# The Complementary Role of NATO and the EU in the Transformation of Regional Security in the Western Balkans

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## Abstract

*This study aims to examine the role of internationally influential organizations, in facilitating the development of security regimes and paving the way for the establishment of security communities in post-conflict regions, with a specific focus on the Western Balkans (WB). In this context it explores the complementary roles of the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in promoting regional stability and peace in an area historically characterized by ethnic tensions, political volatility, and the enduring consequences of conflict. NATO's role centers on military engagement, collective defense, crisis management, and defense sector reform, pillars of hard security, whereas the EU emphasizes political and economic integration, rule of law reforms, institution-building, and socio-economic development to address the structural causes of instability. The study argues that both organizations, primarily through their membership conditionalities, have played pivotal roles in transforming the WB from a conflict formation into a functioning security regime, thereby laying the groundwork for a potential security community. Guided by Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and employing a process-tracing method, the research addresses the central question of "how have the EU and NATO policies contributed to the transformation of the WB from a historically conflict-prone region to a region of increasing peace and stability over the last three decades?".*

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# Batı Balkanlar'da Bölgesel Güvenliğin Dönüşümünde NATO ve AB'nin Tamamlayıcı Rolü

## Öz

*Bu çalışma, özellikle Batı Balkanlar'a odaklanarak, çatışma sonrası bölgelerde güvenlik rejimlerinin geliştirilmesini kolaylaştırmada ve güvenlik topluluklarının kurulmasının önünü açmada uluslararası alanda etkili örgütlerin rolünü incelemeyi hedeflemektedir. Bu bağlamda, Kuzey Atlantik Antlaşması Örgütü (NATO) ve Avrupa Birliği'nin (AB) tarihsel olarak etnik gerilimler, siyasi dalgalanmalar ve çatışmaların kalıcı sonuçlarıyla karakterize edilen bir bölgede bölgesel istikrar ve barışın desteklenmesindeki karşılıklı tamamlayıcı rollerini incelemektedir. NATO'nun rolü materyal güvenliğin temel unsurları olan askeri angajman, kolektif savunma, kriz yönetimi ve savunma sektörü reformuna odaklanırken, AB istikrarsızlığın yapısal nedenlerini ele almak için siyasi ve ekonomik entegrasyon, hukukun üstünlüğü reformları, kurum inşası ve sosyo-ekonomik kalkınmaya vurgu yapmaktadır. Çalışma, her iki örgütün de öncelikle üyelik koşullarıyla, Batı Balkanlar bölgesini bir çatışma oluşumundan istikrarlı bir güvenlik rejimine dönüştürmede önemli roller oynadığını ve böylece potansiyel bir güvenlik topluluğunun oluşması için zemin hazırladığını savunmaktadır. Bölgesel Güvenlik Kompleksi Teorisi (BGKT) tarafından yönlendirilen ve süreç izleme metodu kullanan araştırma, "NATO ve AB politikaları, Batı Balkanlar'ın tarihsel olarak çatışmaya eğilimli bir bölgeden son otuz yılda artan bir barış ve istikrar bölgesine dönüşmesine nasıl katkıda bulunmuştur?" temel sorusunu ele almaktadır.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler***: Uluslararası örgütler, NATO, AB, Batı Balkanlar, bölgesel güvenlik*

**JEL Kodu**: F53, F55

## Introduction

The scholarly literature on the WB has predominantly concentrated on themes of conflict, fragmentation, and ethnic disintegration, often overlooking processes of cooperation and regional integration (Halpern & Kideckel, 2000; Job, 2002; Ramet, 2002; Naimark & Case, 2003; Gallagher, 2003; Thomas, 2003; Rogel, 2004; Mesic, 2004; Oliver, 2005). In contrast, this study investigates the region's transition from conflict to a more stable order since the 1990s, focusing especially on the role of international organizations (IOs) in facilitating this transformation. Specifically, it examines how the EU and NATO have contributed to the emergence of a nascent political-security community in the WB through the strategic use of membership incentives. Furthermore, while contributing to the important works of R. Grillot et al. (2009) and Dursun-Özkanca (2019), who demonstrate the critical role of international organizations in ensuring a stable security order in the WB, this study aims to make a modest contribution to the literature by applying the perspective of the RSCT.

The analysis posits that EU and NATO accession processes have served as key mechanisms for encouraging interstate cooperation, promoting democratic norms, and stabilizing the region. These organizations have deployed conditionality as a tool to reshape domestic political agendas, contributing to a collective sense of security and shared identity among prospective member states (Adler & Barnett, 1998; Schimmelfennig, 2001; Friis & Murphy, 1999). As such, the study offers both empirical and theoretical contributions to the literature on international relations and regional security.

Theoretically, the research adds to the growing body of scholarship that examines the interplay between material incentives and ideational factors such as identity and norms in fostering security cooperation (Adler & Barnett, 1998; Waever, 1998). It also expands the application of the security community framework, originally conceptualized in the context of Western Europe, to post-conflict regions where international organizations play a central role in peacebuilding and institutional consolidation. Empirically, the study provides a critical assessment of the efficacy of current IO-led initiatives in the WB and explores their replicability in other post-conflict contexts. By analyzing the EU and NATO as agents of regional stabilization, the study seeks to offer policy-relevant insights for international actors engaged in peacebuilding and regional integration elsewhere.

For several decades, the WB region has occupied a central position in international security discourse, characterized by persistent ethnic tensions, political volatility, and the enduring legacies of violent conflict. Despite these challenges, the combined efforts of the EU and NATO have contributed significantly to the region's gradual stabilization. Although both institutions pursue the overarching objective of fostering peace and security, their divergent mandates, tools, and institutional capacities have resulted in a functional division of labor that, when effectively synchronized, reinforces regional security in complementary ways (Tzifakis, 2012; Economides & Ker-Lindsay, 2015).

NATO's engagement in the region has primarily centered on enhancing hard security through military presence, crisis management, and defense sector reform. Its interventions, including the establishment of the Kosovo Force (KFOR) and support for security sector restructuring, have aimed to deter violence and strengthen state capacities for defense and crisis response (Yost, 2007; Cornish & Edwards, 2001). Through mechanisms such as the Membership Action Plan (MAP) and the Partnership for Peace (PfP), NATO has also promoted democratic civil-military relations and interoperability among Balkan states, reinforcing regional defense cooperation.

