



PRESIDENCY FOR
TURKS ABROAD
AND RELATED COMMUNITIES

Balkan Think Tanks Convention V

“The Balkans in a Changing World”

June 19-20, 2025
Ankara

SUMMARY REPORT

Reporter: Mehmet Uğur EKİNCİ





Introduction

The Balkan Think Tanks Convention is a gathering of think tanks focusing on political research. The convention aims to enhance dialogue and cooperation among think tanks in the Balkans and Türkiye, develop a regional perspective for understanding and addressing common challenges, and discuss innovative ideas for region-wide policy outcomes. It is led by the Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA), a leading think tank in Türkiye, and financially supported by the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB).

The first Balkan Think Tanks Convention took place in Ankara on June 10-12, 2015, with 30 think tanks and research institutions from twelve countries participating. The second edition was organized on November 3-4, 2016, in Pristina, Kosovo, in partnership with the Democracy for Development Institute (D4D). The event, titled “The Renewed Strategic Importance of the Balkans,” was attended by 27 institutions from twelve countries. The third edition, titled “Furthering Cooperation under Geopolitical Challenges,” took place in Ankara on September 7-9, 2022, bringing together 32 institutions from ten countries. In collaboration with the New Strategy Center (NSC) and the West University of Timișoara, the fourth edition was organized on June 6, 2024, in Timișoara, Romania, with the participation of 15 institutions from twelve countries.

The fifth edition of the Balkan Think Tanks Convention was held in Ankara on June 19-20, 2025. Organized under the title “The Balkans in a Changing World,” it brought together 35 experts affiliated with 31 institutions from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, and Türkiye. The program included six roundtable sessions that focused on several relevant themes for the Balkans today:

- 1) Shifting Global Geopolitics and Their Implications for the Region
- 2) Key Political Disputes and Fault Lines in the Balkans
- 3) The EU and the Balkans
- 4) Main Socio-Economic Challenges in the Region
- 5) Addressing Security Threats and Increasing Resilience
- 6) Mapping Disinformation: Methods, Evidence, and Policy Insights

Each session contained four interventions followed by an open roundtable discussion. During these sessions, experts identified actual and potential challenges to order, security, and peace in the Balkans, and offered their perspectives on how to respond to these challenges and strengthen stability and resilience in the region.

This report provides a general summary of the roundtable sessions, including the main points of discussion and policy recommendations. As the sessions were held under the Chatham House rule, the names and affiliations of the speakers are not specified.



This report summarizes the remarks made during the roundtable discussions.





Session I

Shifting Global Geopolitics
and Their Implications for the
Region



Session I: Shifting Global Geopolitics and Their Implications for the Region

The international system is undergoing significant changes in power distribution and institutional frameworks. The effectiveness of international institutions and the rule-based system is diminishing, leading to a more transactional and unpredictable environment. These changes pose particular challenges to the Balkans, a region historically positioned at the crossroads of geopolitical blocs and been victim to great power competitions.

One speaker outlined three assumptions that dominated post-Cold War strategic thinking, all of which have proven incorrect. The first was the belief that great power competition had ended and that American primacy would continue unchallenged. The second was the expectation that liberal economics would extend globally, incorporating non-Western economies into a neoliberal order. The third was the assumption that democracy would not only spread numerically but also deepen qualitatively across the world. Instead, the past decade has seen a renewed intensity in great power rivalry. The liberal economic order faces challenges not only from external actors but also from U.S. sanctions and trade wars. Meanwhile, democratic systems are under strain due to the

rise of far-right and far-left movements across Europe and the West.

The decline of the liberal international order was identified as one of the main characteristics in the current system. While imperfect, it provided rules and norms through institutions such as the United Nations. Today, those norms are eroding, as conflicts in Gaza, Ukraine, and the Middle East demonstrate. Western-dominated normative frameworks are weakening, while alternatives emerge, with Russia and China promoting different approaches. Even countries traditionally seen as norm consumers, such as Türkiye, are increasingly positioning themselves as norm producers based on strategic interests.

As international organizations weaken, the proliferation of alternative norms raises questions about how such competition will be resolved. The challenge lies in the lack of consensus among norm-producing states, since their norms are shaped by national interests and designed for specific contexts. Effective norm creation requires universality, institutionalization, applicability, and practicality, all of which are conditions that current alternatives struggle to meet. Without universal ideals or institutional backing, their influence will remain limited.

