ANALYSIS

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DEFENCE READINESS BEYOND THE EU

How enlargement partners underpin European security

by

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Summary

- As Europe's defence policy takes centre stage, the Western Balkans are not passive bystanders. Governments across the region are shifting the focus of defence modernisation from maintaining existing forces to upgrading military capabilities and reviving their defence industries.
- The scale and direction of defence modernisation will shape how far the Western Balkans can support Europe's efforts to enhance defence readiness, including through modest but tangible support for Ukraine.
- The most credible entry points are practical: defence-industrial cooperation (including co-production in bottleneck areas such as ammunition, propellants and maintenance capacity) alongside military mobility and dual-use infrastructure that strengthens reinforcement routes, linking the Adriatic to the Black Sea.
- The Western Balkans contribute most to European security by keeping the region stable and predictable. If the Western Balkans cannot manage their own security, they become a standing liability for EU crisis management. If they can, they become a strategic asset for European defence.

Europe is re-arming. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has reshaped the European security environment and pushed defence readiness to the centre of EU policy. This shift is unfolding amid broader instability: widening conflict in the Middle East, escalating tensions involving Iran, and a more contested global order marked by growing turbulence in transatlantic relations[1]. European governments are shifting from crisis management to sustained readiness, expanded industrial capacity, and faster procurement. The EU's response reflects this change in direction. The €150 billion Security Action for Europe (SAFE) instrument marks a step change in the EU's defence ambitions. With national investment plans having been approved in early 2026, questions are sharpening about how quickly capabilities can be generated, how defence supply chains can be secured, and which partners will be incorporated into Europe's emerging defence readiness architecture[2].

In this context, readiness has a practical meaning. It depends on specific enablers: military mobility corridors for the rapid movement of forces and equipment, access to transport and energy infrastructure, resilient defence-industrial supply chains, and trusted political partners along those routes. These requirements extend beyond the EU's formal borders. The Western Balkans sit inside this wider security space, despite being only partially anchored in the EU's political framework. At the same time, several governments are strengthening their security posture and offering practical cooperation, including peacekeeping deployments and support to Ukraine.

Yet debates on EU defence readiness still tend to understate the region's importance for mobility, resilience and political reliability. This matters because the Western Balkans are not starting from zero. The region retains legacy security capacity shaped by decades of managing defence under conditions of uncertainty. Defence industries, trained security elites and an institutional memory of maintaining large conventional forces remain part of the regional landscape. During the Cold War, several countries relied on self-sufficiency rather than alliance guarantees, developing habits of mobilisation, logistics management and territorial defence. This legacy does not replace modern capability or reform, but it explains why some countries in the region can absorb deeper defence cooperation faster than often assumed.

In the current security environment, the EU is moving faster on defence than enlargement can keep pace with. The EU should therefore integrate Western Balkan partners that meet clear benchmarks into EU defence governance where feasible, bring them into military mobility frameworks (including the Solidarity Pool and PESCO Military Mobility project), and scale up dual-use infrastructure investment across the region. Force modernisation and defence-industrial revival in the Western Balkans also matter for Europe's wider rearmament effort, including practical support to Ukraine, even if only at a modest scale. In return, Western Balkan governments must match deeper cooperation with greater domestic responsibility for stability,

security and resilience. Recurring tensions and institutional fragmentation rarely remain local: they test EU cohesion and consume scarce strategic attention. If sequenced well, defence cooperation can strengthen readiness, reduce crisis-management costs and reinforce the credibility of enlargement.

THE STRATEGIC CHALLENGE: WHEN EU DEFENCE POLICY REACHES BEYOND THE UNION

The Western Balkans already form part of the European security framework, whether the EU chooses to acknowledge it or not. As the EU scales up its defence ambition, that ambiguity becomes a liability in the wider neighbourhood. The willingness to deepen defence integration is accelerating faster than the political and governance conditions needed to sustain it. The result is predictable: greater dependency on external actors, fragmented security cooperation, and heightened risks of capability and information leakage. Deeper defence cooperation with the Western Balkans therefore rests on three strategic conditions, each with direct security implications for the EU.