In parallel, the EU has adopted a longer-term, more comprehensive strategy grounded in political and economic integration. Its Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) (Akdemir, 2018, p. 4), accession negotiations, and extensive conditionality frameworks have encouraged candidate and potential candidate countries to implement reforms in the rule of law, democratic governance, public administration, and economic development (Anastasakis & Bechev, 2003; Bieber, 2011). By addressing structural weaknesses and promoting social cohesion, the EU contributes to the construction of resilient and inclusive political communities, thereby mitigating the

root causes of instability and violence. Hence, the coordination between NATO's security-centered engagement and the EU's normative-institutional approach exemplifies a multidimensional peacebuilding model tailored to the specific challenges of post-conflict societies in the WB. When aligned effectively, this dual-track engagement enhances both the immediate and structural dimensions of security, reinforcing regional stability and facilitating long-term integration into Euro-Atlantic structures (Blockmans, 2007).

The complementary roles of NATO and the EU in the WB underscore a strategic partnership aimed at fostering regional stability, democratic governance, and Euro-Atlantic integration. Through coordinated efforts in the fields of security cooperation, political dialogue, and economic development, both institutions have played a pivotal role in the region's post-conflict transformation. This study contends that the EU and NATO, particularly through their accession frameworks and membership conditionalities, have been instrumental in shifting the WB from a conflict-prone environment toward a more stable and cooperative security regime. In doing so, these organizations have laid the groundwork for the emergence of a regional security community (Adler & Barnett, 1998; Schimmelfennig, 2001).

The enlargement strategies of both the EU and NATO have contributed not only to enhanced security but also to the institutionalization of democratic and market-oriented reforms across the region. These efforts have supported post-authoritarian democratization, economic liberalization, and the broader process of post-conflict reconstruction (Anastasakis & Bechev, 2003; Bieber, 2011). The perspective of eventual membership has functioned as a powerful incentive for reform, compelling aspiring member states to implement measures aimed at curbing ethnic intolerance, organized crime, corruption, and institutional underdevelopment—factors that had previously hindered peacebuilding and governance (Grabbe, 2006; Tzifakis, 2012).

Since the cessation of armed hostilities in the 1990s, the WB have made considerable progress in these areas, largely due to the disciplined framework and political leverage offered by Euro-Atlantic integration processes. As a region still shaped by the recent legacies of ethno-nationalist violence and state fragmentation, its integration into Euro-Atlantic structures is not merely beneficial for domestic stabilization but is also essential for the broader security architecture of Europe and the transatlantic community (Economides & Ker-Lindsay, 2015). Therefore, both the EU and NATO have consistently reaffirmed their commitment to the region's integration by deploying substantial political, financial, and technical resources (Blockmans, 2007).

## Method of Study

To investigate the transformation of the WB from a conflict-prone region to one increasingly embedded within Euro-Atlantic structures, this study employs Process Tracing (PT) a qualitative methodology designed to identify and test causal mechanisms within a given case (Beach & Pedersen, 2019; Bennett & Checkel, 2015). Rather than merely identifying correlations, it focuses on how and why particular outcomes emerge through detailed reconstruction of causal processes. In the case of the WB, this involves systematically examining the ways NATO and EU policies have shaped the region's security architecture over time. Hence, PT provides an ideal method to understand to what extent and through what specific causal mechanisms have the EU and NATO policies contributed to the transformation of the WB security complex from a conflictual order to a security regime that aspiring for Euro-Atlantic integration between 1990 and 2025. Given the extensive timeframe from 1990 to 2025, which spans the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia, post-conflict reconstruction, and prolonged Euro-Atlantic integration, the study focuses on key episodes and causal pathways that exemplify broader patterns. PT is particularly well-suited for such longitudinal and path-dependent analysis, enabling the researcher to unpack the layered interactions between international institutions and domestic transformation across different stages of the region's evolution (George & Bennett, 2005).

The first step involves clearly defining key variables. The independent variables are NATO and EU engagements in the region, such as military interventions, peacekeeping, enlargement policies, and rule of law initiatives. The dependent variable, regional security, is broadly defined to include the reduction of inter-state conflict, improved governance, enhanced regional cooperation, progress toward EU/NATO membership, and the transformation of the security complex itself from conflict formation to security community, in line with Buzan and Waever's RSCT. Next, the study develops hypothesized causal mechanisms to explain how NATO and EU actions affect regional security. These mechanisms include; (1) Coercive Stabilization, where NATO interventions and peacekeeping efforts create conditions for peace and reconstruction; (2) Incentivized Transformation via Conditionality, where the EU uses accession carrots to induce governance and security reforms; (3) Normative Socialization and Identity Shift, where both organizations promote Euro-Atlantic norms and values; and (4) Resilience building and external counterbalancing: EU/NATO participation strengthens institutional resilience by reducing the impact of external actors like China or Russia. Each mechanism entails specific process traces observable empirical manifestations that link cause to effect.

The third step involves identifying and collecting a diverse set of empirical data sources to trace these processes. These include official documents (NATO/EU declarations, enlargement reports, mission mandates), national laws and strategies, speeches and interviews with relevant officials, and media analysis. In the fourth step, the study systematically compares observed evidence to hypothesized mechanisms, using tools from within the PT framework. Temporal sequencing ensures that causes precede effects, while congruence testing evaluates the fit between expected and observed traces. Finally, the process tracing method culminates in a phase of hypothesis refinement and contextualized interpretation (Checkel, 2008: 115).

By following these steps, this methodological approach offers a systematic, transparent, and theory-driven investigation of how external actors specifically the EU and NATO have contributed to reshaping the WB' security environment. The result is a rich, empirically grounded account that advances both academic understanding and policy relevance regarding post-conflict transformation and regional integration. PT is inherently iterative. Initial hypotheses may require refinement as new evidence emerges, especially in a region as dynamic as the WB. Taking into account contextual elements including regional historical legacies, global geopolitical upheavals, and institutional inertia is crucial, as is acknowledging the causal complexity that several mechanisms frequently operate simultaneously. The final step involves synthesizing findings into a coherent explanatory account while being transparent about limitations, including data availability, attribution difficulties, and counterfactual uncertainty. By following this structured method, the research aims to produce a nuanced and empirically robust account of how the EU and NATO shaped the evolution of the WB security complex. This contributes not only to academic understanding but also to ongoing policy debates about international engagement in post-conflict and transitional regions.