Questions were raised about how to define the current international system in terms of polarity and balance of power. Discussants agreed that the U.S. and China are the two leading powers, and their es-

calating rivalry is the most significant geopolitical issue today. Russia, while not a superpower, remains a notable military actor despite demographic and economic weaknesses. The European Union, despite its economic strength, lacks geopolitical weight and is losing confidence in its ability to act as a third pole. Still, participants questioned whether these dynamics amount to bipolarity. Unlike the Cold War's tightly aligned blocs, today's environment shows countries forming loose constellations around the U.S. or China without forming rigid alliances. Many states prefer to pursue non-aligned foreign policies to maintain strategic autonomy, avoiding the Sino-American standoff.

There was also skepticism about defining the system as truly multipolar. One speaker argued that if Israel can strike Iran while disregarding sovereignty principles, or if China cannot balance the United States across all domains, then a genuine balance of power does not exist. The current order lacks the structured balance seen in 19th-century multipolarity. Predictions that the U.S., China, and Russia will each dominate their respective spheres were dismissed as overly simplistic, ignoring the agency of middle powers, multinational corporations, and small states.

The current state of international politics was rather conceived as transitional, bringing uncertainty and risks. One speaker compared the situation to a "new Thirty Years' War," recalling historical cycles in which stability gave way to crisis, conflict, and eventually the establishment of new orders. Another speaker noted that no great power appears willing or able to provide global public goods. The United States is losing capacity and willingness, while China is not yet prepared to assume that role. Another participant noted the absence of strong leadership comparable to the post-World War II period, which had encouraged cooperative frameworks. All this creates risks of regional power struggles and economic fragmentation, increasing unpredictability and the likelihood of protectionism, instability, and armed conflict.

One speaker discussed two competing paradigms adopted and promoted by major powers with potential implications for the Balkans. While "Ameri-

ca First" prioritizes corporate business over traditional politics, treating America as a global corporation rather than a conventional state, "Russian World" is a geopolitical concept employing soft power tools to legitimize Russian influence over regions and populations linked to Russia by culture, language, or history. The European Union, by contrast, lacks a coherent geopolitical doctrine of its own, as it is not a state. Reduced American involvement in Europe and the Balkans could heighten regional risks, as the "Russian World" narrative may gain appeal among Balkan populations while the EU struggles to generate stronger political attraction despite its economic benefits.

Arguing that the Balkans are destined to balance between competing blocs, one speaker proposed closer cooperation between Türkiye, Hungary, and Serbia. With their varied relationships with NATO, the EU, Russia, and others, these three states could act together as a diplomatic buffer to mitigate shocks from great power rivalry. However, another participant questioned the viability of such an alignment, pointing out that the three countries have quite different foreign policy objectives, making it difficult to create a coherent balance against or for any particular power.

Several speakers emphasized the role of middle powers in shaping the global transition. One argued that change in the international system is being driven less by great powers than by middle powers, which are taking opportunities created by the collapse of the old order. The erosion of norms and the weakening of traditional blocs have created space for these states to pursue their own interests, sometimes across traditional alliance lines. This demonstrates that the emergence of a new order is far from orderly, with regional powers exerting considerable influence on its eventual form.

The session concluded with an appeal for realistic assessments of state capacities and limitations. The principle of "know thyself" was advocated for all states: great powers must recognize the difficulties of global leadership, while smaller states should understand their true capabilities and constraints in an uncertain international environment.





Session II: Key Political Disputes and Fault Lines in the Balkans

The political situation in the Balkans is still shaped by the legacy of the conflicts in the 1990s, as many unresolved issues from that period continue to affect regional relations nearly three decades later. While the region is in a state of post-conflict peace, it has not yet achieved secure political stability. Nationalisms with strong territorial character remain a driving force behind many ongoing disputes. Beneath the surface of diplomatic statements, persistent problems obstruct reconciliation, democratic consolidation, and the Euro-Atlantic integration of the region. Despite decades of international mediation efforts, many fundamental disagreements persist, often reinforced by political actors prioritizing short-term political gains over long-term regional stability and integration prospects.

A central point of discussion was the fragile situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a country described by a speaker as a microcosm of the Balkans and the most vivid illustration of its divisions. The Dayton Peace Agreement, while successful in ending the war, established a dysfunctional political structure composed of two entities and a district. This arrangement has become a source of political disputes, with resurgent ethno-nationalism being a significant factor. The leadership of Republika Srpska (RS) was identified as pursuing policies that threaten the country's rule of

law and territorial integrity. The current situation represents what appears to be the practical realization of RS's long-term secession agenda, presented under the guise of returning to original Dayton regulations while completely ignoring legal norms established after the peace agreement to improve the country's functionality and facilitate its EU and NATO integration. As other political actors in the country lack effective institutional responses to these threats, the country's political and security situation can further destabilize, even though there currently appears to be no potential for large-scale conflict.

