



KCSS
Kosovar Centre for Security Studies

WHAT IS SERBIA'S "PROJECT 5000" AND WHY SHOULD WE BE CONCERNED?



March 2024

About the Foreign Policy and Regional Security Cooperation Programme

Established in 2009, the Foreign Policy and Regional Security Cooperation Programme is one of the six programs of Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS). Its main goal is to cover a wide range of Kosovo's and Western Balkans foreign policy related topics the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, regional cooperation, reconciliation, peacebuilding, malign foreign influences, and foreign policy. This programme plays a pivotal role in navigating the intricate web of international relations and security challenges in the Western Balkans and beyond.

Since its establishment, this programme has continually adapted to the shifting geopolitical dynamics, focusing on critical areas such as unresolved bilateral disputes, transitional justice, public diplomacy, disinformation campaigns, and the nuances of migration. With a particular emphasis on the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, the programme underscores KCSS's dedication to fostering peace and stability through enhanced understanding, dialogue, and cooperation on pressing security and diplomatic issues.

This multifaceted KCSS's mechanism not only delves deep into research and analysis to inform policy and public discourse but also spearheads efforts in public diplomacy to bolster Kosovo's global standing and regional cooperation. Through targeted activities ranging from facilitating discussions for conflict resolution to advocating for justice mechanisms and addressing migration's root causes and consequences, the programme aspires to craft a more secure and just regional environment. The concerted efforts in security cooperation, peacebuilding, and combating disinformation further exemplify KCSS's commitment to contributing constructively to regional stability and cooperation, marking it as a vital player in shaping the security landscape of the Western Balkans.

The programme has a set structure that consisting of a coordinator, research and implementation staff. The KCSS has carried out various projects under this programme and has participated in various and European consortiums. The programme aims to further develop its expertise, network and partnerships. We invite any enquiry to the staff of this programme by emailing the following account: ForeignPolicy@qkss.org

About the Authorship: This paper was jointly prepared by the senior researchers at the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS)

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KEY TAKEAWAYS:

This paper examines the potential consequences and concerns surrounding Serbia's "Project 5000," emphasizing why it warrants attention not just from neighboring states in the Western Balkans but also from NATO. Given the geopolitical landscape, any escalation of conflict within this region directly impacts NATO's strategic interests, considering its significant presence in the Balkans. Moreover, Russia's overt military backing of Serbia and its advocacy for a militaristic approach towards Kosovo are of particular concern. This stance by Russia can be interpreted as an attempt to embolden Serbia to adopt a military intervention in Kosovo, serving dual purposes for Russia: shifting international focus from the brutal invasion of Ukraine and undermining NATO's credibility and influence in the region.

The unfolding situation underscores a broader strategy by Russia to exploit regional tensions, thereby challenging the Euro-Atlantic integration process. Such maneuvers not only threaten to destabilize the Western Balkans but also aim to fracture European unity and weaken NATO's strategic coherence, particularly as it pertains to its eastern flank and broader engagement in conflict resolution and peacekeeping efforts.

- 1. SHIFTS IN SERBIA'S POSITION OF NEUTRALITY:** The self-proclaimed Serbia's military neutrality is increasingly difficult to reconcile with its recent strategic moves, including the potential reintroduction of mandatory military service, significant investments in advanced weaponry, and comprehensive overhauls of its special forces aimed at enhancing military capabilities. These developments paint a picture of a country that is actively bolstering its military strength and operational readiness. Such actions contrast sharply with the principles of military neutrality. The divergence between Serbia's official statements of neutrality and its tangible military advancements suggests a discrepancy between declared policy and actual military strategy.
- 2. EXPANSION OF SPECIAL FORCES - 'PROJECT 5000':** The initiative to significantly expand the number of special forces from 1,500 to 5,000 signals a clear intent to bolster offensive capabilities and special operations. This move indicates a focus on flexible, rapid-response forces capable of executing a wide range of military operations, underscoring a shift towards more dynamic and versatile military capabilities.

