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# Frontline Vulnerability

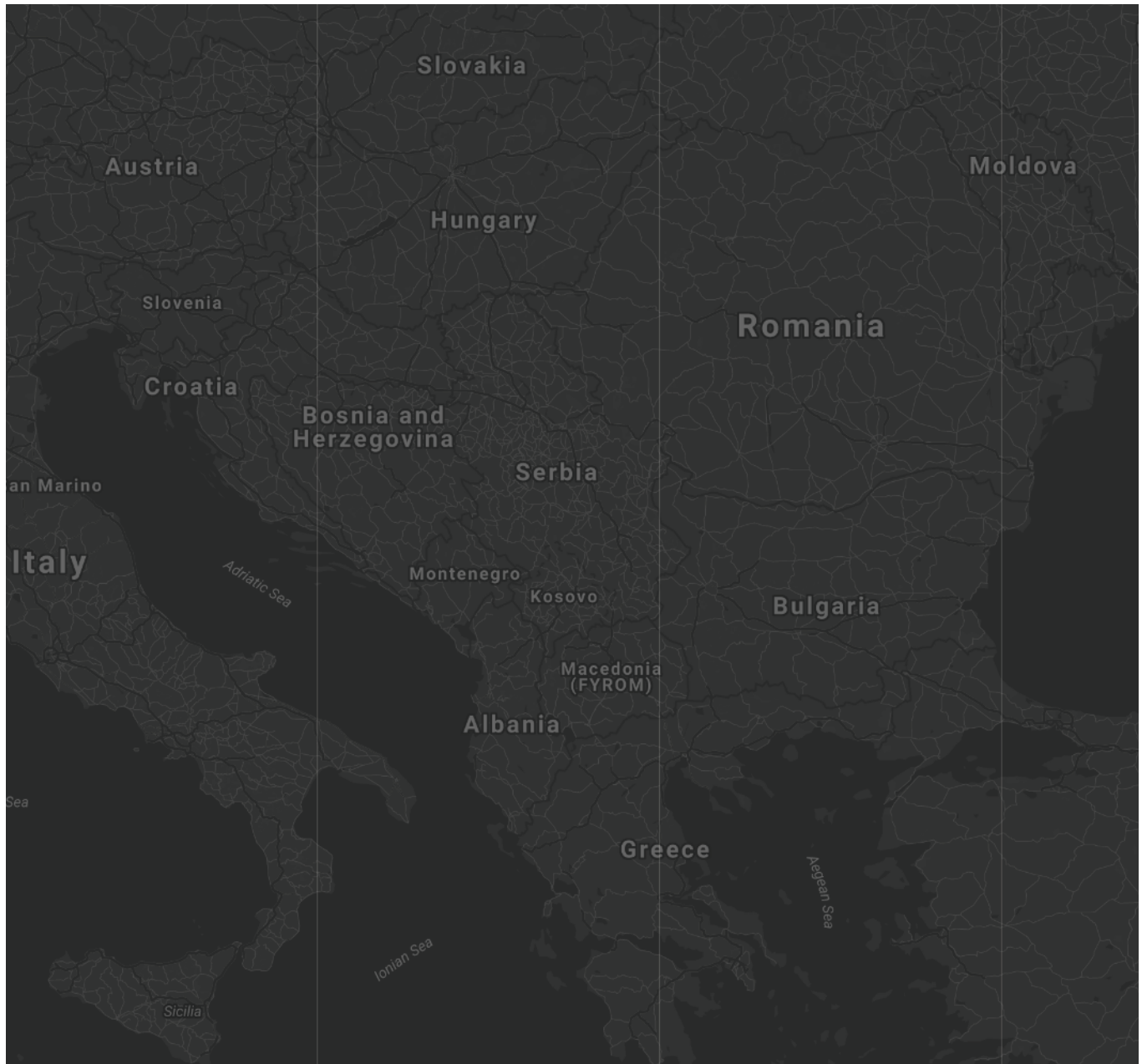
## The Strategic Case for the Western Balkans

### Transition Brief No. 4

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## About the author

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# THE ISSUE

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If the United States is going to face a geopolitical test on its strategic periphery, it is most likely to come where American power is weak, not strong. Recent efforts to shore up the Baltic states through U.S. and NATO military deployments have increased America's relative strength in that region. Less secure, though no less important, is the geopolitical theater of the Western Balkans. Here, a combination of historical legacies, post-conflict vulnerabilities and Russian interference should focus the attention of the new U.S. administration on an area of heightened strategic importance.

