

## The United States and the Western Balkans

The United States has contributed greatly to the post-war reconstruction of the Western Balkans and remains a key player. While the region is not as high on the US foreign policy agenda as in the 1990s, the USA has consistently shown commitment to its Euro-Atlantic integration. US engagement is seen as crucial in this historically volatile region, weakened by unresolved past and emerging challenges.

### US engagement in the region: an overview

In the 1990s, after Yugoslavia split, the Western Balkans were engulfed by armed conflicts that significantly engaged the United States. [US-led military action and diplomacy](#) helped end first the 1992-1995 Bosnian war, then the armed conflict in Kosovo in 1999. US peacekeeping troops stayed in Bosnia and BiH until 2004 and are still deployed in Kosovo as part of NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR) mission. The USA helped broker the 1995 [Dayton Peace Accords](#) and the 2001 [Ohrid Framework agreement](#) in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYR Macedonia). US policy has since shifted from post-conflict reconstruction to [advancing integration](#) into Euro-Atlantic institutions. Since the 2000s, the USA has shown [continuity](#) in its approach to the Western Balkans, and acted as a driver of political and economic transformation.

#### *US engagement through NATO and the Adriatic Charter*

The USA, NATO's strongest member, has assisted aspirant countries from the Western Balkans to reform their armed forces and defence sector. NATO's 1999 [South Eastern Europe Initiative](#) aimed to promote regional cooperation and long-term stability, and its Membership Action Plan (MAP), though not launched solely for the Western Balkans, has remained as proof of NATO's 'open door policy'. In the region, NATO is largely seen as a guarantor for [external and internal](#) security. Slovenia, Croatia and Albania were already members, joined by [Montenegro](#) in June 2017. FYR Macedonia cannot join because of its ongoing name dispute with Greece, although NATO invited it to join in 2008. BiH is working towards a MAP, but is blocked by a dispute over defence property. Serbia does not aspire to join NATO, but nevertheless cooperates closely with it.

At the [2016 Warsaw Summit](#), NATO stated that there was 'an arc of insecurity and instability along NATO's periphery and beyond'. In this new environment, according to the [Center for Euro-Atlantic studies](#), the full integration of the Western Balkans in the European Union (EU) and NATO is a strategic decision.

The [Adriatic charter](#) is another initiative that binds the remaining non-NATO Western Balkan countries, signed after the NATO 2002 Prague summit between the USA, Albania, Croatia, and FYR Macedonia. It signals [undivided US support](#), and serves as a new mechanism for cooperation, aimed at NATO admission.

#### *US foreign assistance to the Western Balkans*

US foreign assistance supports the fundamental [US vision](#) of a Europe whole, free, and at peace, by focusing on the reforms needed to advance accession of the region to the EU, such as fighting corruption, supporting the rule of law, civil society and independent media, implementing agreements reached in the dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo, and the EU reform initiative for BiH. The USA promotes trade and [economic](#) development, key for addressing deeper problems. Under the fiscal year 2018 ([FY2018 budget request](#)), however, foreign assistance funding levels are expected to drop greatly (proposing up to a 60 % cut for Europe and Eurasia).

### The United States and the individual Western Balkan countries

The USA is perceived in the region, in general terms, as a supporter of democratic reforms with significant leverage and credibility. Its influence and presence varies in the individual countries: from '[unparalleled](#)' in Kosovo, to strong in Albania, BiH and FYR Macedonia, and less so in Serbia. US diplomatic involvement has usually led to results in tackling political crises, as the recent cases of [Albania](#) and [FYR Macedonia](#) show.



A NATO member since 2009, Albania sees the USA as ['a strong partner and friend'](#) and values the 1999 intervention in Kosovo and US diplomatic recognition of Kosovo. The USA has [encouraged](#) key constitutional changes, made in relation to its EU bid, and along with the EU, monitors implementation of its judicial reform.

Relations with BiH are largely defined by the fact that the USA helped end the 1995 war and brokered the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA), and had a lasting military presence on the ground. The DPA, however, created a [constitutional problem](#) that the USA has repeatedly [tried to resolve](#), to no avail. Developing a single functional state is still at stake, and the USA has actively provided aid for reforming the country.