# Theoretical Framework of the Study: RSCT and the Western Balkans

The security complex in the WB is characterized by intense rivalries, deep-seated security concerns, and significant external power involvement. RSCT (Buzan & Waever, 2003) which is a framework that emphasizes how regional security dynamics are influenced by the interactions among states within a specific geographical area provides a valuable framework for understanding these dynamics, highlighting the interconnectedness of security in the region. It posits that the security concerns of states in a region are interdependent, and the security of one state is often linked to the security of others in that region. Therefore, understanding regional security dynamics in the WB requires treating the region as a security complex and establishing a causal mechanism to track events and accordingly assess the security outcomes that occur there. In this context, to analyze the security complex in the WB region from 1990 to 2025 using RSCT, it is necessary to consider how various political, military, economic, and social dynamics in the region have shaped the security environment, focusing on regional actors and external powers.

Within this framework, the WB comprising Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia constitutes a distinct and deeply interlinked security complex. The region exhibits entrenched interdependencies rooted in a shared history of violent conflict, ethnic fragmentation, and unresolved political disputes, particularly surrounding Kosovo's status and BiH's internal governance arrangements (Belloni, 2020; Bieber, 2020). The states of the region are geographically intertwined. Conflicts or instability in one part of the region invariably spill over, affecting neighbors through refugee flows, economic disruption, and the rekindling of ethnic grievances.

This proximity and history of shared conflict create a strong security interdependence. This security interdependence is further reinforced by persistent amity-enmity patterns, whereby historical rivalries especially between Serbia and Kosovo or among Bosnia's constituent entities sustain a climate of mistrust and recurring political tensions (Bieber, 2020). Such conditions fulfill the RSCT criteria for the formation of a regional security complex, wherein the internal security concerns of one actor cannot be addressed in isolation from its neighbors. Internally, the region has elements of an anarchic structure. While no single regional hegemon exists, the influence of external powers (NATO, EU, US, Russia, Türkiye) has a significant role in the region's security structure.

Within this regional configuration, NATO and the EU act as external actors whose involvement can be characterized as penetrative and transformative. Their shared objective has been the stabilization and long-term integration of the WB into the Euro-Atlantic security and political architecture (European Commission, 2020; NATO, 2023). NATO's engagement in the region has centered on the provision of hard security guarantees and the management of post-conflict military stabilization. Its interventions in BiH (through IFOR and SFOR) and Kosovo (via the ongoing KFOR mission) represent direct exercises of security governance (Yost, 2014; NATO, 2023). Furthermore, NATO has facilitated the integration of several WB states namely Croatia, Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia into its alliance structure, thereby extending its strategic perimeter and promoting interoperability and defense reform (NATO, 2023). In RSCT terms, NATO has acted to restructure the internal balance of the regional complex by absorbing selected actors into its security framework and reducing localized security dilemmas through collective defense commitments.

In contrast, the EU's approach has emphasized normative transformation and long-term conflict de-securitization. Through the deployment of civilian missions such as EULEX in Kosovo, the provision of pre-accession assistance (IPA), and its central role in facilitating dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo, the EU has sought to mitigate the underlying sources of regional insecurity (European Commission, 2020; Ker-Lindsay & Armakolas, 2020). Enlargement conditionality serves as the EU's principal instrument of influence, offering the prospect of membership in exchange for domestic reforms, democratization, and regional cooperation. This strategy seeks to de-securitize regional relations by embedding them in a wider web of European norms, institutions, and practices.

Despite their distinct institutional identities, NATO and the EU often operate in a complementary manner, with NATO addressing the hard security dimensions and the EU leading civilian and political normalization efforts. Their joint engagement, as observed in Bosnia and Kosovo, reflects a degree of external management of the regional security complex (Yost, 2014; Belloni, 2020). In RSCT terms, this can be seen as an attempt to convert a fragile and conflict-prone regional security complex into a successfully managed, externally anchored subsystem.

RSCT provides a powerful lens through which to understand the interconnected security dynamics of the WB. The region exhibits the defining characteristics of a sub-complex, with deep-seated historical patterns of amity and enmity, and a significant degree of external overlay. In this context, NATO and the EU play mutually complementary roles. NATO, with its focus on hard security, deterrence, and defense reform, provides the essential foundation of stability (Belloni, 2009; Sloan, 2016). The EU, through its normative power, economic leverage, and emphasis on rule of law and good governance, works to transform the underlying causes of instability and integrate the region into a broader liberal security order (Bieber, 2011; Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2011).

The strategic interplay between these actors underscores a division of labor. While NATO ensures the immediate security environment, the EU addresses the structural drivers of instability through its enlargement and neighborhood policies. Without NATO's security guarantee, the EU's long-term integrative agenda would remain susceptible to renewed conflict and external interference (Marise, 2011, p. 238). Conversely, without the EU's comprehensive transformative engagement, NATO's military footprint alone would be insufficient to achieve sustainable peace and prosperity in the region (Gstöhl & Lannon, 2014). Together, they exemplify a coordinated external overlay shaping the trajectory of a regional sub-complex toward potential security community formation.

NATO and the EU, through their power influences at the global and regional level, are working to gradually de-securitize and integrate the region's historical grievances into the broader European security complex. As a result, based on the theoretical understanding of RSCT, the research proposes four hypothesized causal mechanisms. These are; 1- Military interventions and peacekeeping efforts are posited to enforce peace agreements, deter renewed hostilities, and establish a safe atmosphere that supports both political and economic growth, 2- EU membership prospects and access to financial assistance are contingent upon specific reforms in governance, rule of law, and regional cooperation (Incentivized Transformation through Conditionality), 3- Engagement through technical assistance, civil society support, and normative dialogue is expected to reframe domestic elites' and publics' preferences and identities in favor of European norms and practices, 4, NATO and EU presence mitigate external interference primarily from Russia and China by enhancing local resilience to hybrid threats and aligning strategic orientation with the Euro-Atlantic community. To examine these hypotheses, the research comprehensively analyzes the engagement patterns of the most influential external actors in the region (NATO and the EU) and their interactions with the WB countries.

