, to be effective.

Integrate Environmental Sustainability: Environmental sustainability must be explicitly and robustly integrated into all peace and security strategies, acknowledging its fundamental importance for human security and long-term regional stability, with significant investment, policy coherence, and capacity building. A dedicated Western Balkans Resilience Fund, jointly financed by Allies and the EU, could provide resources to finance green infrastructure pilot projects that extend benefits beyond defense installations

Reconciliation and Inclusive Political Pluralism: Sustained and multi-faceted efforts are needed to prioritize genuine reconciliation that transcends ethnic divisions and counters nationalist or divisive narratives, and to promote inclusive political pluralism. This includes robustly supporting credible transitional justice mechanisms, promoting inclusive and critical historical education, fostering inter-ethnic dialogue at all societal levels, from grassroots to political elites, and actively supporting independent, professional media to counter disinformation and hate speech.

Address Socio-Economic Inequalities: Long-term peace is inextricably linked to addressing socio-economic inequalities and promoting equitable development. International support, combined with internal reforms, must focus on tackling structural economic challenges, reducing high unemployment (especially among youth), promoting inclusive growth, and ensuring a fairer distribution of resources and opportunities to alleviate grievances that could fuel instability and social unrest.

This study aimed to assess whether and how NATO's post-Cold War policies in the Western Balkans have pushed the region beyond the fragility of negative peace towards a deeper foundation of positive and sustainable peace. Mixed-methods data (i.e.,index trend analysis, process tracing case studies) indicates that NATO's security sector interventions have been associated with measurable gains in trust, governance quality, and regional cooperation. However, environmental dimensions are lagging behind and governance failures remain, indicating that the Alliance's current trajectory

provides an incomplete form of positive peace (i.e., sustainable peace). Theoretically, the findings confirm Galtung's (1969) insight that peace is multi-dimensional and highlight the limitations of security-first paradigms.

In conclusion, NATO's presence in the Western Balkans cannot be denied for its capacity to adapt as a security organization and its role in halting devastating conflicts and establishing a vital, though incomplete, negative peace. However, the complex and challenging transition from this fragile negative peace to a deep-rooted, positive, and sustainable peace demands far more than military force or traditional security paradigms; it is a generational endeavor. Essentially, the premise that "the obligation to ensure positive or sustainable peace in the Balkans rests on NATO's shoulders" is not the accepted premise or argument of this study. However, ensuring positive or sustainable peace in the Balkans is also necessary for the sustainable security and peace of wider Europe. In this context, NATO-EU dialogue is crucial, and a more civilian-oriented NATO capable of making organic contributions to democratization processes in the Balkans is essential.

References

AKGÜN, S. (2012). "Current Situation in the Scope of Kosovo Reconstruction Process." *Gazi Akademik Bakış*, 5(10): 249-268.

ANASTASAKIS, O. AND BOJICIC-DZELILOVIC, V. (2002). Balkan regional cooperation and European integration. The Hellenic Observatory: The European Institute, LSE.

Balkan Insight. (2024). BIRN Doc Lifts Lid on Russian Disinformation in Balkans. https://balkaninsight.com/2024/05/10/birn-doc-lifts-lid-on-russian-disinformation-in-balkans/ (Accessed October 28, 2025).

BELIS, C. A., DJATKOV, D., DOBRICIC, S., DE MEIJ, A., KOLAREVIĆ, S., ARIAS NAVARRO, C., ... & LETTIERI, T. (2024). *Environment and Climate Status in the Western Balkans: 2024 Report*, Publications Office of the European Union. Belgium. https://coilink.org/20.500.12592/2x5uogn (Accessed May 5, 2025). COI: 20.500.12592/2x5uogn.

BELLONI, R. (2012). Hybrid peace governance: Its emergence and significance. *Global Governance*, 21-38.

BIEBER, F. (2006). Post-War Bosnia: Ethnicity, Inequality and Public Sector Governance. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

CHANDLER, D. (2017). *Peacebuilding: The twenty years' crisis, 1997-2017*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

COUSENS, E. M., & CATER, C. K. (2001). *Peacebuilding as Politics: Cultivating Peace in Post-Conflict Societies*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.

CSAKY, Z. (2024). Enlargement and the rule of law: Diverging realities. Enlargement and the rule of law: Diverging realities | Centre for European Reform. https://www.cer.eu/insights/enlargement-and-rule-law-diverging-realities (Accessed October 28, 2025).