Serbia's bilateral relations are a key factor in the regional political climate. Its relations with Croatia continue to be shaped by post-war legacies, with contemporary issues including border disputes along the Danube River, unresolved cases of missing persons from the war, minority representation in parliament, and disputes over Serbian Orthodox Church artifacts. While economic cooperation has grown in recent years, political rhetoric often includes mutual accusations, amplified by pro-government media outlets, particularly in Serbia. Thanks to its EU membership, Croatia may condition its support for Serbia's accession on resolving these bilateral issues.

Serbia's relationship with Bosnia and Herzegovina is primarily defined by the Dayton Peace Agreement, of which Serbia was a signatory. Many in Serbia and RS perceive Serbia as a guarantor of the Dayton framework. The official relationship is often overshadowed by the strong ties between Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and RS President Milorad Dodik. A recent example of this cooperation was the All-Serbian Assembly, organized in 2024 as a response to the UN resolution on the Srebrenica genocide.

The dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina has made little progress. A major point of contention is the implementation of agreements. While the 2023 Ohrid Agreement allows for Kosovo's membership in international organizations, Serbia maintains a firm stance against Kosovo's potential membership in the United Nations. At the same time, Kosovo has not fulfilled its obligations under the 2013 Brussels Agreement, specifically regarding the establishment of the Association/Community of Serb Municipalities. Its refusal to do so before Serbia fulfills its obligations has led to Kosovo losing its chance for membership in the Council of Europe. The security documents of both Serbia and Kosovo portray the other as a primary security threat, resulting in a security dilemma and increased defense spending.

One participant argued that Belgrade's focus on northern Kosovo shows that its Kosovo policy was driven more by territorial considerations than by its interest in the well-being of Serbs, as the majority of Serbs in Kosovo actually live in central and southern parts of the country. The north has remained a crisis area largely due to the decision by the Serb List party to have mayors, administrators, police officers, judges, and prosecutors leave institutions only in the north, not in other parts of Kosovo where Serbs are more integrated into the legal and constitutional framework.

North Macedonia's bilateral disputes with its neighbors were presented as a case study of power asymmetry. As a non-EU member negotiating with EU members Greece and Bulgaria, North Macedonia has found itself in a weaker position. The dispute with Greece, which resulted in the Prespa Agreement and the country changing its name, was described as painful but ultimately leading to tangible outcomes, such as NATO membership. In contrast, the dispute with Bulgaria, which concerns identity, history, and cultural heritage, has resulted in a new veto within the EU accession framework. While the SDSM government approved constitutional changes in July 2022, the subsequent change in government has prevented implementation. One speaker argued that lessons from these experiences show that compromises hurt the weaker party more, and that the longer a dispute remains unresolved, the more difficult a solution becomes and the greater the concessions required from the less powerful party. Delays also deepen domestic polarization and radicalize public discourse, making compromise harder to achieve.

Some discussants remarked that while day-to-day interactions and economic cooperation between citizens and businesses of different Balkan countries are often positive, relations at the governmental level are frequently strained by negative political rhetoric amplified by media outlets. As an example of an oft-used catchphrase in political rhetoric, the concept "Serbian world" was discussed briefly. One perspective described it as an undefined term used for media manipulation and propaganda to divert attention from domestic problems. Another view countered that it should not be underestimated, seeing it as a war ideology with clear geopolitical goals that poses a threat to regional peace and stability, intertwined with a similar Russian concept.

Despite ongoing challenges, some positive developments were also noted. Some discussants underlined that the post-Cold War Western policy toward the Balkans have achieved important results in consolidating regional peace and cooperation. The EU's Growth Plan was identified as a potential opportunity for countries not yet ready for full EU membership to become incorporated into the EU Single Market, allowing them to enjoy economic benefits while remaining outside political decision-making processes. This could represent a significant achievement for regional development even without full membership. Meanwhile, the accession of Albania and Montenegro to the EU in the forthcoming years could create completely new regional dynamics.

A general observation was that the region still lacks a sense of shared vision and agency. One speaker suggested that the problems in the Balkans were created by the region's own actors, not by external forces. The need for stronger regional ownership to manage ongoing challenges was a recurring theme, as external powers often approach the region with their own agendas rather than the best interests of the Balkan peoples. A participant argued that regional cooperation initiatives based on collective knowledge and empathy should be developed to address disputes.