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3. **IMPACT ON REGIONAL SECURITY DYNAMICS:** Serbia's military expansion and modernization efforts, particularly through 'Project 5000', could have profound implications for regional security. These developments could contribute to a security dilemma in the Western Balkans, where neighboring countries may feel compelled to bolster their own military capabilities in response, potentially leading to an arms race and heightened tensions. An arms race between Serbia and Croatia – for many – is already happening.

 4. **GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS:** The bolstering of Serbia's military capabilities, especially in the context of its relations with Kosovo and broader regional challenges, reflects a more assertive security policy. This policy is influenced by Serbia's strategic partnerships, notably with Russia and China, and has implications for Euro-Atlantic integration efforts and NATO's strategic interests in the Balkans.

 5. **CHALLENGES TO IMPLEMENTATION:** Despite the ambitious goals of 'Project 5000', there are significant challenges to its successful implementation, including the lowering of recruitment standards and the struggle to meet recruitment targets. These challenges highlight the complexities involved in rapidly expanding and professionalizing the armed forces.

 6. **NEED FOR REGIONAL DIALOGUE AND COOPERATION:** The analysis underscores the urgent need for dialogue and cooperation among Western Balkan states, NATO, and other stakeholders to address the potential for conflict escalation.

Introduction

Following the Yugoslav wars, the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and the democratic changes after the war, Serbia embarked on a path of military reform. The Serbian Armed Forces went through a series of transformations from a large force based on conscription to a smaller and professional military that is capable of addressing regional security concerns. The first reforms on downsizing and modernizing the military were made in 2006 when Serbia joined the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program. The reforms continued following the independence of Montenegro in 2006 and the independence of Kosovo in 2008. As a result, the number of personnel reportedly decreased from around 135,000 in 2000 to around 24,000 in 2006.¹ Since then the number has gradually increased to over 30,000 which includes a complete defense system - the Ministry of Defense with various institutions in addition to the Armed Forces.² Although there is no publicly available official figure on the number of active soldiers

1 IISS, The Military Balance. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.TOTL.P1?locations=RS>

2 Read more at: <https://www.balkansec.net/post/brojnost-vojski-srbije-hrvatske-bih-crne-gore-i-severne-makedonije-u-2021>

in Serbia's military, unofficial estimates range between 22,000 and 25,000.³ According to the CIA World Factbook, in 2023 SAF accounted for approximately 25,000 active-duty troops (15,000 Land Forces; 5,000 Air/Air Defense; 5,000 other); approximately 3,000 Gendarmerie.⁴ Most recently, the General Staff of the SAF proposed reinstating compulsory military service as a measure to strengthen its armed forces.⁵

Besides the reorganization of people and units, it was imperative to modernize the legacy Yugoslav military assets. In this regard, Serbia invested heavily in its defense industry complex. It produced and modernized some heavy equipment such as Nora B-52 self-propelled howitzer, M-84 main battle tank, and M-16 multi-purpose armored vehicles. In addition, it acquired advanced weaponry such as helicopters, aircraft, and air defense systems from Russia, China, and a few European countries.

Based on the data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) on military expenditures for Kosovo and Serbia from 2018 to 2022 there is a significant gap between them. Data on Kosovo shows a consistent increase in military expenditures from 2018 to 2022, both in absolute terms and as a percentage of GDP. The total expenditure rose from \$63 million (0.8% of GDP) in 2018 to \$107 million (1.1% of GDP) in 2022⁶ whereas in 2024 Kosovo recorded highest defence budget of over 2% of its GDP. This upward trend indicates a growing focus on enhancing military capabilities. On the other hand, Serbia's military budget has seen a substantial increase from \$817 million (1.6% of GDP) in 2018 to \$1.43 billion (2.3% of GDP) in 2022.⁷ This growth not only reflects a significant rise in absolute spending but also a marked increase in the percentage of GDP dedicated to military expenditures, suggesting heightened security concerns or ambitions. One potential explanation for Serbia's increased military expenditures is its staunch contestation of Kosovo's statehood and broader regional security challenges, pertaining Bosnia and Herzegovina and the perceived arms race with Croatia.