Although 17 years have elapsed since NATO's military intervention in the Western Balkans, policy makers should not assume that all conflicts have been assigned to history. Disputes continue to fester over statehood, territory, political authority and economic resources, and are compounded by the uncertainties of international integration and the interference of outside powers. An eruption of violence in one state could pull neighbors and international organizations into a spiral of confrontation.

The region is not doomed to failure. Progress is achievable, as seen by the accomplishments of several states since the collapse of Yugoslavia. This can be measured by entry into two key international organizations—NATO and the European Union—where strict criteria for membership apply. Although EU membership may no longer be so attractive to sizeable sectors of the EU's population, for aspirants in the Western Balkans, EU accession brings numerous benefits including investment, free movement of labor and essential structural funds.

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Two countries entered the EU after a long process of reform: Slovenia (2004) and Croatia (2013). Montenegro, Serbia, Albania and Macedonia have gained EU candidacy status, while Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosova remain on the lower rungs of qualifying for entry. Three countries have also achieved NATO membership, often viewed as a stepping-stone toward the EU—Slovenia (2004), Croatia (2009) and Albania (2009)—while Montenegro is on track to formally join NATO in 2017.

The prospect of EU and NATO membership has been the key incentive to democratizing the state and promoting inter-ethnic coexistence. Without that prospect, reforms tend to falter and local disputes are revived. In the wake of the EU crises, preoccupation with Brexit and a new budget to negotiate, enlargement is not high on the EU's agenda. It seems unlikely to consider the entry of any country for at least a decade. Receding opportunities for membership undermine Balkan commitments to the rule of law and encourage corruption and democratic reversals.

The region confronts three kinds of danger, which could imperil American interests: social unrest, minority turmoil and foreign interference. In combination, such threats could destabilize some states and even provoke violent clashes. If such conflicts expand across borders, both NATO and Russia could be sucked into the escalating combat.

Several Western Balkan countries are currently stuck in a no-man's land between democratic statehood and international integration. The incoming U.S. administration must monitor two conflict scenarios in particular—Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia—as they will prove the most threatening to regional stability. That stability is ultimately a benefit to America's overseas markets and the tranquility of its allies.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the standoff between the Serbian entity, Republika Srpska (RS) and the government in Sarajevo may come to a head. RS representatives claim Bosniak Muslims seek to dominate the state and marginalize the Serbs. If U.S. and EU attention shifts away from the country, RS representatives may withdraw from central government institutions and stage a referendum on independence. Such moves would raise calls among Bosniaks to eliminate the Serbian autonomous region and centralize the state. Croats can also capitalize on the unrest to declare an autonomous region in western Herzegovina. This triangular radicalization could lead to violent confrontations and drag both Serbia and Croatia, a NATO member, into direct conflict.

In Macedonia, Albanian frustration with government policy and political polarization among the majority Slavs may disable the formation of a stable government following recent parliamentary elections. Albanian leaders are demanding greater rights for their community, including making Albanian an official language throughout Macedonia and the creation of a new ministry to enhance "economic and social equality" in all regions of the country.

If thwarted, Albanian parties can raise the stakes by calling for federalization or a two-entity structure and even declaring an autonomous region along the Albanian and Kosova borders. In response, Macedonian politics would further radicalize, with nationalists mobilizing the public to defend the country's territorial integrity. Neighbors could be drawn into the dispute, with Serbia offering assistance to Skopje against Albanian separatism, while Kosova and Albania, a NATO member, will seek to protect their ethnic kindred.