The discussion concluded with remarks that regional countries should address the outstanding problems through agile, strategic approaches that involve early engagement, smart negotiation, and knowing when to compromise versus when to resist. For this, building internal legal, institutional, and diplomatic capacities to anticipate challenges and respond coherently, rather than relying on crisis management, is essential.





Session III: The EU and the Balkans

The Balkans' European integration process remains incomplete, presenting both opportunities and challenges. The war in Ukraine has renewed focus on the EU's agenda for the region, with the understanding that without a more effective integration path, instability could grow. This has led to initiatives like the Growth Plan, which provides increased financial assistance to support Balkan countries. Despite the EU's renewed commitment and strong support for EU membership across Balkan countries, the path forward faces obstacles, including internal political dynamics and external geopolitical pressures, while flaws and inconsistencies in the EU's enlargement policy continue to frustrate aspirant countries.

The specific accession paths of some Balkan countries were examined. A speaker described Montenegro as the most advanced case in the current accession process, though its negotiations have taken far longer than all previous enlargement rounds. Its progress has accelerated in recent years due to internal and geopolitical developments, including the government change in 2020 and Russia's war in Ukraine. After receiving a positive Interim Benchmark Assessment Report and closing several chapters in 2024, Montenegro set an ambitious goal of meeting all membership criteria by the end of 2028, raising

optimism about the feasibility of enlargement in the near future.

In contrast, Serbia's relationship with the EU was described as ambivalent. Public support for EU integration has declined for over a decade due to successive crises within the EU and a sustained anti-EU narrative promoted by local elites. The EU's credibility among pro-EU Serbian citizens is also undermined by Brussels' prioritization of strategic resources, such as lithium, over democratic values. It was argued that the focus of Serbia's European policy has shifted away from Brussels towards direct engagement with capitals like Berlin, Paris, and Budapest. Despite ongoing reforms, Serbia's low alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy raises questions about its commitment to European integration. One discussant argued that the relationship between the EU and Serbia resembles a game in which both sides pretend integration is the goal while recognizing it is unrealistic, likely leading to a form of privileged partnership. Another suggested that even a change of government in Belgrade would not fundamentally alter Serbia's foreign policy unless the EU makes a tangible membership offer.

External pressures on Balkan-EU relations were also discussed. Russia employs both hard power, particularly evident in Black Sea escalation affecting Bulgaria's exclusive economic zone, and soft power tools, such as political influence, disinformation, and destabilization. China offers an alternative development model, operating differently in EU member states, where it competes with EU funds, compared to aspiring members.

A significant new factor is the changing U.S. posture toward Europe, signaling reduced commitment and engagement. This creates pressure on the EU to take the Balkans more seriously as part of its security perimeter. The influence of the MAGA movement and statements from U.S. officials, such as Vice President Vance's claim that Europe faces greater threats from within than from Russia and China, have been welcomed by some Balkan political leaders. This dynamic encourages nationalist movements across Europe and may embolden leaders to deviate from EU norms.

Another point of discussion was the EU's decision-making process and its impact on enlargement. Some discussants argued that most accessions have been driven more by political will than by strict adherence to technical requirements. The EU's internal dynamics, including the influence of large political groupings like the European People's Party, often shape decisions, sometimes favoring major powers over peripheral members. Politicization of the enlargement process, where individual member states can block progress over bilateral disputes, undermines the merit-based approach.

North Macedonia was cited as an example of how such blockades can erode the EU's credibility and create disillusionment within a candidate country. After achieving candidate status in 2005, its accession process stalled for 15 years due to the name dispute with Greece. Even after changing its name to resolve the issue, Bulgaria's veto created further obstacles. To launch negotiations, North Macedonia's Assembly accepted a French proposal requiring constitutional amendments in line with Bulgaria's demands. This damaged public optimism, as many Macedonians felt unfairly treated despite fulfilling EU expectations. In the 2024 election, the nationalist-conservative VMRO-DPMNE party won, and the current government now opposes the constitutional changes required by the negotiation framework. Another example of bilateral disputes derailing enlargement is Montenegro, where one chapter remains stalled due to disagreements with Croatia.