First, *governance is a security variable*, because defence cooperation transfers resources, access, and trust. Higher defence spending heightens the risk of corruption. If civilian oversight is weak and procurement is opaque, cooperation can entrench state capture and facilitate corrupt practices. Capacity-building can then create vulnerability, not resilience. This matters for the EU's defence readiness agenda. Instability or misalignment in the region can raise the cost, slow the tempo, and complicate the execution of EU defence plans. Trust depends on basic safeguards: transparent tenders, independent scrutiny and credible enforcement. Second, *interoperability is a political choice*. For the EU, interoperability with the Western Balkans matters because EU and NATO operations already rely on shared airspace, transit access and crisis coordination across the region. When governments treat alignment as transactional, predictability suffers. Third, *inclusion must be conditional but credible*. Asking partners to assume greater security responsibilities while offering only vague promises of integration incentivises hedging and strategic ambiguity. This is where grey-zone tactics take hold. Unresolved disputes related to borders and status – most notably between Belgrade and Pristina, as well as constitutional crises in Bosnia and Herzegovina – leave authority fragmented across local governments, EU missions, and NATO mandates. This fragmentation lowers the perceived cost of escalation, enabling both local actors and external powers to apply hybrid pressure below the threshold of open war[3].

These conditions matter because the Western Balkans shape European security across three interconnected strategic layers: transatlantic dynamics, Europe's defence ambitions, and regional stability. At the *transatlantic* level, Europe can no longer assume that the US will consistently provide the same level of attention, predictability, or surge capacity to European security. Signs of US disengagement from European security are already visible. US policy choices increasingly trade predictability for transactional leverage – often in ways that introduce volatility into the wider strategic environment. Since the 2003 European Security Strategy, the EU has framed stability in its neighbourhood as a core strategic interest. In today's context, Europe needs partners on its borders that are predictable, secure and operationally reliable – not an additional source of vulnerability. With several NATO members (Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia) and Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia embedded through the Partnership for Peace, the region already forms part of NATO's security architecture, regardless of formal membership. NATO allies routinely patrol and secure the airspace over Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia through rotational air-policing arrangements, while in Kosovo* the NATO-led KFOR mission retains authority over security in the lower airspace under its UN mandate.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ opinion on Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

Military mobility via the Western Balkans

Military bases and transport corridors in the region

The routes shown (Corridor Vc, Corridor X, Rail Route 10, and Corridor VIII) sit within the EU's WBEM TEN-T Core Network Corridor, linking Central Europe with Adriatic and Eastern Mediterranean ports via the Western Balkans.

Military bases

Maritime	Air	Air and land	Land	Internal security and support
○ / ●	○ / ●	○ / ●	○ / ●	○ Dual-use / ● Military

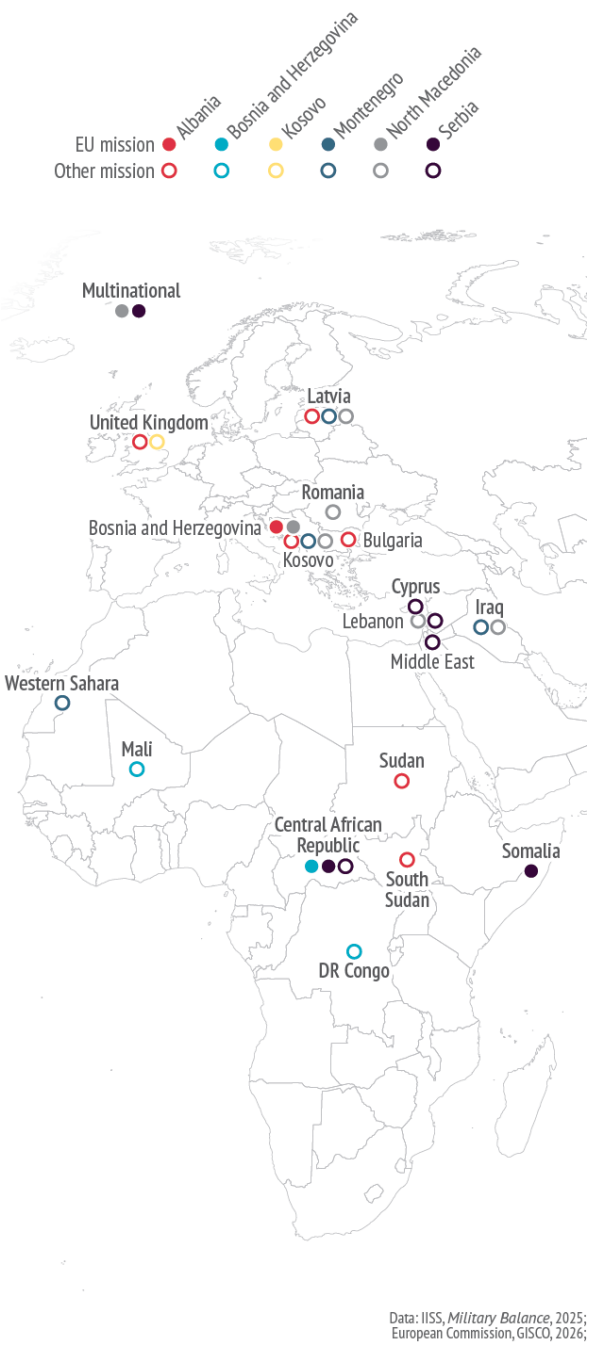
Data: European Commission, GISCO, 2026; Natural Earth, 2026