# The Western Balkan Regional System: From Conflict Formation to Security Regime

The political and geopolitical transformations that swept across Europe during the 1990s were both rapid and profound. With the exception of those in the WB, all communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe had essentially collapsed by January 1990. By early 1992, both the Soviet Union and the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia had disintegrated, fundamentally altering the political map of the continent (Brown, 2009; Judt, 2005). Concurrently, Germany underwent reunification and was reintegrated as a full member of both NATO and the EU, symbolizing the consolidation of liberal democratic governance in Western and Central Europe. Meanwhile, while Albania also initiated its departure from state socialism, embarking on a protracted and turbulent path toward democratization and market reform (Biberaj, 1998), the post-communist transitions in the WB proved to be significantly more prolonged, fragmented, and violent. Rather than peaceful democratization and economic liberalization, the region became emblematic of state collapse, ethnic fragmentation, and violent conflict.

The dissolution of Yugoslavia unleashed a series of ethno nationalist wars marked by episodes of ethnic cleansing, civil strife, forced displacement, and widespread destruction, particularly in BiH, Croatia, and Kosovo (Glenny, 1996; Gagnon, 2004; Judah, 2000). Consequently, scholarly and political assessments of post-communist transformation in the WB have been overshadowed by the region's association with humanitarian crises, war crimes, and fragile post-conflict governance. This divergent trajectory underscores the unique challenges faced by the WB in comparison to other post-communist states. Whereas much of Central and Eastern Europe experienced relatively linear transitions toward EU integration and liberal democratic consolidation, the WB's political evolution was hindered by deep-rooted ethnic divisions, contested statehood, and weak institutional infrastructures (Bieber, 2011; Batt, 2004). As such, the region represents a distinct case in the broader narrative of post-Cold War European transformation.

After the Cold War ended and communist regimes collapsed across Europe, long-suppressed structural and political tensions re-emerged in the WB. The breakup of Yugoslavia saw the rise of ethno-nationalist ideologies, particularly in Serbia under the leadership of Slobodan Milosevic. Milosevic's instrumentalization of Serbian nationalism aimed to assert Serbian dominance over the multiethnic federation, but this assertive posture alarmed other Yugoslav republics, notably Slovenia,[1] Croatia, and Macedonia, and served as a key catalyst for their respective declarations of independence in 1991 and 1992 (Bowker, 1998; Ramet, 2006). In 1992, BiH followed suit, seeking international recognition as an independent state. However, this move was met with fierce resistance from Belgrade and Serbian nationalists, particularly given BiH's ethnically mixed population of Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs. The ensuing conflict characterized by widespread atrocities, ethnic cleansing, and mass displacement developed into one of the most devastating wars in post-Cold War Europe, lasting until 1995 (Gagnon, 2004; Glenny, 1996).

During the early stages of the Bosnian War, the EU (then the European Community) attempted to act as a mediator, but its limited capacity and internal divisions severely undermined its effectiveness as a crisis management actor (Woodward, 1995). However, thanks to the intervention of the United States (the US) and NATO a ceasefire was ultimately brokered. This culminated in the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in December 1995, which formally ended the conflict and established the constitutional framework for post-war BiH (Bowker, 1998; Bieber, 2006). The Dayton Agreement institutionalized a dual-entity political structure within BiH based on ethnic power-sharing. The new state comprised the Federation of BiH representing the Bosniak and Croat communities and the Republika Srpska, primarily inhabited by ethnic Serbs. While this

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[1] According to international organizations, Slovenia is no longer a part of the Western Balkans. As a Western Balkan state, Albania, however, was not a part of the Yugoslav Republic.

arrangement succeeded in halting hostilities and preserving the territorial integrity of BiH, it also entrenched ethnic divisions and created a highly complex and often dysfunctional political system (Chandler, 2000).

As the Yugoslav Federation began to fall apart, Kosovo, another entity that had long opposed joining the Serbian political system, unilaterally declared its independence from Serbia in 1991. However, this declaration failed to garner significant international recognition at the time, leaving Kosovo in a state of political limbo throughout much of the 1990s (Judah, 2000; Weller, 2009). Although the situation remained relatively stable in the immediate aftermath, violence escalated toward the end of the decade as Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic once again mobilized nationalist sentiment and security forces employing strategies reminiscent of those used during the earlier conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia (Gow, 2003). Unlike BiH, however, Kosovo did not endure a prolonged and multi-year conflict. Drawing on the lessons of its delayed response during the Bosnian War, the international community particularly NATO acted swiftly to prevent mass atrocities. In 1999, following a campaign of repression by Serbian forces against the ethnic Albanian population, NATO launched a 78-day aerial bombing campaign without explicit authorization from the United Nations Security Council, marking a significant moment in the evolution of humanitarian intervention (Bellamy, 2002; Ker-Lindsay, 2009).

During the NATO operation, regional alignment patterns in the WB became more clearly defined. States in the region aligned themselves either for or against the intervention, crystallizing what Barry Buzan and Ole Waever conceptualize as a regional security complex (Buzan & Waever, 2003). Within this emerging sub-complex, Macedonia and Albania assumed particularly strategic roles. Both countries served as staging grounds for NATO forces, hosting approximately 18,000 troops in Macedonia and 8,000 in Albania. Meanwhile, Croatia facilitated the mission by opening its airspace and providing logistical support (Judah, 2000). In contrast, Serbia was increasingly isolated, positioned in direct opposition to the emerging regional coalition and international interventionist norms. This geopolitical polarization contributed to the development of a sub-regional security complex, wherein patterns of amity and enmity became entrenched along the lines of support for or resistance to the Kosovo intervention. The binary structure of Serbia versus the others shaped subsequent security alignments and influenced regional cooperation and mistrust in the post-conflict years. This configuration also reflected the broader dynamics of Euro-Atlantic integration, with most neighboring states aligning themselves with NATO and the EU, while Serbia remained hesitant and antagonistic toward Western interventionism.