ÇELIKKAN, O., & PROGONATI E. (2012). "NATO's Balkan Adventure". In M.S. Erol (Ed.), *Hot Peace's Cold Organization: New NATO*. Barış Kitapevi, Ankara.

DAALDER, I. H. (1998). Decision to Intervene: How the War in Bosnia Ended. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/decision-to-intervene-how-the-war-in-bosnia-ended/ (Accessed October 15, 2025).

DE CONING, C. (2016). From peacebuilding to sustaining peace: Implications of complexity for resilience and sustainability. *Resilience*, 4(3), 166-181.

ĐOKIĆ, K. (2019). Does NATO Facilitate Regional Defence and Security Cooperation in the Balkans?. Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, Belgrade.

DONAIS, T. (2009). Empowerment or imposition? Dilemmas of local ownership in post-conflict peacebuilding processes. *Peace and Change*, 34(1), 3-26.

DOYLE, M. W. (1986). Liberalism and world politics. *American political science review*, 80(4), 1151-1169.

DŽUVEROVIĆ, N. (2023). Balkan Peace Index 2022: Trends and Analysis. *Journal of Regional Security*, 18(2), 127-134.

DŽUVEROVIĆ, N., TEPŠIĆ, G., MILOŠEVIĆ, A., REČEVIĆ, T., VUKELIĆ, M., VOJVODIĆ, S., & VARDA M. (2024). *The Balkan Peace Index 2023*. MIND Project Publications. University of Belgrade – Faculty of Political Science.

DŽUVEROVIĆ, N., RADOVANOVIĆ, S., TEPŠIĆ, G., & KRIVOKAPIĆ, Đ. (2025). Balkan Peace Index decision EXpert model and data. *Data in Brief*, 58, 111181.

DŽUVEROVIĆ, N. (2025). Local turn in knowledge production about post-conflict societies: the case of the Balkan peace index. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 19(1), 44-65.

European Commission. (2024). Commission adopts 2024 Enlargement Package. Commission adopts 2024 Enlargement Package - Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood. https://enlargement. ec.europa.eu/news/commission-adopts-2024-enlargement-package-2024-10-30_en (Accessed November 11, 2025).

European Commission. (2025a). Commission Staff Working Document Bosnia and Herzegovina 2025 Report Accompanying the Document Communication From the Commission to the European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2025 Communication on EU enlargement policy. https://enlargement.ec.europa. eu/document/download/5d8fc547-f8f8-456f-84e3-b38998acfafd_en?filename=bosnia-and-herzegovina-report-2025.pdf (Accessed November 7, 2025).

European Commission. (2025b). Commission Staff Working Document Albania 2025 Report Accompanying the Document Communication From the Commission to the European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2025 Communication on EU enlargement policy. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/ fe9138b7-90fe-4277-a12c-3a03f6d1957f_en?filename=albania-report-2025.pdf (Accessed November 11, 2025).

European Commission. (2025c). Commission Staff Working Document Kosovo 2025 Report Accompanying the document Communication From the Commission to the European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2025 Communication on EU enlargement policy. 2025 Communication on EU enlargement policy. https:// enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/127563ea-4c03-44a4-b56c-2d569afd86a5_ en?filename=kosovo-report-2025.pdf (Accessed November 11, 2025).

European Commission. (2025d). Commission Staff Working Document Montenegro 2025 Report Accompanying the document Communication From the Commission to the European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2025 Communication on EU enlargement policy. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/ download/9ae69ea7-81d6-4d6a-a204-bd32a379d51d_en?filename=montenegro-report-2025.pdf (Accessed November 10, 2025).

European Commission. (2025e). Commission Staff Working Document North Macedonia 2025 Report Accompanying the document Communication From the Commission to the European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2025 Communication on EU enlargement policy. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/ document/download/267b368e-6b55-4a42-bb72-6395593de4da_en?filename=north-macedonia-report-2025.pdf (Accessed November 10, 2025).

FIERKE, K. M., & WIENER, A. (1999). Constructing institutional interests: EU and NATO enlargement. *Journal of European public policy*, 6(5), 721-742.

FUNG, C. J., GEHRMANN, B., MADENYIKA, R. F., & TOWER, J. G. (2021). New Paths and Policies towards Conflict Prevention: Chinese and Swiss Perspectives. New York.: Taylor & Francis.

GALTUNG, J. (1969). Violence, peace, and peace research. *Journal of Peace Research*, 6(3), 167-191.