FYR Macedonia and the USA enjoy a [cooperative relationship](#) across a broad range of issues. In 2001, the USA, along with the EU, helped end an inter-ethnic conflict with the Ohrid Framework Agreement. Ethnic tensions are still a threat to the country's fragile stability, especially in the context of the [recent political crisis](#).

Kosovo sees the USA as a reliable and influential ally. While five EU Member States have not yet recognised it as an independent state, the USA was [among the first to do so](#) and has later advocated in favour of Kosovo, including for its Unesco membership in 2015. In 1999, the USA, in coalition with NATO, intervened and deployed military personnel to the NATO-led security force KFOR. It supports as an observer the [EU-led dialogue](#) between Kosovo and Serbia, aimed at normalising their relations. In October 2017, the US Vice-President, Mike Pence, reaffirmed US support for a [sovereign democratic](#) Kosovo. Kosovo is among the top recipients of US foreign assistance. In September 2017, it signed a US\$49 million ['threshold programme'](#) with the USA.

Recognising that Serbia is an important political and economic factor in the future of the region, the USA has provided a sizable amount of aid, and constantly [sought to strengthen](#) bilateral relations, affected by the US interventions in BiH and Kosovo, and the US recognition of Kosovo's independence. This has led to contradictory public perceptions of NATO, and has allowed Russia's soft power to gain more ground.

[Relations](#) with Montenegro have been more coherent. Despite its citizens' [divided views](#) on joining NATO, the country became its 29th member in 2017, celebrated as [proof](#) that the future of the region lies in the West.

## US policy under the current administration

The initial uncertainty about the new US administration's approach to the region has kicked off a debate on rethinking US policy towards the region. In mid-2017, the Atlantic Council and the [European Fund for the Balkans](#) drew attention to the topic in two conferences. The [panellists](#) presented the region as a 'low-hanging fruit', where the USA has already invested a lot and much has already been achieved. Experts argued that with relatively few resources, good results can be preserved. Conversely, potential withdrawal might boost the risks of [negative backsliding](#), and [encourage Russia](#) to gain influence, and Islamism to infiltrate further in the Western Balkans. US engagement is [largely seen as vital](#) for the region, especially in joint action with the EU.

The current US administration has so far acted to [reassure](#) its partners of its extended commitment to the region. The [White House](#)'s first [decision](#) on the region was to prolong the 'national emergency with respect to the Western Balkans', a black list of people and organisations blocked from cooperation with the USA. Milorad Dodik, the President of BiH's Serb-dominated entity, was [added to the list](#) in early 2017 for obstructing the implementation of the Dayton Accords. Apart from that, US Vice-President Mike Pence has made a series of reassuring statements: at the 2017 [Munich Security Conference](#), he stated the US's unwavering commitment to NATO; at the August 2017 Adriatic Charter Summit, he [confirmed](#) that under President Trump, the USA would [continue to support](#) the region's Euro-Atlantic future. In September 2017, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini met him, and highlighted the [importance of US support](#).

## What is at stake in the Western Balkans: outlook

Conflict-torn in the 1990s, the Western Balkans is now at peace and has undergone substantial political and economic change. Nonetheless, international commitment and support is still needed, lest a mix of unresolved and emerging new challenges bring renewed instability in the region, potentially perilous beyond its limits. A [recent study](#) on the region's state of democracy warns of its decline. The Center for European Policy Analysis adds to the [list](#) of instability triggers – economic woes, political polarisation, authoritarianism, ethnic tensions and separatist moods – among others. Foreign interference is yet another rising threat. In 2017, the Council on Foreign Relations identified [military confrontation](#) between Russia and NATO as a top potential flashpoint. [Russia](#) is seen as growing more assertive in the Western Balkans recently. [Turkey](#) and the Gulf States have also increased support to Muslims, opening a door to radical Islamism. As [highlighted](#) by several experts, this context makes it strategically important for both the US and the EU to keep the region in sight. The European Parliament, in a [2017 report](#), also highlighted the need for full EU and UN involvement in the still fragile region.