As for the economic effects of EU membership, Croatia's experience was discussed. It was noted that since joining, Croatia's GDP per capita has increased

significantly relative to the EU average, largely due to the impact of EU funds, access to the single market, and tourism. This has helped reverse the trend of brain drain, with more young people now returning than leaving. However, this positive story came with a caution about becoming overly reliant to EU funds, as Croatia now faces the challenge of maintaining its economic momentum as it approaches a development level that will reduce its eligibility for cohesion funds. By raising the experience of Bulgaria, another discussant suggested that EU membership does not offer an automatic solution to all problems, as inequalities between rural and urban areas and the emigration of young people persist long after accession.

Pointing to migration patterns, one speaker contended that the large-scale emigration of the Balkan workforce to EU countries for decades could be considered a form of exploitation. While this labor has supported EU economies, it has left Balkan countries with aging and shrinking populations. The speaker argued that countries benefiting from this labor migration carry moral, political, and financial obligations to compensate those that supplied it. From this perspective, EU financial support to its southern and eastern members could be seen as partial compensation, and a similar commitment should be extended to Western Balkan candidates through a faster accession process.

Participants also discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the current enlargement model. One question raised was whether a longer accession process might be beneficial, encouraging countries to complete difficult reforms before joining to avoid the democratic backsliding seen in some member states. The Cooperation and Verification Mechanism applied to Bulgaria and Romania was mentioned as a tool with initially high hopes that ultimately proved insufficient. It was argued that democratization is a reversible process, and therefore, strengthening democratic resilience in candidate countries is essential to prevent the accession process from being exploited by opportunistic politicians for narrow political gains. Another participant added that stronger institutions would make candidate countries less vulnerable to bilateral pressures and better able to sustain public support for EU integration.





Session IV: Main Socio-Economic Challenges in the Region

While much attention focuses on geopolitical developments and major international players, the underlying socio-economic factors represent the chessboard itself on which these larger moves are made. The socio-economic conditions in the Balkans are marked by deep-seated structural issues that affect the daily lives of citizens and pose significant barriers to long-term development. The region faces demographic decline, economic vulnerabilities, governance weaknesses, and environmental pressures that demand urgent attention from policymakers, academia, and civil society.

Several participants argued that the most pressing challenge is the severe demographic crisis characterized by massive population decline due to both low birth rates and outward migration. This results in smaller and significantly older populations with far-reaching implications. Public finances are under strain as fewer working-age individuals support pension systems. Social structures relying on family-based elderly care face pressure as traditional support systems weaken. The loss of human capital reduces the region's potential for innovation and economic growth. This demographic shift also undermines democratic foundations, as societies struggle to maintain the energy needed to sustain and reform democratic institutions.

Persistent economic vulnerabilities present another major challenge. Many of the region's econo-

mies are undiversified, heavily dependent on agriculture, low-value manufacturing, and remittances from abroad. This reliance makes them vulnerable to external shocks, such as global price fluctuations or reduced demand in the EU. Chronic trade imbalances, with imports of high-value goods far exceeding exports of raw materials, further burden these economies. While foreign direct investment has created jobs, it has often benefited foreign companies more than local small and medium-sized enterprises, which struggle with limited access to capital and technology. These economic challenges are worsened by weak governance, widespread corruption, and a significant informal economy, which in some countries accounts for nearly one-third of the gross domestic product.

A central socio-economic issue discussed was the high rate of youth unemployment, which in some parts of the region exceeds 30 percent. This situation drives the brain drain, with studies showing that many young people wish to emigrate permanently in search of better opportunities. Reasons for this desire include a lack of job prospects, low wages, precarious work conditions, and limited career advancement opportunities. The loss is particularly severe in critical sectors like information technology and healthcare, where highly skilled professionals are most likely to leave. This not only represents a short-term economic loss but also threatens the long-term societal development of Balkan nations, with demographic projections warning of significant population declines by 2050. The problem of emigration and brain drain is not exclusive to non-EU member countries; as one discussant noted that after their accession, Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia

collectively lost approximately 5 million people to other EU countries. While this trend has reportedly begun to reverse in Croatia, with more people returning than leaving in recent years, demographic loss remains a defining issue for the region.

Weak governance and institutional limitations were identified as systemic barriers to progress. Widespread corruption, clientelism, and political interference in judicial systems erode public trust and discourage investment. This perpetuates a cycle of poverty and economic stagnation. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, these problems are compounded by a highly fragmented political system with multiple levels of governance. This structure leads to overlapping responsibilities, policy incoherence, and inefficiencies in decision-making, hindering timely and effective reforms. In education, for example, administration is divided among 14 different ministries, resulting in the absence of a unified curriculum or quality assurance system, leading to poor learning outcomes. This fragmentation also causes inconsistencies in data collection, impeding evidence-based policymaking and monitoring of reform progress.