GALTUNG, J. (1990). Cultural violence. *Journal of Peace Research*, 27(3), 291-305.

GALTUNG, J. (1996). *Peace by peaceful means: Peace and conflict development and civilization*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

GALTUNG, J., & HÖIVIK, T. (1971). Structural violence, peace and future. *Journal of Peace Research*, 8(3/4), 213-228.

GHECIU, A. (2005). *NATO in the New Europe: The Politics of International Socialization After the Cold War*. Stanford University Press.

GOLA, G. (2023). Case Study: Western Balkans. *Global State of Democracy 2023 Report*, Global State of Democracy Initiative.

GRILLOT, S. R., CRUISE, R. J., & D'ERMAN, V. J. (2010). Developing security community in the Western Balkans: The role of the EU and NATO. *International Politics*, 47(1), 62-90.

GROPAS, R. (2004). Functional borders, sustainable security and EU-Balkan relations. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 4(1), 49-76.

GÜL, M. (2015). "From Establishment to 21st Century: Continuity and Transformation in NATO in the 1990s." *Akademik İncelemeler Dergisi*, 1(10): 247-265.

HADŽIKADUNIĆ, E. (2022). Peacebuilding Process in Bosnia And Herzegovina - The Initial Success That Has Been Reversed. In M. Mulalić, E. Topcu, & J. Muhasilović (Eds.), *The Western Balkans Cooperation, Geopolitics and Economic Transitions and Relations*. International University of Sarajevo. (pp. 72-86).

HEYWOOD, A. (2013). *Global Politics*. (Translated by N. Uslu, H. Özdemir). Adres Yayınları, Ankara.

IDE, T., BRUCH, C., CARIUS, A., CONCA, K., DABELKO, G. D., MATTHEW, R., & WEINTHAL, E. (2021). The past and future (s) of environmental peacebuilding. *International Affairs*, 97(1), 1-16.

IGNATIEFF, M. (2003). *The Lesser Evil: Political Ethics in an Age of Terror*. Princeton University Press.

IISS (The International Institute for Strategic Studies). (2024). *The Armed Conflict Survey 2024*. Routledge.

Institute for Economics and Peace. (2023). *Global Peace Index 2023: Measuring Peace in a Complex World*. Sydney: IEP.

IZZI, V., ANGELOV, E., DAVIDOVIC, M. D., DJUKANOVIC, N., JOJKIC, I., DIKA, A. M., & PONI, M. (2021). *Supporting the Western on Reconciliation: Building Capacity and Momentum for the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (Ryco)*.

KARABULUT, B. (2012). "Strategic Concepts and NATO's Transformation". In M.S. Erol (Ed.), *Hot Peace's Cold Organization: New NATO*. Barış Kitapevi, Ankara.

KRAMPE, F., O'DRISCOLL, D., JOHNSON, M., SIMANGAN, D., HEGAZI, F., & DE CONING, C. (2024). Climate change and peacebuilding: sub-themes of an emerging research agenda. *International Affairs*, 100(3), 1111-1130.

KULKOVA, M. (2019). From negative to positive peace in western Balkans: A case for eclectic Theory. *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies*, 13 (3): 26-47.

LIRËZA, L. (2023). The Impact of Environmental Issues to Security in the Balkans. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research and Development*, 10(1), 36-41.

MAC GINTY, R. (2010). Hybrid peace: The interaction between top-down and bottom-up peace. *Security dialogue*, 41(4), 391-412.

MAC GINTY, R. (2025). The liberal peace is over and it is not coming back: hybridity and the emerging international peace system. *Third World Quarterly*, 1-20.

MULALIĆ, M., & KARIĆ, M. (2022). *Cosmopolitanism, Global Risks, and Framing of the Western Balkans Relations*. In M. Mulalić, E. Topcu, & J. Muhasilović (Eds.), *The Western Balkans: Cooperation, Geopolitics and Economic Transitions and Relations*. International University of Sarajevo.

NATO. (1991). *The Alliance's New Strategic Concept (1991)*. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_23847.htm (Accessed May 15, 2025).

NATO. (1994). *Partnership for Peace Framework Document*. Brussels: NATO.

NATO. (1999a). *Strategic Concept*. Washington D.C.: NATO. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_27433.htm (Accessed May 15, 2025).

NATO. (1999b). *Membership Action Plan (MAP)*. Brussels: NATO.