TABLE 1: Comparing military budget of Serbia and Kosovo in 2018 and in 2022 respectively

Year	Kosovo Military Expenditure (in millions)	Kosovo Military Expenditure (% of GDP)	Serbia Military Expenditure (in millions)	Serbia Military Expenditure (% of GDP)
2018	\$63	0.8%	\$817	1.6%
2022	\$107	1.1%	\$1.43 billion	2.3%

3 Read more at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-conscription-vucic-anger-modernizing-military/32770746.html>

4 Read more at: <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/serbia/#military-and-security>

5 Read more at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-defense-ministry-compulsory-military-service/32760066.html>

6 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Yearbook: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.CD?locations=XK>

7 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Yearbook: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.CD?locations=RS>

Serbia's military budget is substantially larger than Kosovo's in absolute terms and as a percentage of GDP. For Kosovo, increasing its military expenditure could be aimed at bolstering its defense capabilities and asserting its sovereignty, but also are in line with the 10-year comprehensive transition plan that was agreed with strategic partners of Kosovo. For Serbia, the significant increase in military spending could be seen as an effort to maintain a strategic advantage in the region and assert its position regarding Kosovo and other regional security issues. Serbia's military expansion reflects a more autonomous security policy, potentially influenced by its relationships with Russia and China.

With these military reforms and increased defense spending, Serbia's aim is to send messages that it is establishing capable military armed forces. Serbian armed forces appears to be organized into a General Staff, Land Force, Air Force and Air Defense, as well as Special Forces and some other independent units under the General Staff. Many of these units have reportedly completed their organization including completion of trainings and purchasing respective military equipment for their personnel. One component that is reported to be still subject to reforms is the Special Forces. Following as they stated the successful implementation of 'Project 1500', which was promoted as a major overhaul of their special forces, the President of Serbia has recently launched 'Project 5000', another initiative to further enhance the capabilities of Special Forces.

The objective of this analysis is to catalyze a meaningful discourse among security institutions in Kosovo, NATO, and other stakeholders about Serbia's increasing militarization and its implications for the Western Balkans' aspirations towards Euro-Atlantic integration. It seeks to highlight the urgent need for a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the security dynamics at play, advocating for preemptive diplomatic engagement and strategic planning to counteract the potential for conflict and ensure a pathway towards lasting regional stability and integration into the Euro-Atlantic framework. This conversation is crucial for preempting any unilateral military actions that could escalate into wider regional conflict, potentially derailing the fragile peace and integration processes in the Western Balkans. The analysis is solely focused on depicting 'Project 5000' though it does not intend to omit other segments of the SAF that are facing transformation to meet new vision.

WHAT IS 'PROJECT 5000'?

In 2016 Special Forces went through a reform known as '**Project 1500**'. The project aimed at creating a 1500-strong special force, with well-trained and equipped operatives - marking a shift towards aligning with Western standards and practices. Initially, the special force was organized in a brigade-level unit, named Special Brigade, with a headquarters, one Parachute Battalion, one Reconnaissance-Commando Battalion, and one Military Police Antiterrorist Battalion. As the implementation of the project progressed, in December 2019 was reported that Serbian President Vucic decided to restore brigade level and unit status. This resulted on Special Brigade being disbanded while, from the existing battalions, the 63rd Parachute Brigade, the 72nd Special Operations Brigade, and the Special Purpose Military Police Detachment "Cobra" were reestablished, as units directly subordinated to the Chief of General Staff of the Serbian Armed Forces.⁸ The change marked the final restructuring move undertaken within the framework of 'Project 1500', which concluded with three fully operational units capable of conducting various offensive and defensive missions such as sabotage, counter-sabotage, counter-insurgency, counter-terrorism, reconnaissance and intelligence gathering, in tactical, operational, and strategic depth, using land units as well as vertical maneuver (airborne).