Speakers also highlighted persistent inequalities and challenges faced by vulnerable groups. A significant developmental gap exists between well-developed urban centers and rural areas, which often lack economic opportunities and access to basic services. This urban-rural divide contributes to internal migration, poverty, and social fragmentation. Marginalized communities, including the Roma, face exclusion from employment, education, and healthcare. In many Balkan countries women's participation in the labor force is considerably low compared to men, particularly in rural regions. These disparities are worsened by underinvestment in education and social protection. Social spending is often poorly targeted, with limited investment in critical areas like early childhood development, housing, or care services.

Environmental issues are strongly linked to the re-

gion's socio-economic challenges. Many Balkan cities suffer from severe air pollution, primarily due to reliance on lignite and coal for energy production. Climate change effects, such as droughts and floods, directly threaten agriculture, a sector employing a substantial portion of the workforce in some countries. Meanwhile, the region has strong potential for renewable energy sources, including hydropower, wind, and solar. Discussants viewed the transition to a green economy not merely as an environmental necessity but also an economic one to enhance energy independence and create new industries and jobs. However, progress in this area is often slowed by bureaucracy and vested interests in the fossil fuel industry.

Given the fragmented nature of Balkan markets and infrastructure, as well as the slow EU enlargement process, some participants emphasized the need for deeper regional economic cooperation. One discussant proposed creating a "Balkan economic zone" to facilitate trade and improve connectivity. It was argued that since Balkan countries already trade extensively with each other, strengthening these ties could create a more robust and self-reliant economic area. Others cautioned that for such cooperation to be effective, unresolved political conflicts must be left behind to establish a foundation of peace and stability. Additionally, it was noted that regional initiatives cannot replace the transformative financial support of the EU, whose structural and cohesion funds offer capital on a scale unavailable within the region.

Discussants stressed that comprehensive educational reforms are essential to address various socio-economic challenges in the region. To strengthen human capital and reduce youth unemployment, countries should revise curricula to align with the labor market needs, emphasizing digital skills and entrepreneurship. Educational reforms should also promote mutual understanding among the younger generations by revising historical narratives and supporting regional exchanges.





Session V: Addressing Security Threats and Increasing Resilience

The security situation in the Balkans is fragile. A key problem is that parts of the region are still dealing with the unresolved legacies of the 1990s. Risks arising from unresolved disputes, political instability, and socio-economic challenges are further worsened by broader geopolitical shifts. Currently, tensions between Serbia and Kosovo and the political struggles in Bosnia and Herzegovina are the most critical points of friction, and therefore the most significant sources of potential instability in the region. The ongoing war in Ukraine creates additional concerns for regional security, even though it has at the same time revived EU attention toward the Balkans.

Kosovo and Serbia still regard each other as primary security threats. The EU-mediated dialogue process has been slow and inconsistent. Conflicting political preferences and narratives in Belgrade and Pristina make meaningful negotiation and mutual compromise nearly impossible. The success of this process is essentially tied to the membership paths of these two countries, and the lack of a clear EU enlargement perspective weakens a key incentive for progress. As European capitals address multiple urgent challenges, including the war in Ukraine, and adjust their priorities, the EU struggles to find effective ways to encourage the parties toward a settlement.

As for Bosnia and Herzegovina, some speakers emphasized that secessionist rhetoric and actions

from RS threaten the country's integrity, and the developments that followed the court verdict against President Dodik represent the most serious political crisis the country has faced since the war. Depending on the course of action taken by the RS leadership and the international support it receives, the crisis could escalate further and potentially involve violence.

Regarding the potential for renewed conflict in the Balkans, a general view was that a full-scale conventional war is highly unlikely, partly because the societies in the region are demographically older and economically incapable of sustaining prolonged warfare. However, the risk of localized, low-level acts of violence still exists. A speaker warned that the 2023 Banjska attack demonstrated the real potential for conflict, which could include threats of insurgency and attacks on critical infrastructure. Ongoing domestic political crises in Serbia, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina were identified as factors increasing the risk of localized conflict. Discussants raised several scenarios. For example, radical nationalist groups may see the political instability and institutional weaknesses as opportunities to provoke violence in order to alter the situation on the ground. Political leaders weakened by domestic crises might use an incident to rally support. Foreign malign actors could encourage such violent acts for their own national interests. In this context, the role of KFOR and EUFOR is seen as absolutely critical in maintaining control of the security situation.