NATO. (2001). *Operation Essential Harvest and beyond*. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_18568.htm?selectedLocale=en (Accessed May 16, 2025).

NATO. (2010). *Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization*. Lisbon: NATO. https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_publications/20120214_strategic-concept-2010-eng.pdf (Accessed May 15, 2025).

NATO. (2022). *Madrid Summit Declaration*. Madrid: NATO.

NATO. (2024a). Enlargement and Article 10. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49212.htm (Accessed May 5, 2025).

NATO. (2024b). Deep Dive Recap: The Balkans and the Gender Perspective. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_222406.htm?selectedLocale=en (Accessed May 7, 2025).

NATO. (2024c). Membership Action Plan (MAP). https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_37356.htm (Accessed May 5, 2025).

NATO. (2024d). Peace support operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1995-2004). https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52122.htm (Accessed May 10, 2025).

NATO. (2025). NATO's role in Kosovo. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_48818.htm (Accessed May 5, 2025).

PARIS, R. (2004). At war's end: building peace after civil conflict. Cambridge University Press.

PEJKOVIĆ, L., & LAZIĆ, N. (2024). Socio-Economic Development and Instability in the Western Balkans. *Journal of Southeastern European Economy*, 22(1), 50-75.

RICHMOND, O. P. (2006). The problem of peace: understanding the 'liberal peace'. *Conflict, security & development*, 6(3), 291-314.

RISSO, L. (2022). A Forgotten Success: Operation Essential Harvest, 2001. *The RUSI Journal*, 166(6-7), 96-105.

SAMORUKOV, M. (2023). Surviving the War: Russia-Western Balkan Ties After the Invasion of Ukraine. https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2023/04/surviving-the-war-russia-western-balkan-ties-after-the-invasion-of-ukraine?lang=en (Accessed May 10, 2025).

SCHIMMELFENNIG, F., & SEDELMEIER, U. (2004). Governance by conditionality: EU rule transfer to the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe. *Journal of European public policy*, 11(4), 661-679.

SHARIFI, A., SIMANGAN, D., KANEKO, S., & VIRJI, H. (2021a). The sustainability-peace nexus: why is it important?. *Sustainability Science*, 16(4), 1073-1077.

SHARIFI, A., SIMANGAN, D., & KANEKO, S. (2021b). The literature landscape on peace-sustainability nexus: a scientometric analysis. *Ambio*, 50(3):661–678. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-020-01388-8.

SIMANGAN, D., SHARIFI, A., & KANEKO, S. (2021). Positive peace pillars and sustainability dimensions: An analytical framework. *International Studies Review*, 23(4), 1884-1905.

SMITH, L. (1999). NATO's IFOR in Action Lessons from the Bosnian Peace Support Operations. https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA394097.pdf (Accessed October 29, 2025).

SPERLING, J., & WEBBER, M. (2009). NATO: from Kosovo to Kabul. *International Affairs*, 85(3), 491-511.

STOJKOVSKI, L., & BRSAKOSKA BAZERKOSKA, J. (2024). Climate Change As a Security Issue in the Western Balkans. *Contemporary Macedonian Defense/Sovremena Makedonska Odbrana*, 24(46), 11-22.

STORCHI, L. (2021). Corruption and violation: suppression of press freedom and justice in the Western Balkans. https://www.eurac.edu/en/blogs/eureka/corruption-and-violation-suppression-of-press-freedom-and-justice-in-the-western (Accessed October 29, 2025).

SUNTER, D. (2020). Disinformation in the Western Balkans. NATO Review - Disinformation in the Western Balkans. https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2020/12/21/disinformation-in-the-western-balkans/index.html (Accessed October 30, 2025).

TEPŠIĆ, G. (2024). The Balkan Peace Index 2023: Monitoring the Regional Peace. *Journal of Regional Security*, 19(1), 119-126.

United Nations. (2015). The challenge of sustaining peace, Report of the advisory group of experts for the 2015 review of the United Nations peacebuilding architecture. New York, NY: United Nations.

United Nations Development Programme. (2022). *Human Development Report 2022*. New York: UNDP.

United Nations Development Programme. (2023). *Human Development Report 2023*. New York: UNDP.

United Nations General Assembly. (2016). Review of the United Nations peacebuilding architecture (Resolution 70/262). Retrieved from https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_70_262.pdf. (Accessed October 30, 2025).

United Nations Office on Drugs. (2024). *World Drug Report 2024 (Set of 3 Booklets)*. Stylus Publishing, LLC.