Three years later, in December 2022, media reported about another order issued by the President of Serbia who seem to be looking to further strengthen Serbia special forces. According to it President Vucic is looking surge in the number of special operators from 1500 to 5000, under the so-called '**Project 5000**' banner. The rationale behind this initiative allegedly lies in the challenges and threats perceived by the Government of Serbia which according to them underscores the necessity for expanded capabilities in conducting special operations across a broader operational and strategic spectrum. The Serbian authorities claim that the units that are part of 'Project 5000' are going to be designated with the highest readiness classification, ensuring they maintain peak combat readiness even during peacetime.

According to Serbia's Chief of the SAF General Staff, the implementation of this initiative is segmented into three phases and is planned to be completed by the end of 2024.⁹ The first phase includes upgrading existing units: the 63rd Parachute Brigade, the 72nd Special Operations Brigade, and the Special Purpose Military Police Detachment "Cobra". The highlight of this phase is the creation of the Battalion "Orlovi" (Eagles) within the 72nd Brigade. According to the Government open sources in Serbia, this phase has already commenced in 2023¹⁰ and it is assessed that by the end of this phase, the number of special forces will increase from 1500 to around 2000 personnel. The second phase includes the formation of three battalions for special operations and the upgrading of the armored reconnaissance battalion, while the

8 Read more at: <https://www.vs.rs/en/units/serbian-armed-forces/72nd-special-operations-brigade>; <https://www.vs.rs/en/units/serbian-armed-forces/63rd-parachute-brigade> To recall, both brigades have been deployed in Kosovo, especially in the Battle of Koshare in the fightings against KLA units.

9 Read more at: <https://n1info.rs/vesti/mojasilovic-za-dve-godine-do-5-000-pripadnika-specijalnih-jedinica/>

10 For more information see: <https://www.mod.gov.rs/eng/20113/kandidati-za-prijem-u-specijalne-jedinice-po-projektu-5-000-polozili-vojnicky-zakletvu20113>

third one focuses on upgrading reconnaissance units within the Land Forces.¹¹ By the time Project 5000 is completed, Serbia is expected to have the largest number of special forces in the Balkans.

This rapid increase of special forces by more than three times within two years seem to be a super ambitious goal. Potential cracks into this very ambitious plan have already been noticed, taking into consideration the reports that the Ministry of Defense (MoD) seem to lowered the criteria for admission by allowing applications from candidates who only have primary education and those who have not performed military service under arms before, in order to complete it within the proposed timeline. Additionally, the Serbian MoD reportedly created financial incentives too by increasing the salaries and allowances of the special operators, which surpassed those of regular army personnel by three times. Even a first-year soldier of the special units gets paid more than a senior officer of the Army or an airplane pilot of the Air Force. These incentives may have positive impact and increase competition. However, it increases the interest of those who have deep institutional connections to become part of these units, regardless of if they fulfill high standards criteria or not. Furthermore, these large income discrepancies can also be demotivating for the rest of the military. The reports have been also indicating that regardless of financial incentives made and the lowering of selection criteria, the number of successful candidates who have made it to become part of these special forces is relatively low. In the first class of 2023, only 250 candidates passed the selective basic training out of supposedly thousands of applicants for three elite units.¹² With such rhythm, 'Project 5000' will most likely not meet its objectives by the set deadline - the end of 2024.

WHY DOES 'PROJECT 5000' MATTER?

The effort of Serbian political elite to push forward their announced Defense Sector reforms by promoting widely the process of as they call professionalization of the armed forces, modernization of military assets, expanding of special forces, and adoption of the aggressive recruitment and incentivization strategies" clearly exposes their intent to present themselves as key forces which are going to bring Serbia where it belongs: as sole regional hegemon in the Western Balkans. Be it for the domestic consume or as a message for the other WB countries where Serbia projects its influence sphere, it is clear that these actions go beyond merely enhancing national defense capabilities and goes against the intention of building up a 'force for good'.