In 2001, a bloody internal war in the Republic of Macedonia (now North Macedonia) claimed the lives of about 100 people in a six-month period. The clashes, which pitted government forces against ethnic Albanian insurgents, were rooted in long-standing grievances regarding minority rights, political representation, and socio-economic marginalization (International Crisis Group, 2001). Drawing on the lessons of previous conflicts in Kosovo and Bosnia, the international community acted swiftly to prevent the escalation of violence into full-scale war. With the support of Albania and key Western actors, NATO played a central role in mediating the crisis and implementing a peacekeeping presence that contributed to stabilizing the country (Newman & Visoka, 2024, p. 640).

In parallel, the EU began to expand its influence in the region. In April 2003, the EU launched Operation Concordia in Macedonia, its first-ever military mission under the CSDP. The mission involved a multinational force of 380 soldiers drawn from 27 EU member states and candidate countries. Concordia was successfully concluded in December 2003 and was succeeded by EU Mission Proxima, a police advisory mission aimed at further consolidating peace, strengthening rule of law, and enhancing the operational capacity of domestic security institutions (Gross & Juncos, 2010). These missions signaled the rise of the EU alongside NATO as a credible security provider actor in the WB.

Simultaneously, the EU played a crucial diplomatic role in enabling the region's political reorganization. In 2003, the EU mediated an agreement that established the Union of Serbia and Montenegro, a loose federal arrangement designed to preserve regional stability while accommodating growing independence movements. This

arrangement, however, proved short-lived. In May 2006, Montenegro held a referendum on independence, which was closely monitored and supported by the EU. With 55.5% of voters opting for secession just above the 55% threshold set by the EU the Montenegrin parliament declared independence on 3 June 2006 (BBC, 2006). Shortly thereafter, on 12 June 2006, the EU and all its member states formally recognized Montenegro as a sovereign and independent state (European Commission, 2006).

These developments underscored the EU's increasingly assertive and multifaceted role in the post-conflict reconstruction and state-building processes across the WB. By combining diplomatic engagement, peacekeeping operations, and conditionality-driven integration mechanisms, the EU has emerged as a key actor in shaping the region's trajectory toward stability, democracy, and eventual accession into Euro-Atlantic structures (Bieber, 2011; Blockmans, 2007). NATO and the EU, which see the region as vital to Euro-Atlantic security and aim to transform the region in line with Western values, have used the lure of membership in their organizations to promote positive change in the region. Indeed, they were successful in this as all countries in the WB took steps to join European and Atlantic integration.

In the post-conflict period, all WB states have expressed a clear commitment to aligning with European and transatlantic institutions. Several countries namely Albania (2009), Croatia (2009), Montenegro (2017), and North Macedonia (2020) have become full members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), while others maintain active participation through the PfP program (NATO, 2024). These security affiliations have been instrumental in promoting defense reforms, democratic civil-military relations, and regional security cooperation (Gheciu, 2005). Concurrently, the EU has become the primary pillar supporting the region's political and economic change. All WB states have formally engaged with the EU accession process, whether as candidate countries or potential candidates. Through instruments such as the SAP, the European Commission has guided reforms in governance, the rule of law, market regulation, and human rights. In response, governments across the region have increasingly aligned domestic legislation with the acquis communautaire, demonstrating a normative commitment to European integration (Anastasakis & Bechev, 2003; Bieber, 2011).

Taken together, these developments signaled a profound geopolitical and normative shift. While the 1990s were marked by fragmentation and conflict, the post-2000 period has witnessed growing convergence around shared norms of peace, cooperation, and integration. Although challenges remain particularly with regard to corruption, democratic backsliding, and unresolved bilateral disputes the general trajectory of the WB suggests a sustained transformation from a post-conflict zone into a region gradually embedding itself within the broader Euro-Atlantic order.

With the new era which refers to the aftermath of the violent conflicts of the 1990s, governments across the WB have undertaken a series of substantive political and institutional reforms aimed at reducing inter-state tensions and fostering regional stability. This new era has been characterized by extensive demilitarization, the near-total elimination of the threat of inter-state conflict, and the transition from authoritarian rule to more democratic governance across the region (Batt, 2004; Bieber, 2011). The adoption of democratic norms and institutions, coupled with increasingly cooperative diplomatic relations, reflects the depth and scope of the political transformation that has taken place.

Although the potential for localized intra-communal violence particularly in sensitive areas such as Kosovo, BiH, or Serbia has not been entirely eliminated, the likelihood of widespread civil conflict on the scale witnessed in the 1990s has significantly declined (Chandler, 2000; Gagnon, 2004). Crucially, post-conflict governments in the region have, for the most part, refrained from supporting violent ethnic mobilization or revisionist foreign policy agendas. In contrast to the aggressive nationalism and territorial expansionism that characterized much of the region's political landscape in the 1990s, regional leaderships in the new era have generally embraced norms of peaceful coexistence, diplomatic conflict resolution, and cooperative security (Tzifakis, 2012).

The transformation of the security environment in the region has been facilitated in large part by the sustained involvement of international actors, particularly NATO and the EU. NATO's presence, particularly through peacekeeping operations and defense reform initiatives, has helped to stabilize post-conflict societies and integrate them into Euro-Atlantic security structures (Gheciu, 2005). Concurrently, through the development of its European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) later formalized under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) the EU has progressively enhanced its capacity for conflict prevention, crisis management, and post-conflict reconstruction in the WB (Grevi, Helly, & Keohane, 2009). Together, the EU and NATO have contributed to reshaping the WB security architecture, fostering a political environment in which revisionist policies and militarized inter-state rivalry have become increasingly untenable.

## The Transformative Impact of NATO and the EU on the Western Balkans Security

The WB, a region historically afflicted by conflict and fragmentation, has witnessed sustained engagement by both NATO and the EU in pursuit of regional stability and security. The synergistic involvement of these two actors driven by overlapping geopolitical interests and a shared normative commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration has profoundly influenced the region's post-conflict trajectory (Belloni, 2009; Gstöhl & Lannon, 2014). NATO's role in the WB dates back to the 1990s, initially as a crisis response actor during the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia. Over time, its involvement has evolved into a more comprehensive security provider focused on deterrence, crisis management, and cooperative engagement (Sloan, 2016).