U.S. Department of State. (1997). "NATO Involvement in Balkan Crisis." *State Department Archives*. https://1997-2001.state.gov/regions/eur/natobalk.html (Accessed May 30, 2025).

UVALIĆ, M. (2025). *Challenges of economic development in the Western Balkans*. https://revistaidees.cat/en/reptes-per-al-desenvolupament-economic-als-balcans-occidentals/ (Accessed May 29, 2025).

VACHUDOVA, M. A. (2014). EU leverage and national interests in the Balkans: The puzzles of enlargement ten years on. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 52(1), 122-138.

WATKINS, A. (2007). NATO and the Balkans: The case for greater integration. https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2007/04/01/nato-and-the-balkans-the-case-for-greater-integration/index.html (Accessed May 20, 2025).

WILLIAMS, P. D. (2013). *Security Studies: An Introduction*. Routledge.

WILSON, W. (1965). The Political Thought of Woodrow Wilson. Edited by E. David Cronon. New York: Bobbs-Merrill.

World Bank Group. (2020). *Air Quality Management in the Western Balkans*. https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eca/publication/air-quality-management-in-western-balkans (Accessed May 20, 2025).

World Bank Group. (2021). Going Green Means Cleaner Air, Healthier Living in the Western Balkans. https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2021/05/17/going-green-means-cleaner-air-healthier-living-in-the-western-balkans (Accessed October 28, 2025).

World Bank. (2025). *An Evaluation of the World Bank Group Strategy for Fragility, Conflict, and Violence 2020-2025 (Approach Paper)*. World Bank. http://hdl.handle.net/10986/42784 License: CC BY-NC 3.0 IGO." (Accessed May 20, 2025).

Yale Environmental Performance Index. (2024). *Environmental Performance Index 2024 Report*. New Haven, CT: Yale University.

YANNIS, A. (2001). Kosovo under international administration. *Survival*, 43(2), 31-48.

YAPICI, M. İ. (2007). "The Place of Military Intervention in International Law in Bosnia-Herzegovina". *Uluslararası Hukuk ve Politika*, 2(8): 1-24.

YOUNES, B. (2024). The Role of International Actors in Sustainable Peacebuilding: A Critical Perspective. *International Studies Review*, 26(1), 1-15.

Özet

Bu çalışma, NATO'nun Soğuk Savaş sonrası dönemde Batı Balkanlar'daki rolünü, Johan Galtung'un teorik çerçevesinden hareketle "negatif barış" ve "pozitif barış" kavramları üzerinden eleştirel bir analiz çereçevesinde ele almaktadır. Makalenin temel tezi, NATO'nun askeri müdahaleler ve güvenlik odaklı politikalar aracılığıyla bölgedeki aktif çatışmaları durdurarak "negatif barış" (savaşın yokluğu durumu) tesis etmede büyük ölçüde başarılı olduğu, ancak kalıcı ve sürdürülebilir bir "pozitif barış" ortamının (yapısal ve kültürel şiddetin ortadan kalktığı, sosyal adalet, ekonomik refah ve sağlam demokratik kurumlarla desteklenen bir barış) inşasında önemli zorluklarla karşılaştığını savunmaktadır. Araştırma, bu arümanı desteklemek amacıyla Balkan Barış Endeksi (BPI) gibi bölgeye özgü verilerle küresel endeksleri birleştiren karma yöntemli bir metodoloji kullanmaktadır.

Çalışma, öncelikle NATO'nun 1990'lardaki dönüşümünü ve Batı Balkanlar'daki krizlere müdahale sürecini tarihsel bir bağlama oturtmaktadır. Bosna-Hersek, Kosova ve Kuzey Makedonya'daki müdahalelerin, kitlesel sivil kayıplarını önlediği ve bölgeye temel bir güvenlik ortamı getirdiği kabul edilmektedir. Bu müdahaleler ve sonrasında kurulan Barış İçin Ortaklık (BİO) gibi mekanizmalar, bölge ülkelerinin güvenlik sektörlerini reforme etmelerine ve silahlı kuvvetler üzerinde sivil kontrolü sağlamalarına yardımcı olmuştur. Özellikle NATO üyeliği elde eden Arnavutluk, Hırvatistan, Karadağ ve Kuzey Makedonya'da bu kurumsal dönüşümün daha belirgin olduğu tespit edilmektedir. Bu başarılar, NATO'nun negatif barışı sağlama kapasitesinin altını çizmektedir.