At the *European* level, the EU's defence agenda is expanding rapidly, combining joint procurement and industrial ramp-up (SAFE) with military assistance to partners (via the European Peace Facility) and capability development and interoperability (PESCO). Together, these tools aim to generate speed, scale and coordination, even as implementation remains uneven and politically constrained. Their effectiveness also relies on resilient infrastructure and workable cooperation beyond the EU's borders, including transit rights, regulatory alignment and host-nation support for movement and deployment. Readiness therefore depends not only on what the EU builds, but on how it manages its surrounding security space. This is where defence and enlargement intersect. When the EU treats defence as urgent but enlargement as slow and separate, a gap opens between security needs and the political map. That gap risks creating second-tier security partners. While cooperation with the EU is formally offered rather than imposed, problems arise when expectations of alignment rise faster than access to decision-shaping processes and defence frameworks. In such cases, cooperation can slide into an 'align and comply' dynamic that erodes incentives rather than strengthening them.

These tensions between ambition and inclusion are not abstract. They surface most clearly in military mobility, where political alignment, infrastructure and governance determine whether Europe's defence tools translate into real readiness. The Western Balkans can strengthen European security by providing critical connectivity between Central Europe, the Adriatic and the EU's south-eastern flank, while also enabling reinforcement routes towards the Black Sea. This strategic function rests on key transport routes, most notably Corridor X and the planned Corridor VIII, integrated within the broader Western Balkans–Eastern Mediterranean TEN-T framework (see map on page 3). EU policy increasingly reflects this logic. The 2025 Military Mobility package[4] and the March 2025 Preparedness Union Strategy[5] both frame military mobility as a core element of dual-use planning. Geography gives the region strategic weight. Since Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the Black Sea has emerged as a strategic theatre for European deterrence, air and maritime security, and resilience planning. In any contingency, reinforcing Romania and Bulgaria – and sustaining Ukraine – depends on the ability to rapidly deploy personnel, equipment, ammunition and fuel from Western Europe across Southeast Europe. Yet reliance on a limited set of north–south routes creates structural bottlenecks, reduces redundancy, and constrains operational flexibility.

Corridor VIII would add a missing east–west axis running from the Adriatic to the Black Sea, complementing rather than replacing Corridor X. Its strategic value lies in diversification: by adding redundancy and throughput, it reduces exposure to disruption, eases pressure on existing corridors and strengthens resilience in crisis scenarios. Adriatic entry points could facilitate onward movement if matched with adequate road and rail standards, streamlined border procedures, and dual-use infrastructure. Albania serves as a concrete case in point. Durrës remains the country's primary logistics hub, while plans to develop a new commercial port at Porto Romano signal an effort to expand Adriatic cargo capacity. This does not constitute a military supply base, nor are existing road and rail links along Corridor VIII uniformly capable of handling heavy military movement. Unlocking this potential would require sustained investment and regulatory alignment.

At the *regional* level, stability in the Western Balkans directly affects the credibility and cost of EU foreign and security policy. The EU and NATO support stability through missions, mediation and crisis prevention. Regional fragmentation further complicates security cooperation. The division of Western Balkan countries into NATO (Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia) and non-NATO partners (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia) adds an additional layer of complexity, particularly in areas linked to high-sensitivity defence and intelligence agendas. In practice, cooperation is frequently entangled with lingering political frictions, politicisation and uneven institutional capacity. This limits effectiveness and prevents operational collaboration from reaching its full potential. This makes the region a variable in Europe's readiness calculus: its capability choices and crisis behaviour can either ease or amplify the EU's crisis-management burden. The strategic question is not the region's abstract importance, but whether structured inclusion and clearer



expectations can reduce the risk of recurring crises.