One key explanation for this expansion of special units is that current political elite in Serbia wants to use display of power as the means to maintain nationalist sentiments among the Serbian citizens high. Another important possible motive is that they want to warn any potential opposition political forces that they have a firm grip on power, and they will keep it

11 For more information see: <https://n1info.rs/vesti/mojisilovic-za-dve-godine-do-5-000-pripadnika-specijalnih-jedinica/>

12 For more information see: <https://www.ozonpress.net/blog/zasto-je-propao-konkurs-za-specijalne-jedinice/>

by any means, threatening with a potential Belarus scenario of 2021. Serbia too seems to have a serious problem with fraudulent elections, as seen in the latest example of the December 2023 election in Serbia, which was strongly criticized by the international community for serious irregularities observed. Just as President Lukashenko did back in 2021, the scenario of suppressing any potential future protests by using special forces should not remain negligible.

The decision by Serbian state to augment its “specials” forces to a total of 5,000 personnel should also be looked within the framework of regional security dynamics and the nation’s geopolitical positioning. This expansion, ostensibly for defensive posturing given Serbia’s encirclement and geopolitical constraints, paradoxically signals a potential shift towards offensive military capabilities. The rationale behind this assertion is rooted in established military strategic principles that dictate for a successful offensive operation, the attacking force must possess a significant numerical advantage over the defender, traditionally quantified as a 3:1 ratio in both personnel and technical capabilities.

This strategic calculus suggests that Serbia’s buildup of its special forces is not merely a defensive measure but a calculated preparation for potential offensive operations. Such a force, precisely because of its size and the nature of its capabilities, could be deployed to assert Serbia’s interests aggressively within the region.

This development should be viewed with concern by neighboring states and especially the European Union and other Western countries, as it indicates a possible escalation in regional tensions and the likelihood of Serbia pursuing its objectives through forces regionally and domestically. Furthermore, the emphasis on enhancing technical capabilities alongside the increase in personnel underscores the seriousness of Serbia’s intent to bolster its offensive military capabilities. In doing so, Serbia is not just expanding its military force but also significantly enhancing its operational effectiveness, readiness, and the potential for power projection within the region. This strategic move, therefore, not only alters the military balance but also impacts the regional security architecture, necessitating a reevaluation of diplomatic and security strategies by all stakeholders involved.

Serbia’s substantial investments in modernizing its military hardware and expanding its defense industry, including the production and acquisition of advanced weapons systems from Russia, China, and European countries, indicate a strategic intent to enhance its military strength significantly. The development of heavy equipment like the Nora B-52 self-propelled howitzer and the acquisition of advanced air defense systems are clear indicators of Serbia’s ambition to establish a formidable military presence in the region. Serbia is also investing in becoming a major arms exporter. Azerbaijan is speculated to be the undisclosed buyer of 48 Nora B-52 self-propelled howitzers from Serbia, in a deal valued at €311 million. Other countries, such as Algeria and Cyprus, are reported in the media as interested in buying Nora B-52 as well.

The emphasis on developing a large, highly trained special forces capability through ‘Project 1500’ and the subsequent expansion under ‘Project 5000’ is particularly telling. Increasing the number of special operators from 1,500 to 5,000, with the aim of creating the largest special forces contingent in the Balkans, underscores a strategic priority on rapid response and

flexible military capabilities that can be projected across the region. The creation of specialized units capable of conducting a wide range of military operations, including offensive and defensive missions, highlights Serbia's intention to assert its military prowess and exacerbate security dilemma in the Western Balkans. The narrative of Serbia as a militarily neutral state is increasingly untenable in the face of these developments, mainly the investment in military infrastructure and capabilities far beyond the defensive needs and the discussions to reinstate compulsory military service. According to information that is publicly available. The decision to lower admission criteria for special forces and to significantly increase the salaries and allowances of these operators, making them far more attractive than other military or civilian positions, indicates a determined effort to bolster the ranks of these elite units. Although this strategy has faced challenges in meeting recruitment targets, the aggressive push to expand and incentivize the special forces speaks to a broader ambition to enhance Serbia's military capabilities. By aiming to establish the largest number of special forces in the Balkans, Serbia is positioning itself as a dominant military force in the region, capable of influencing regional security dynamics.