A persistently unstable Balkan region could descend into a conflict zone by radicalizing sectors of the local population frustrated with the political elites and receding prospects for international integration. Social unrest and a weakening government structure could help facilitate the infiltration of jihadist and other terrorists. Militant Islamist groups could target U.S. diplomats and businesses and NGO representatives in the Balkans, or use the region to plan for more spectacular attacks against U.S. interests across Europe.

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**“Balkan insecurity will also *enable Russia to become more intrusive.*”**

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Balkan insecurity will also enable Russia to become more intrusive. Moscow views the region as Europe's weak spot where competition with NATO and the U.S. can be intensified, latent conflicts manipulated and new allies corralled. The Kremlin may also calculate that a Donald Trump administration may be less committed to the region and more willing to allow for Russian intervention.

Moscow promotes local nationalism to undermine support for Western institutions. It also corrupts national politicians to favor Russian business interests and fosters energy dependence to undergird diplomatic and political compliance and reduce Western investments. Moscow can also intensify its propaganda offensives through local media, the Internet and social networks to discredit Western institutions and encourage Euroskeptic and anti-American sentiments throughout the region.

Russian President Vladimir Putin aims to maintain several “frozen states” in the Western Balkans to prevent Western integration, as is the case with Ukraine and Georgia. He encourages the autonomist RS entity to keep Bosnia divided and question its future as a single state. Likewise, Moscow backs Kosova's Serbian minority as a repressed nationality in order to uphold the specter of partition. In Montenegro—a country on the verge of NATO accession—Kremlin proxies were reportedly behind a failed October coup attempt. Moscow also manipulates Macedonia's internal turmoil and its obstructed path toward NATO and the EU by the persistent Greek veto.

Republika Srpska President Milorad Dodik meets with Vladimir Putin. Photo credit: Alexei Nikolsky/TASS.



Unresolved conflicts and disputed states empower the Kremlin and international terrorist networks to claim that NATO has failed to stabilize the region despite its military presence. This undermines NATO's rationale as a security provider and creates the perception that Washington is surrendering and withdrawing from Europe. Balkan instability also distracts Western attention from other simmering crises along Europe's borders that could flare up into new wars. It removes any urgency to resolve the proxy war in Ukraine, the dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan over occupied Azeri territories—including Nagorno-Karabakh—Russia's territorial partition of Georgia and the Transnistrian standoff in Moldova. In sum, instability and escalating conflict in the Western Balkans will symbolize Western disarray and America's global decline and encourage ultranationalist groups and neo-imperial states to pursue their ambitions in other unsettled regions.

Given the destabilizing factors outlined above, the incoming U.S. administration must focus on four core policies that will directly serve Balkan, European and U.S. interests.

- ⑤ First, Washington has to avoid any display of military weakness or diplomatic withdrawal, as this will convince regional and extra-regional aggressors that they have the green light to precipitate conflict. U.S. disengagement can incapacitate NATO and undermine America's global stature and leadership role.
- ⑤ Second, Washington should continue working closely with Brussels and Berlin to push for reforms in all Western Balkan states in order to stimulate economic development and help stabilize the region. It is ultimately Europe's responsibility to assist in institutional reform, but the United States provides an essential supportive role at a time when EU leadership may be viewed as weak and preoccupied.
- ⑤ Third, Washington needs to work closely with all governments to help secure the region from jihadist infiltration and thereby contribute to enhancing U.S. national security and the safety of American citizens throughout Europe.
- ⑤ Fourth, the Trump administration should view Southeastern Europe as part of a larger emerging market, increasingly interconnected through energy, transportation and trade networks not only with the EU but with Turkey, the Middle East, the Caspian Basin, Central Asia, and China. A stable and secure Balkan region will create fresh opportunities for U.S. business across several potentially profitable regions.





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