The Kosovo Force (KFOR), established under UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999), is an important component of NATO's long-term commitment and continues to guarantee freedom of movement and a safe and secure environment in Kosovo. KFOR functions as both a stabilizing force and a deterrent against renewed inter-ethnic violence, contributing to broader conflict management in the post-conflict environment (NATO, 2025). In BiH, NATO played a critical role in implementing the Dayton Peace Agreement through the deployment of the Implementation Force (IFOR) in 1995, later replaced by the Stabilization Force (SFOR), which remained active until 2004. These missions were instrumental in disarming factions, restructuring defense institutions, and laying the groundwork for long-term peacebuilding (NATO, 2005).

NATO has actively engaged with the WB through political dialogue and practical cooperation frameworks such as the PfP, launched in 1994. These initiatives have played a crucial role in fostering regional understanding, enhancing institutional capacities in defense and security sectors, and promoting interoperability through joint training, exercises, and defense reform efforts (NATO, 2024a; Mulchinock, 2017). The prospect and eventual attainment of NATO membership has served as a powerful incentive for political and military reforms across the region, reinforcing democratic governance and contributing to post-conflict stabilization (Belloni, 2009; Sloan, 2016).

Slovenia joined NATO in 2004, marking the first post-Yugoslav state to enter the Alliance. This was followed by Albania and Croatia in April 2009, Montenegro in 2017, and North Macedonia in 2020, after resolving the long-standing name dispute with Greece (NATO, 2024b). BiH and Serbia, although not members, were both invited to join the PfP and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council at the NATO Riga Summit in 2006, an invitation that initiated bilateral cooperation programs aimed at supporting each country's path toward Euro-Atlantic integration (NATO, 2006).

BiH has been a NATO partner since 2006 and formally submitted its Membership Action Plan (MAP) in 2010. However, its progress has been hindered by internal political gridlock and unresolved legal issues, particularly concerning the registration of immovable defense property under state control a prerequisite for full NATO

integration. Moreover, recurrent tensions with the Republika Srpska entity, including periodic threats of secession and proposals to withdraw its personnel from the state-level Armed Forces, have further complicated BiH's accession prospects (Bieber, 2011).

The only WB nation that is working toward EU membership without any plans to join the Atlantic Alliance is Serbia. Nevertheless, Belgrade has agreed to enhance cooperation with NATO through an Individual Partnership Action Plan, despite citing the potential expansion of international recognition of Kosovo as one of the primary threats to its security in its 2021 National Security Strategy (Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Serbia, 2021). In Serbia's perspective, however, this is not in opposition to maintaining parallel relations in the defense sector with Russia and, increasingly with China, from which the Belgrade Armed Forces purchase weapons systems, especially for air defense. This approach is also reflected in the training and educational sphere, where the Serbian military branch participates in exercises with regional neighbors, Moscow and, on a bilateral basis, with NATO Countries (Alimpijević, 2025).

The engagement of NATO with the WB countries consolidated security links and contributing to the overall stability of the Euro-Atlantic area. Membership is seen as a guarantee of sovereignty and a deterrent against external interference. The EU's involvement in the WB is primarily driven by its enlargement policy, aiming to integrate the region into the Union. This process inherently links security with political, economic, and rule of law reforms. In this context, the SAP is the EU's overarching framework for relations with the WB, offering a clear path towards EU membership conditioned on rule of law, democratization, economic progress, and regional cooperation. This process promotes stability by incentivizing internal reforms. The EU provides substantial support and expertise to combat organized crime, terrorism, and improve border management in the WB. This includes cooperation with EU agencies like Europol, Eurojust, and Frontex, and financial assistance through instruments like IPA (Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance). Strengthening security institutions and the rule of law is central to this effort.

The EU operates Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) missions in the region, such as EUFOR Althea in BiH and EULEX Kosovo, focused on maintaining a safe and secure environment, supporting police and judicial reforms, and strengthening the rule of law. The EU is the region's largest trading partner and donor, investing significantly in economic development and infrastructure connectivity. Economic stability is seen as a fundamental pillar of overall security, and the EU aims to foster economic convergence with its standards. The EU actively supports regional initiatives and organizations that foster cooperation among WB countries in areas like security, trade, and mobility, recognizing that cross-border challenges require collective action.

At the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit of the European Council, the EU recognized for the first time that the future of the Balkans lay in the EU (European Council, 2003). Subsequently, as part of the enlargement of the EU, two countries that were part of the former Yugoslavia (Slovenia in 2004 and Croatia in 2013) joined the Union. Compared to the EU, NATO, on the other hand, has maintained an enlargement perspective at its core and has largely escaped enlargement fatigue. At its Riga Summit in 2006, NATO declared that Euro-Atlantic integration, based on solidarity and democratic values, remains necessary for long-term stability for the WB (NATO, 2006). NATO's open-door policy was underlined at the Bucharest Summit in 2008, when NATO reemphasized its goal of a Europe that is whole, free, and at peace (NATO, 2008).

NATO and the EU's roles in the WB are largely complementary, coherent, and mutually reinforcing, though challenges in coordination sometimes arise. Both organizations share the overarching goal of promoting peace, stability, democracy, and prosperity in the WB, ultimately aiming for the region's full Euro-Atlantic integration. NATO primarily focuses on military security, deterrence, and defense capacity building, while the EU emphasizes political, economic, and rule of law reforms, as well as civilian crisis management. This division allows for a comprehensive approach to regional security. Relations between the EU and NATO have been institutionalized

through joint declarations and frameworks for cooperation, enabling political dialogue and practical collaboration on issues relevant to the WB. NATO's KFOR, for instance, cooperates closely with EULEX Kosovo.

As a result, the security landscape of the WB is intrinsically linked to the sustained engagement of NATO and the EU. While NATO provides a crucial military security umbrella and fosters defense cooperation, the EU drives comprehensive reforms across governance, economy, and justice, paving the way for eventual integration. The continued success in navigating the region's complex challenges hinges on robust cooperation between these two key international actors, ensuring that the WB progresses towards lasting stability and prosperity within the Euro-Atlantic framework.