This undertaking by Serbia, can also be seen in the context or interpreted as a strategic measure to counterbalance significant challenges within its human resources system. This perspective gains credence when considering insights from former senior military leaders in Serbia, such as Momir Stojanović, a former director of military intelligence, who highlighted many issues plaguing Serbian Armed Forces, characterizing the structure as "razvlačetna," a term suggesting it is overstretched or diluted. This characterization of the armed forces' current state underlines a critical vulnerability in Serbia's defense posture, primarily stemming from deficiencies in "manpower" and perhaps qualitative aspects of its military personnel. The reintroduction of compulsory military service emerges, therefore, not merely as a policy shift but as a necessary recalibration aimed at revitalizing the armed forces' human capital.

The growing militarization of Serbia, and especially "Project 5000" should be monitored closely by the Serbia's Western Balkans neighboring countries and in general the west. Senior members of Serbia's political elite have not shied away from publicly expressing support for plans to annex Republika Srpska from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Most recently, Aleksandar Vulin, Serbia's former chief of the Security Intelligence Agency (BIA), a close confidant of President Vucic and the person -though not only - who coined the expansionist concept "Serbian World" has stated that "It is the duty of my generation to unite all Serbs: this process has already started and will not stop. Sanctions are a small price to pay." Miloš Vučević, the current Serbian Minister of Defense, accused by Kosovo authorities of direct involvement in the Banjska terrorist attack in September of 2023, and likely to become the future Prime Minister, had requested in 2022 from NATO to allow up to 1,000 Serbian military personnel to enter Kosovo. The Serbian world is largely seen as a counterpart to the initiative of Russian peace (world) and it is in essence another way of referring to the old hegemonic idea of a "Greater Serbia", which was one of the main causes of the disintegration of Yugoslavia and bloody ethnic conflicts on its territory in the 1990s.

The emphasis on special forces within Serbia's military expenditure strategy, as highlighted by "Project 5000," underscores a shift towards enhancing offensive capabilities rather than

purely defensive postures, because special forces represent offensive and not defensive capabilities. Special forces, with their focus on operations such as sabotage, counter-sabotage, counterinsurgency, and special operations, offer flexibility and a range of tactical options that can be utilized beyond conventional warfare scenarios.

The “Little Green Man” scenario which refers to covert operations where forces operate without official insignia or direct acknowledgment by their government—allows for deniable operations. This strategy is particularly pertinent to Serbia’s concerns in Kosovo, where tensions remain high, and direct military engagement would mean confrontation with NATO. By enhancing special forces capabilities, Serbia could theoretically engage in covert operations to influence outcomes in Kosovo or other areas of interest without direct military confrontation. What adds to this concern is that Serbia views the situation in Kosovo through a counterinsurgency lens which indicates Serbia’s perception of its challenges as not merely political but as security threats requiring military readiness that special forces are uniquely equipped to address, such as in the “Little Green Man” scenario”. In other words for Serbia, Kosovo dispute is not only a political but a security challenge, and this is very concerning.

The advancement of offensive capabilities via special forces within the Western Balkans context raises concerns about the escalation of covert actions. The increase in special forces capabilities by Serbia could contribute to a security dilemma, where neighboring countries feel compelled to respond by enhancing their own military capabilities, leading to an arms race (already underway to some extent with Croatia) that significantly undermines regional stability and security.

The deliberate development of Serbia’s special forces capabilities, which are inherently designed for advanced offensive operations, covert actions, and rapid deployment, signals a shift towards a more assertive military posture. This development is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it inherently raises the specter of increased covert operations within the region, activities that are typically aimed at achieving strategic objectives without engaging in open conflict. Such operations can include intelligence gathering, sabotage, or influence operations, which can destabilize governments and societies from within, often without a clear attribution to the aggressor state. Secondly, and perhaps more critically, the expansion of Serbia’s special forces capabilities introduces a classic security dilemma scenario. In international relations theory, a security dilemma occurs when one state’s efforts to increase its security prompt reactions from other states, who perceive these efforts as a threat to their own security. This leads to a cycle of military buildups, with each state seeking to ensure its security through increased military capabilities, thereby inadvertently increasing the likelihood of conflict. In the case of the Western Balkans, Serbia’s military enhancements could compel neighboring countries, such as Croatia, to respond in kind. Indeed, there are indications that an arms race is already developing to some extent, with Croatia and other regional actors seeking to bolster their own military capacities in response to perceived threats. This tit-for-tat escalation not only diverts valuable resources away from economic and social development but also significantly undermines regional stability and security. It creates an atmosphere of mistrust and competition, where dialogue and cooperation become increasingly difficult. Furthermore, the arms race in the Western Balkans, fueled by the