Frontex cooperation offers a partial illustration of how such limitations can be mitigated. Positioned at the interface between EU and non-EU territory, the Western Balkans has become a focal point where external border management intersects with broader European security concerns. The expansion of status agreements, including most recently with Bosnia and Herzegovina, has enabled the deployment of Frontex's Standing Corps and joint operations under host-state authority, with around 500 officers currently active across Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia[6]. While it cannot be attributed solely to Frontex cooperation, the 78% decline in irregular crossings along the Western Balkan route in 2024 illustrates how structured, EU-led operational cooperation can deliver tangible security outcomes, provided political alignment and institutional capacity are sustained. Participation in international peacekeeping and crisis-management missions builds on this foundation, translating airspace access and interoperability into practical experience with joint deployments, multinational command structures, and burden-sharing, key indicators of operational reliability within European and transatlantic security frameworks (see map opposite).

FROM MAKING TO MATTER: DEFENCE PRODUCTION, READINESS, AND SUPPORT

Military production in the Western Balkans is unevenly distributed: while roughly 200 defence-related companies operate across the region, Serbia alone accounts for the bulk of integrated, large-scale production capacity. Its defence industry covers the full spectrum from small- and medium-calibre ammunition and light weapons to armoured and mine-resistant vehicles, self-propelled artillery, air-defence systems, hydraulic subsystems and naval craft, alongside aircraft-unguided rockets, unguided artillery rockets, missile and rocket-motor components. This range of capabilities is underpinned by companies such as Jugoimport SDPR, PPT Namenska, Zastava Oružje, Belom, and FAP Priboj, among others[7]. Bosnia and Herzegovina occupies a more specialised but still strategically relevant position, centred on ammunition, explosives, and critical components rather than complete platforms. Its industry focuses on mortar, artillery, tank and rocket ammunition, a wide array of fuzes and primers,

40 mm munitions, and grenades, with production concentrated in long-established firms such as Igman, Pretis, Unis Ginex, Binas and Pobjeda Technology[8]. While limited in scale and constrained by political fragmentation, this capacity matches Europe's current ammunition shortfalls, positioning Bosnia and Herzegovina as a functional supplier of high-demand consumables rather than complex systems.

By contrast, North Macedonia and Kosovo illustrate an emerging third model: defence-industrial integration through co-production rather than legacy capacity. The 2025 Memorandum of Cooperation between North Macedonia's ATS Group and Türkiye's state-owned MKE[9], including plans for a joint gunpowder production facility, signals a shift from marginal production towards embedded participation in regional ammunition supply chains. Kosovo is pursuing a similar trajectory, with plans to commence ammunition production from late 2026 following an agreement with Türkiye's MKE to construct a domestic ammunition factory[10]. Although modest in absolute terms, this model is analytically significant: it demonstrates how Western Balkan countries can rapidly expand their industrial relevance through joint investment, technology transfer, and alignment with external standards. If anchored in EU and NATO regulatory frameworks, such arrangements could serve as a template for future European defence-industrial partnerships, particularly in bottleneck areas such as propellants and ammunition inputs.

Beyond defence-industrial initiatives, the Western Balkans are also translating alignment into concrete force modernisation. This effort mirrors wider European rearmament trends under the EU's Readiness 2030 agenda and is driven by the same geopolitical pressures shaping defence investment across Europe. A first cluster of countries has prioritised alliance-anchored capability upgrading, focusing on interoperability, mobility and force projection within NATO frameworks. Montenegro has proposed up to €250 million in defence-related borrowing, centred on helicopters, Spike anti-armour systems, specialised and logistics vehicles, and CBRN (chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear) capabilities. This modernisation drive is accompanied by a rebalancing of the 2026 defence budget: funding for the Armed Forces falls to €49.4 million, an 8% reduction from 2025, while the Ministry of Defence allocation rises slightly to €78.9 million. At the same time, funding for EU, NATO and UN missions is being scaled back[11]. North Macedonia has approved a record €358 million defence budget for 2026: the package includes the operational deployment of Turkish-made BORAN 105 mm towed howitzers – making North Macedonia the first European country to operationally deploy the system[12] – alongside an expanded fleet of US-supplied Joint Light Tactical Vehicles (JLTVs). Further investments focus on air mobility, air defence, and sustainment infrastructure, including the planned acquisition of eight multi-purpose helicopters from Italy[13]. This level of spending keeps defence expenditure slightly above NATO's 2% benchmark. Political leaders have, however, signalled an intent to raise that share over the next decade towards a broader 5% target.