Another speaker focused on the interconnected security environment of the Black Sea and the Balkans. Russia's actions in Ukraine since 2014, espe-

cially after the 2022 invasion, have turned the northern Black Sea into a heavily militarized zone, where Moscow has established an anti-access/area denial capability. Moscow has used this position to pressure NATO allies by targeting commercial vessels, blocking exclusive economic zones of Romania and Bulgaria under the pretext of military exercises, and conducting GPS jamming. These actions are seen as part of a broader strategy to distract NATO, undermine European unity, and operate without accountability. This situation is also important as Türkiye, Romania, and Bulgaria are investing in significant natural gas exploration projects in the Black Sea. Protecting this emerging energy infrastructure is a regional security priority requiring greater coordination in maritime domain awareness, cybersecurity, and responses to hybrid threats. Additional interconnectors, LNG terminals, and digital infrastructure were suggested as ways to build resilience and create deterrence through interconnected systems that are harder and more costly to disrupt. The Black Sea Mine Countermeasure Task Group, formed by Türkiye, Romania, and Bulgaria, was cited as a successful regional initiative in Black Sea maritime security. It was suggested that the EU's recently-announced Black Sea security strategy should include other Balkan countries.

The region's resilience depends on both internal cooperation and external support. One participant stressed the importance of regional investment in peacebuild-

ing and expressed concern about a shift away from peace-oriented political narratives toward more competitive and divisive ones. Several discussants agreed that EU integration remains the best option for Balkan states to reduce tensions and ensure stability.

In response to a question about Ankara's stance on the region's two major disputes, a speaker said that Türkiye supports Bosnia and Herzegovina's existing constitutional framework, warning that alternatives could lead to conflict. Türkiye also supports the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, viewing it as a necessary line of communication to help prevent renewed violence, especially when international attention is directed elsewhere. Ankara's continuous high-level engagement with all parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Serbia and was also noted.

The role of Hungary, an EU and NATO member with strong ties to Serbia and RS, in Balkan security was also briefly discussed. A participant expressed concern about the presence of Hungarian KFOR soldiers in northern Kosovo, given Budapest's close relationship with Belgrade. Another assessed Hungary's actions in the region as a mix of security-seeking, driven by a desire to avoid conflict in its neighborhood, and influence-seeking, aiming to expand its political networks in the Balkans. While Hungary is unlikely to actively destabilize the region, Budapest's support for Dodik risks unintended consequences due to the volatile nature of Bosnian politics.



Session VI

Mapping Disinformation:
Methods, Evidence, and
Policy Insights



Session VI: Mapping Disinformation: Methods, Evidence, and Policy Insights

This session explored the methods, evidence, and policy considerations related to the deliberate spread of false information in the Balkans. A dominant theme was the active and systematic use of disinformation campaigns by the Kremlin to erode popular support for Euro-Atlantic institutions. Multiple factors including historical connections to Russia, low media literacy levels, and underlying social and economic inequalities make Balkan populations vulnerable to these campaigns. These populations show particular susceptibility to conspiracy theories and anti-establishment messaging due to educational deficits and social marginalization. This situation is worsened by media and state capture, where oligarchic networks control media outlets to distribute propaganda and influence security services, preventing them from effectively countering these operations.

One speaker analyzed the information environment in Bulgaria. Despite being a NATO and EU member, Bulgaria's deep-rooted historical and cultural connections with Russia make pro-Kremlin narratives highly effective. Disinformation reaches the Bulgarian public through two primary channels: it is either imported from Kremlin-controlled sources and then amplified by domestic actors, or it is produced locally by a network of pro-Kremlin politicians, academics, and busi-

ness figures. Another speaker focused on the case of Romania, where a new and dangerous trend has emerged involving the use of coordinated networks of fake accounts to artificially inflate the popularity of political candidates and spread disinformation. An examination of TikTok revealed thousands of videos from accounts with default usernames and no personal information, all posting synchronized content to support far-right, anti-system political figures. This tactic proved potent, accumulating tens of millions of views and contributing to the unexpected electoral success of one such candidate.

Social media platforms, particularly Facebook, YouTube, and increasingly TikTok and Telegram, were identified as primary vectors for disinformation dissemination. The rapid growth of TikTok and its algorithm-driven content distribution system has created new challenges for monitoring and countering disinformation efforts. The discussion revealed that traditional fact-checking approaches may be insufficient for addressing the speed and scale of social media-based disinformation campaigns, particularly given the sophisticated coordination networks that can rapidly amplify false narratives across multiple platforms. For example, there is a mutually reinforcing cycle where narratives are created and amplified on Telegram and then disseminated through pro-Russian websites, successfully influencing search engine results and public discourse.