## Conclusion

This study examined the role of internationally influential organizations, in facilitating the development of security regimes and paving the way for the establishment of security communities in post-conflict areas. In this context, the study explored the mutually complementary roles of the EU and NATO in promoting regional security in the WB, focusing on how organizations and structures with strong international actor influence play a role in enabling the transition of the regional system from conflict to order in post-conflict regions. Based on the theoretical assumptions of RSCT, the hypothesis that third parties, such as international organizations with global actor influence, can play powerful roles in transforming conflict formations into security regimes when they engage in intra-regional interactions with positive rewarding activities in post-conflict regions guided the research. In this context, the study focused on the patterns of engagement of the two major international organizations in the WB and their interactions with the regional countries.

The Euro-Atlantic integration process has positively affected democratic developments in the WB countries and further reduced the risk of a return to authoritarian rule, enabling the region to make a significant leap forward in freeing itself from its conflict-formation structure. Moreover, the fact that democratic governments are currently in power in all WB countries has made the modernization of the economies of the WB countries and their competitiveness the main issues in the process of accession to the EU and NATO. Hence, their participation in this process also enabled them to create a conducive environment for economic growth. More importantly, the overall sense of security and stability in the region because of this rapprochement has begun to facilitate both the attraction of more foreign direct investment and increased coordination and cooperation among regional actors.

This study has shown that NATO and the EU have been central to the stabilization and gradual transformation of the WB from a conflict-prone region to one increasingly anchored in Euro-Atlantic structures. Drawing on RSCT, the research confirmed that international organizations with global reach can serve as powerful agents of change when they engage regional actors through security guarantees, institutional reform, and economic incentives. The complementary roles of NATO and the EU illustrate how hard security and normative integration can work together. NATO has provided the backbone of military stability, defense reform, and collective security, while the EU has acted as a normative and economic driver, promoting democratization, rule of law, and regional cooperation. Together, their policies have reduced the risk of renewed conflict, enhanced political and economic modernization, and encouraged the WB states to orient toward integration rather than fragmentation.

NATO and the EU have functioned as pivotal external actors in attempting to stabilize and transform the WB through a mixture of military, institutional, and normative strategies. While their engagement reflects a concerted effort to manage the security complex through integration into broader Euro-Atlantic structures, the process remains incomplete and contested. The persistence of unresolved bilateral disputes, the reassertion of ethnic nationalism, and the interference of rival external actors underscore the fragility of the region's current security equilibrium. The WB thus remains a partially penetrated and externally managed regional security complex,

whose full transformation will depend on sustained and coherent engagement from both NATO and the EU, alongside a credible and reinvigorated path toward integration.

Yet, the findings also highlight ongoing vulnerabilities. Serbia's strategic ties with Russia, unresolved disputes such as the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, and the growing influence of other external actors including Russia, China, and Türkiye have complicated efforts to fully embed the region within the Euro-Atlantic security order. These dynamics underscore that while NATO and the EU have penetrated and reshaped the WB's security environment, their success remains partial and fragile. Ultimately, the WB should be understood as an evolving, externally managed security complex rather than a fully integrated community. Continued progress will require sustained commitment, flexible strategies, and a credible path toward membership for aspirant states. Without this, the gains achieved risk stagnation or reversal. With it, however, NATO and the EU can complete the transition of the WB from a zone of instability to one of enduring security and cooperation.

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# Genişletilmiş Özet

## Amaç

Bu çalışma, Batı Balkanlar'a odaklanarak, çatışma sonrası bölgelerde güvenlik rejimlerinin geliştirilmesini kolaylaştırmada ve güvenlik topluluklarının kurulmasının önünü açmada uluslararası alanda etkili örgütlerin oynadığı rolü ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu bağlamda, NATO ve AB'nin tarihsel olarak etnik gerilimler, siyasi dalgalanmalar ve çatışmaların kalıcı sonuçlarıyla karakterize edilen bir bölge olan Batı Balkanlar'da bölgesel istikrar ve barışın tesis edilmesindeki karşılıklı tamamlayıcı rollerini ortaya koymaktadır. NATO'nun rolü materyal güvenliğin temel unsurları olan askeri angajman, kolektif savunma, kriz yönetimi ve savunma sektörü reformuna odaklanırken, AB istikrarsızlığın yapısal nedenlerini ele almak için siyasi ve ekonomik entegrasyon, hukukun üstünlüğü reformları, kurum inşası ve sosyo-ekonomik kalkınmaya vurgu yapmaktadır. Çalışma, her iki örgütün de, öncelikle üyelik koşullarıyla, Batı Balkanlar bölgesini bir çatışma oluşumundan istikrarlı bir güvenlik rejimine dönüştürmede önemli roller oynadığını ve böylece potansiyel bir güvenlik topluluğunun oluşması için zemin hazırladığını savunmaktadır. Bölgesel Güvenlik Kompleksi Teorisi (BGKT) tarafından yönlendirilen ve süreç izleme metodu kullanan araştırma, "NATO ve AB politikaları, Batı Balkanlar'ın tarihsel olarak çatışmaya eğilimli bir bölgeden 90'lı yıllara nazaran son otuz yılda artan bir barış ve istikrar bölgesine dönüşmesine nasıl katkıda bulunmuştur?" temel sorusunu cevaplamayı hedeflemektedir.