A second trajectory combines capability development with explicit defence-industrial ambitions. Albania has announced plans to increase defence spending to approximately €589 million (just over 2.1% of GDP) in 2026 and has outlined longer-term ambitions to move towards 5% of GDP over the next decade[14]. The country has accelerated the development of a domestic defence-industrial base through the establishment of the state-owned company KAYO, tasked with reviving former production facilities and expanding output of ammunition, unmanned systems, armoured vehicles and counter-drone technologies. Planned acquisitions, including ATMOS 155mm howitzers and SPEAR 120mm mortar systems from an Israeli company[15] as well as the procurement of Thales air-surveillance radar, point to a model that links modernisation with industrial revitalisation. Kosovo similarly combines rapid budget growth – with plans exceeding €1 billion over the next 4 years – with efforts to develop domestic ammunition and drone production[16], and expand the Kosovo Security Force, alongside possible NATO-standard acquisitions, such as UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters from the US. These investments will be complemented by continued partnerships with foreign military academies (e.g. Türkiye, Germany, the US), with scope to expand cooperation.

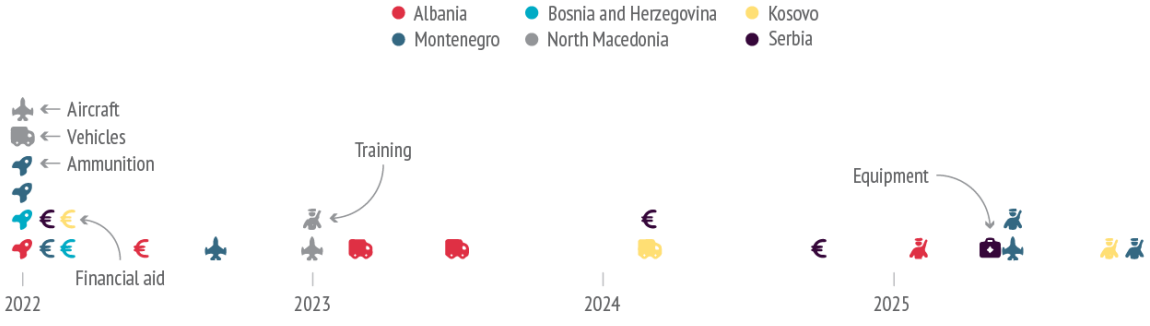
In contrast, Bosnia and Herzegovina takes a more cautious approach to modernisation, focused on limiting risk. Under the 2025–2030 Armed Forces Modernisation Programme[17], planned investments include approximately €5.1 million for the procurement of 46 specialised vehicles for light infantry battalion-level units, intended to replace ageing M113A2 armoured personnel carriers dating back to the 1970s, alongside around €10.2 million allocated for a helicopter acquisition programme and a further €5.1 million for replenishing ammunition and mine/explosive ordnance reserves. Rather than pursuing force expansion, the programme is primarily aimed at replacing obsolete equipment and sustaining baseline operational readiness in the context of persistent political fragmentation.

Serbia follows a distinct fourth trajectory centred on strategic autonomy through diversified procurement. It combines the region's highest defence spending with high-end Western acquisitions – most notably 12 Dassault Rafale multirole fighter aircraft valued at €2.7 billion[18], while simultaneously modernising its land forces through a mix of domestically produced platforms, such as the Lazar 3 armoured combat vehicle, and upgraded artillery, radar, and rotary-wing capabilities, including H-145M utility helicopters. At the same time, China has emerged as Serbia's primary external supplier of military equipment, accounting for approximately 57% of arms imports between 2020 and 2024. This exceeds deliveries from both Russia (around 20%) and France (just over 7%)[19]. Between 2023 and 2024, Serbia became the first European country to take delivery of advanced Chinese systems, including three FK-3 (HQ-22) medium-range and four HQ-17A short-range air-defence systems, 300 HQ-22 and 100 HQ-17 missiles, as well as ten CH-95 armed unmanned aerial vehicles (drones). These capabilities have historically been exported primarily to Asian and Middle Eastern partners[20]. Serbia's multi-vector modernisation strengthens capability and leverage at the expense of closer foreign policy alignment with the EU and NATO. It also introduces interoperability constraints. Procurement from non-Western suppliers limits secure communications and information exchange, while increasing reliance on external supply chains and technical support. This, in turn, reduces enlargement partners' ability to integrate effectively into coalition planning and multinational operations with EU and NATO allies.