Technological advances, particularly in artificial intelligence, were identified as creating new dimensions to the disinformation challenge. A speaker noted that

within two years, the vast majority of online content will be AI-generated. This development will present a profound challenge to how individuals discern truth and could lead to a weakening of critical and deep thinking skills as people become accustomed to receiving knowledge and analysis directly from AI platforms. AI-generated content may reinforce existing cognitive biases and strengthen current identity constructs, creating new challenges for detecting and countering disinformation.

Shifting the analytical lens away from state-centric disinformation, another participant argued for a greater focus on communication polarization and the exploitation of socially vulnerable populations. In the Balkans, social vulnerability is not only a problem for states to manage, but also a resource for criminal or terrorist organizations. An example was given of how vulnerable Roma communities in Bulgaria were used for logistical support by jihadist networks, a situation that was then exploited for propaganda.

In response to these challenges, several countermeasures were proposed. There was consensus on the need to expand the fact-checking ecosystem and provide greater support for independent journalism to offer credible alternatives to propaganda. A key area for development is public media and digital literacy. One initiative described efforts to train students to identify fake news, with calls to incorporate such training into the national school curriculum. The discussion also addressed the strategy of “pre-bunking,” or preemptively warning the public about disinformation campaigns before they gain traction. The successful approach in Moldova, where authorities issued advance warnings about an expected information attack during an election, was contrasted with reactive strategies that are often less effective because they are forced to counter a lie that has already spread.

It was argued that disinformation campaigns focus heavily on identity dynamics within Balkan countries, exploiting religious, ethnic, national, and historical mo-

tivations, and forcing populations into a binary choice between European/Western and alternative identifications. The Turkish perspective offered a different model, suggesting that strategic autonomy and the development of unique national characteristics that combine multiple influences might provide a way to escape such binary framings. This observation led to the suggestion that Balkan countries should work to create their own unique strategic narratives grounded in their specific cultural and historical contexts, thereby moving beyond an epistemic frame set by external powers.

The discussion emphasized the point that local actors possess significant agency. One participant claimed that pro-Russian and pro-Chinese narratives in Balkan countries are not always the result of foreign campaigns but are often spread by local elites and their associated media apparatus for domestic public relations and to create leverage against Western pressure on issues of democracy and the rule of law. This demonstrates the importance of analyzing the local political terrain and the motivations of domestic elites to understand why certain external narratives find a receptive audience.

Participants also discussed whether the information warfare is a one-way process. One discussant questioned what the West’s own information campaigns toward Russia and China look like, arguing that an understanding of both sides is necessary for an effective response, a task made more difficult by the banning of outlets like RT in Europe. Other discussants acknowledged that the Euro-Atlantic community is engaged in its own strategic communication efforts and that political actors on all sides are increasingly mapping societal polarities and targeting specific segments of the population. While some frame this as a necessary part of an ongoing information war, it was recognized that exploiting societal vulnerabilities is a tactic now used by legitimate political actors, not just malign foreign powers or extremist groups.

PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS

BALKAN THINK TANKS CONVENTION V, ANKARA, 19-20 JUNE 2025

Institution	Country
<i>Albanian Institute for International Studies</i>	Albania
<i>Centre for Development Evaluation and Social Science Research</i>	Bosnia and Herzegovina
<i>Centre for Security Studies</i>	Bosnia and Herzegovina
<i>Center for the Study of Democracy</i>	Bulgaria
<i>ECFR Sofia</i>	Bulgaria
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<i>Institute for European and Globalization Studies</i>	Croatia
<i>Institute of International Economic Relations</i>	Greece
<i>Institute of International Relations</i>	Greece
<i>Kosovar Center for Security Studies</i>	Kosovo
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<i>Institute for Democracy Societas Civilis-Skopje</i>	North Macedonia
<i>New Strategy Center</i>	Romania
<i>Romanian Center for European Policies</i>	Romania
<i>Belgrade Center for Security Policy</i>	Serbia
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Nene Hatun Cad. No: 66 GOP 06700 Çankaya, Ankara, TÜRKİYE : Defterdar Mh. Savaklar Cd. Ayvansaray Kavşağı No: 41-43 Eyüp,
Tel: +90 312 551 21 00 Faks: +90 312 551 21 90 : İstanbul, TÜRKİYE Tel: +90 212 395 11 00 Faks: +90 212 395 11 11

info@setav.org • www.setav.org