## Yöntem

Bu çalışma nitel araştırma desenlerinden biri olan vaka (olay) çalışmasıdır. Çalışmada NATO ve AB gibi iki önemli uluslararası örgütün Batı Balkanlar'ın çatışma yoğun bölgesel güvenliğini daha istikrarlı bir yapıya dönüştürmede izlediği politikaları anlamak için süreç izleme yöntemi kullanılmaktadır. Andrew Bennett'e göre bir vakada zaman içindeki değişikliklerin anlaşılmasına katkıda bulunan tanısal kanıt parçalarının incelenmesini sağlayan süreç izleme yönteminin merkezinde nedensel bir mekanizmanın kurulması yer alır. Nedensel mekanizma, eklektik teorilerin faktörleri belirli bir yapıda nasıl birleştirdiğini keşfetmek için bir çerçeve sağlar. Chekel'in tanımına göre de nedensel mekanizmalar, bazı olgular için açıklama olabilecek bir dizi hipotezdir. Farklı teorilerden yaklaşımlar arasında bir bağlantı bulmak için bir referans sağlar. Ayrıca, süreç izleme, belirli bir olgu için belirli bir nedensel sürecin yanı sıra altta yatan nedensel mekanizmanın belirlenmesine de yardımcı olur. Bu bağlamda son otuz yılda NATO ve AB'nin etkisiyle Batı Balkanlar bölgesel güvenliğinde yaşanan değişimi incelemeyi amaçlayan bu çalışmada süreç izleme yönteminin seçilmesinin nedeni, bu yöntemin vakadaki nedensel mekanizmaları ortaya koyarak bu süreçlerin nasıl işlediğini açıklığa kavuşturma gücüne sahip olmasıdır.

## Bulgular

Bu çalışma, güvenlik rejimlerinin geliştirilmesini kolaylaştırmada ve çatışma sonrası bölgelerde güvenlik topluluklarının kurulmasının önünü açmada uluslararası alanda etkili örgütlerin kritik roller oynadığını ortaya koymuştur. Bu bağlamda, çalışma, güçlü uluslararası aktör etkisine sahip örgüt ve yapıların çatışma sonrası bölgelerde bölgesel sistemin çatışmadan düzene geçişini sağlamada nasıl bir rol oynadığına odaklanarak, NATO ve AB'nin Batı Balkanlar'da bölgesel güvenliği teşvik etmedeki karşılıklı tamamlayıcı rollerinin bölgeyi istikrara kavuşturduğunu göstermiştir. Ayrıca, BGKT'nin teorik varsayımlarına dayanarak, küresel aktör etkisine sahip uluslararası örgütler gibi üçüncü tarafların, çatışma sonrası bölgelerde olumlu ödüllendirme faaliyetleriyle bölge içi etkileşimlere girdiklerinde çatışma oluşumlarını güvenlik rejimlerine dönüştürmede güçlü roller oynayabilecekleri hipotezinin geçerli olduğunu kanıtlamıştır.

## Sınırlılıklar

Bu çalışma çeşitli sınırlılıklarının olduğunu kabul etmektedir. İlk olarak, kamuya açık belgelere ve ikincil kaynaklara dayanılması NATO ve AB içindeki iç karar alma süreçlerine erişimi kısıtlamakta ve potansiyel olarak nedensel çıkarımların derinliğini sınırlamaktadır. İkinci olarak, geniş zamansal kapsam (1990-2025) bölgesel dönüşümün çeşitli aşamalarını kapsamakta ve değişen siyasi bağlamlarda analitik tutarlılığın sürdürülmesinde zorluklara yol açmaktadır. Üçüncüsü, çalışma daha geniş kalıpları göstermek için kilit dönemlere odaklanırken, Batı Balkanlar'daki her ülkeye özgü farklılıklar genelleştirilebilirliği sınırlayabilmektedir. Dördüncüsü olarak, özellikle daha önceki dönemlerdeki veri eksiklikleri bazı mekanizmaların ampirik kapsamını kısıtlayabilmektedir. Son olarak, tüm süreç izleme araştırmalarında olduğu gibi, karşı olgusal akıl yürütme doğası gereği spekülatif kalmaktadır. Ancak bu kısıtlamalara rağmen, bu çalışma NATO ve AB'nin Batı Balkanlar'da bölgesel güvenliği nasıl şekillendirdiğine dair yapılandırılmış ve teoriyle desteklenmiş bir açıklama sunmaktadır.

## Öneriler

Bu çalışma, NATO ve AB'nin 1990-2025 yılları arasında Batı Balkanlar güvenlik kompleksinin dönüşümündeki rolünü incelemiş ve çatışmadan entegrasyona doğru gerçekleşen bu bölgesel değişimin altında yatan nedensel mekanizmaları ortaya çıkarmak için süreç izleme yöntemini kullanmıştır. Analiz, zorlayıcı istikrar, koşulluluk, normatif sosyalleşme ve dış dengeleme gibi yolları tanımlayarak, dış aktörlerin güvenlik sonuçlarını nasıl şekillendirdiğine dair incelikli bir anlayış sunmaktadır. Gelecekteki araştırmalar karşılaştırmalı bölgesel bir yaklaşım benimseyerek, karma yöntemleri entegre ederek veya siber tehditler ve dış müdahale gibi yeni ortaya çıkan güvenlik sorunlarını inceleyerek bu bulguları geliştirebilir. Yeni perspektiflerin dâhil edilmesi ve teorik çerçevenin genişletilmesi analizi daha da zenginleştirecek ve çatışma sonrası bölgelerde Avrupa-Atlantik angajmanının politika açısından uygunluğunu artıracaktır.

## Özgün değer

Bu araştırmanın özgün değeri, NATO ve AB angajmanlarının Batı Balkanlar'ın uzun vadede çatışmaya eğilimli bir bölgeden Avrupa-Atlantik yapılarına giderek daha fazla entegre olan bir bölgeye dönüşmesine nasıl katkıda bulunduğuna dair sistematik ve mekanizmaya dayalı açıklamasında yatmaktadır. Çalışma, otuz beş yıllık bir dönem boyunca süreç takibi uygulayarak, dış aktörlerin bölgesel güvenlik dinamiklerini etkilediği belirli nedensel yolları (zorlayıcı, normatif, kurumsal ve jeopolitik) ortaya çıkarmak için yüzeysel korelasyonların ötesine geçmektedir. Bu yaklaşım sadece çatışma sonrası dönüşüme ilişkin akademik anlayışı derinleştirmekle kalmıyor, aynı zamanda uluslararası örgütlerin karmaşık ve parçalı güvenlik ortamlarında kalıcı barışı, yönetişim reformunu ve bölgesel işbirliğini hangi koşullar altında teşvik edebileceğine dair politika açısından önemli içgörüler sunuyor.