These defence-industrial and modernisation trajectories determine the Western Balkans' capacity to contribute – albeit modestly – to Europe's wartime defence effort in Ukraine (see diagram below). Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro and North Macedonia have provided military assistance in various forms, including lethal equipment and ammunition; heavy weapons and protected mobility assets; sustainment support; defence-industrial cooperation, notably in UAV production; and institutional contributions through training programmes and participation in NATO and EU military assistance missions, including the NATO Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine (NSATU) initiative and the

Limited in scale, strategic in effect

Military, financial and humanitarian aid to Ukraine since 2022



Data: SIPRI, 2026; Ministries of foreign affairs of Western Balkans countries; various media sources (incl. Euractiv, FT, Kyiv Post).

EU Military Assistance Mission (EUMAM). Albania has also deepened its political-security alignment, signing a ten-year cooperation agreement with Ukraine in early 2025 and joining the allied fighter-jet coalition.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's contribution has been limited to humanitarian assistance and military exports, notably Ukraine's 2022 purchase of 22 domestically produced M-74 120 mm mortars. While remaining unaligned with EU sanctions, Serbia was the only Western Balkan country to provide macro-financial assistance to Ukraine, including a €30.2 million grant transferred in March 2024. The most recent disclosed allocation – approximately €300,000[21]– was designated to cover the costs of operational and maintenance personnel for Ukraine's air navigation service providers in 2025. Wartime assistance thus serves as a stress test, revealing both the limits of Western Balkan contributions and the potential for deeper integration to translate constrained resources into more structured security roles.

TURNING CONTRIBUTION INTO READINESS

Through peacekeeping deployments, defence-industrial modernisation, support to Ukraine and growing operational cooperation with EU and NATO partners, much of the Western Balkans is already acting as a *de facto* security contributor. Several countries maintain simultaneous deployments across EU, NATO and UN frameworks: from EUFOR Althea and KFOR in the Western Balkans, to NATO forward-presence rotations in Latvia, Romania and Bulgaria, and UN or EU missions in Lebanon, Somalia, the Central African Republic, South Sudan and DR Congo. Across the region, capability upgrading is also accelerating alongside Europe's broader rearmament. For example, Albania is reactivating legacy production facilities, Kosovo is advancing plans for domestic ammunition and drone manufacturing, and North Macedonia is investing at record levels in mobility and battlefield firepower.

Yet the sustainability of this role as a security contributor depends on political alignment, transparency and the assumption of greater internal responsibility. The policy question, therefore, is not whether the Western Balkans should be engaged, but how EU defence frameworks can translate existing contributions into a more meaningful role in upgrading Europe's posture and readiness.

Steering rearmament towards interoperability and stability

The EU should play a more assertive role in shaping defence modernisation in the Western Balkans to prevent rearmament from undermining interoperability and regional stability. Growing reliance on non-EU suppliers risks technical fragmentation, long-term dependency, and reduced compatibility with EU and NATO standards, particularly as the EU steps up defence integration. In the absence of stronger European industrial engagement, external actors are increasingly positioned to influence the region's defence-industrial revival in ways that may diverge from European frameworks. At the same time, uncoordinated armament trends and politicised defence rhetoric risk fuelling a competitive, zero-sum rearmament dynamic, amplifying mistrust and straining already fragile regional relations. The EU should therefore frame defence investment as a contribution to European security, link cooperation to interoperability benchmarks, and push back against narratives that instrumentalise rearmament to deepen regional cleavages. Without stronger EU guidance, modernisation risks becoming a driver of fragmentation rather than convergence.