Çalışma, «negatif barış» durumunun sürdürülebilir bir istikrar için yetersiz kaldığını savunmaktadır. Pozitif barışın temel sütunları olan yönetişim, sosyo-ekonomik kalkınma ve toplumsal uzlaşı gibi alanlarda NATO'nun etkisinin sınırlı ve dolaylı kaldığı ileri sürülmektedir. İttifak'ın temel yetki alanı bu yapısal sorunlara doğrudan müdahale etme kapasitesine sahip değildir. Makale bu durumu, Batı'nın "liberal barış" modelinin yerel dinamiklerle çarpışması ve "hibrit barış" olarak adlandırılan bir yapının ortaya çıkmasıyla açıklamaktadır. Dışarıdan gelen liberal reformlar (örn. güvenlik sektörü), "devlet ele geçirme" (state capture) ve himaye ağlarını sürdüren yerel elitler tarafından çarpıtılmakta veya içi boşaltılmaktadır. Bu nedenle, salt güvenlik odaklı reformlar bu derin köklere sahip sorunların çözümüne otomatik olarak etki edememektedir. Bu durum, Balkan Barış Endeksi'nin bulgularıyla da desteklenmektedir. Endeks, bölgenin "Pekiştirilmiş Barış" (örn. Arnavutluk) ve "Tartışmalı Barış" (örn. Bosna-Hersek, Sırbistan, Kosova) olarak ikiye ayrıldığını ortaya koymakta; bu da NATO'nun müdahil olduğu kilit bölgelerde pozitif barışın hâlâ kırılgan olduğunu göstermektedir.

Araştırmanın önemli bulgularından biri, NATO'nun geleneksel güvenlik yaklaşımındaki en önemli boşluğun "çevresel sürdürülebilirlik" olduğunu ortaya koymasıdır. Bölge genelinde hava kirliliği, su kaynaklarının yetersiz yönetimi, ormansızlaşma ve fosil yakıtlara olan bağımlılık gibi çevresel sorunlar, sadece halk sağlığını ve ekonomik kalkınmayı tehdit etmekle kalmamakta, aynı zamanda yeni güvenlik riskleri ve toplumsal gerilimler yaratma potansiyeli taşımaktadır. Çalışma, çevresel bozulmanın uzun vadeli istikrar için bir "tehdit çarpanı" olduğunu ve bu konunun NATO'nun barış inşası gündemine entegre edilmemesinin, elde edilen kazanımları dahi riske attığını savunmaktadır. Çalışma ayrıca, bölgesel dinamiklerin ve dış aktörlerin etkilerini de analiz etmektedir. Rusya›nın enerji, kültür ve siyasi alandaki etkisi, Avrupa Birliği›nin genişleme politikasının yarattığı fırsatlar ve zorluklar, Bosna-Hersek gibi ülkelerdeki çözülmemiş iç siyasi krizler ve tüm bölgeyi etkileyen beyin göçü gibi demografik sorunlar, pozitif barışın önündeki engeller olarak sıralanmaktadır. Bu karmaşık jeopolitik ortam, NATO›nun tek başına hareket etme kabiliyetini sınırlamakta ve çok aktörlü, koordineli bir stratejinin gerekliliğini ortaya koymaktadır.

Sonuç olarak, makale NATO'nun rolünün gerekli ancak tek başına yetersiz olduğu tespitini yapmaktadır. Kalıcı barışın tesisi için stratejik bir paradigma değişikliğine ihtiyaç duyulduğu belirtilmektedir. Bu değişiklik, sadece negatif barışı yönetmekten, aktif olarak pozitif barışı inşa etmeye geçmeyi zorunlu hale getirmektedir. Bu çerçevede, uluslararası toplumun ve NATO'nun, dışarıdan dayatılan çözümler yerine yerel sahiplenmeyi ve sivil toplumun kapasitesini güçlendiren bir yaklaşım benimsemesi; güvenlik, siyaset, ekonomi ve çevre boyutlarını bütünleştiren çok kapsamlı ve koordineli stratejiler geliştirmesi elzemdir. Dahası NATO'nun bölgede etnik bölünmeleri aşarak gerçek bir uzlaşıyı ve kapsayıcı politikaları desteklemesi ve bu çerçevede adımlar atması da gereklidir. Batı Balkanlar'ın geleceği, sadece askeri güvenlik garantilerine değil, bu daha derin ve dönüştürücü adımların atılmasına bağlıdır.