Making defence integration resilient through governance guardrails

Speed creates exposure. As the EU scales up defence instruments and procurement, one of the central risks is not only underinvestment but mis-investment: opaque contracting, procurement capture, and supply-chain choices that create strategic vulnerability. This risk increases when cooperation expands into environments where safeguards are still consolidating. Oversight is not a brake but a safeguard against fragility. More assertive EU engagement – using available defence and mobility funds – should go hand-in-hand with firm insistence on good governance. As defence

instruments are scaled up, the European Parliament should use its scrutiny powers to strengthen transparency, conflict-of-interest safeguards and auditing requirements across EU defence and military-mobility funding, ensuring that deeper engagement reinforces trust rather than creating new vulnerabilities. Deeper cooperation with Western Balkans partners should be tied to verifiable governance safeguards, especially in procurement, auditability, and civilian control. This also sends a clear credibility signal: integration is rewarded, but integrity is non-negotiable. Without these safeguards, defence integration may reinforce existing corruption channels and open new pathways for external influence inside Europe's security space.

Reducing fragmentation by extending EU defence governance to the Western Balkans

The Western Balkans will make only a limited quantitative contribution to Europe's rearmament. However, excluding the region from the EU's emerging defence governance risks fragmentation that can raise costs and reduce efficiency. The EU's defence posture depends not only on production volumes, but on integration: common standards, coordinated procurement, and predictable military mobility. When the EU asks partners to assume greater responsibility without offering meaningful agency, it sends mixed signals and exposes the limits of conditional integration. The conditions must be paired with credible pathways, including structured, benchmark-based access to relevant EU security and defence frameworks, such as the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) and the European Defence Agency (EDA). Responsibility without agency weakens incentives; responsibility matched with access can strengthen both trust and alignment. These steps would not transform the EU's rearmament agenda, but they can reduce coordination costs, support interoperability and improve the predictability of crisis response.

Bringing the Western Balkans into the EU Military Mobility Package

The EU's effort to enhance military mobility through a new Solidarity Pool[22] of shared transport and logistics capabilities, intended to address shortfalls in moving forces and materiel across Europe, sits uneasily with the continued exclusion of the Western Balkans from its governance framework. While the Military Mobility Transport Group, designed to facilitate coordination and information exchange, allows ad-hoc observer participation for Ukraine, Moldova and European Economic Area partners, the Western Balkans remain absent. This is also true for PESCO Military Mobility (PESCO MilMob), launched in 2018, which aims to streamline procedures, accelerate border crossings, strengthen national points of contact and test mobility through exercises. This is not merely symbolic. Military mobility depends on routine coordination and trust built through practice, particularly in regions that serve as key transit corridors in times of crisis or contingency. This is especially relevant for reinforcement routes towards the Black Sea region, where speed, redundancy and predictability of movement are central to deterrence against Russia. Excluding the Western Balkans weakens the credibility of an initiative meant to foster readiness and solidarity, reinforcing perceptions of the region as a peripheral security actor rather than an operational partner. This omission is especially difficult to justify given that three Western Balkan countries are NATO members already operating within Allied mobility and interoperability frameworks. Addressing this disconnect would enhance both EU and Euro-Atlantic preparedness.

Scaling up infrastructure investment

Significantly higher and better-coordinated investment in transport infrastructure is essential if the Western Balkans are to support military mobility. Decades of underinvestment have left roads, railways, bridges, ports and airports outdated, unevenly maintained and poorly suited to the weight, scale and tempo of modern military movement. The EU's indicative extension of the TEN-T network to the Western Balkans[23] rightly recognises infrastructure as a

dual-use security enabler, including for military mobility, but current financing – largely channelled through the Western Balkans Investment Framework and Connecting Europe Facility – remains insufficient relative to identified needs. The EU should therefore scale up infrastructure funding, link it more directly to enlargement and capacity-building, and promote coordinated, region-wide investment planning. Without sustained investment in modern, dual-use infrastructure, neither TEN-T integration nor military mobility objectives will translate into operational readiness.

CONCLUSION

Europe is operating under mounting strategic pressure. As the EU accelerates its defence agenda in response to Russia's war against Ukraine and uncertainty in Euro-Atlantic relations, the Western Balkans should not be relegated to the margins of European security. The region retains assets that matter for European defence – legacy industrial capacity, trained security personnel, institutional experience in mobilisation and logistics, and a strategic geography linking the Adriatic to the Black Sea. Harnessed effectively, these assets can support Europe's wider rearmament effort. At the same time, the region's most strategic contribution remains stability. By lowering tensions, strengthening governance and avoiding self-inflicted crises, the Western Balkans can ease the EU's crisis-management burden. If the region can keep pressure off the EU, attention can shift to the most acute strategic challenges: sustaining Ukraine, deterring Russia, de-risking critical dependencies, and bolstering resilience against hybrid attacks.

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