expansion of special forces and other military capabilities, risks drawing in external powers, further complicating the security landscape. External actors may choose to support different countries based on strategic interests, but Russia and potentially China are already strategic partners to Serbia and Russia has been involved for some time now.

Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which are not members of NATO and have been identified by Serbia as areas of interest for potential intervention under certain conditions, are particularly susceptible to the implications of Serbia's increasing militarization. This vulnerability is exacerbated by the rising support for far-right parties within the European Union, whose platforms often include pro-Russian sentiments and explicit backing for Serbia's territorial claims against Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Such political shifts in the EU present a more tangible risk of intervention than might initially appear.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik, leader of the Republika Srpska entity, is pushing for secession with significant backing from Serbia. Despite Bosnia's Constitutional Court's rulings, Dodik's annual Day of Republika Srpska celebrations have continued. This separatist drive, featuring symbols of Serbian-Russian solidarity, highlights the broader geopolitical risks in the Western Balkans, including NATO member Montenegro's political shifts towards pro-Serbian and pro-Russian stances, further complicating regional security dynamics.

The scale and nature of "Project 5000" could contribute to heightened tensions in the Balkans. The potential for covert operations, especially in sensitive areas like Kosovo, raises the risk of unexpected conflicts that could spiral beyond local control. The Western Balkans falls within NATO's strategic purview, and any destabilization in the region directly challenges the alliance's security objectives. Serbia's military expansion, particularly in capabilities that enable deniable operations, could necessitate a reassessment of NATO's posture and engagement in the region. Russia's support for Serbia, coupled with its encouragement of militaristic approaches to regional disputes, aligns with its broader strategy to undermine Euro-Atlantic unity and distract from its actions elsewhere, such as the war in Ukraine. "Project 5000" fits into this larger geopolitical puzzle, potentially serving Russian interests by increasing NATO's security challenges.

Looking through a strategic and operational lens, the expansion of special forces is indicative of Serbia's plans for unconventional or hybrid operations. This is particularly important considering that such operations do not cross the threshold of war and may not trigger a direct kinetic response by NATO/KFOR. If such an operation is carried out, it will happen fast from start to finish and it will be hard to interrupt it. It will create a *fait accompli*. Serbia will not show its flag and deny its involvement. Everything will be portrayed as an act of resistance by the local Serb population. In such a scenario, Kosovo does not have enough capabilities to reverse it. Furthermore, any intervention after a new reality is created can be used as an excuse for Serbia to intervene militarily.

THE WAY FORWARD

Serbia's "Project 5000" and the strategic focus on enhancing special forces capabilities represent a significant development in the military and security landscape of the Western Balkans. This move carry implications for regional stability, and adds up to the ongoing tensions with Kosovo. The potential for covert operations and the emphasis on offensive rather than defensive capabilities could lead to an escalation of security concerns in the region, highlighting the need for careful monitoring and engagement by international stakeholders interested in Balkan stability, especially NATO.

Considering the above-mentioned developments and the possible scenario, Kosovo institutions should focus on developing **proactive measures (detect, deter/prevent, and disrupt)** instead of reactive ones (punish and retaliate). The objective should be to expose and collapse the operations before any armed group or formation set foot in the Republic of Kosovo:

- The Government should invest more in intelligence institutions and develop new collection capabilities to provide early warning (DETECT)
- Kosovo Intelligence Agency and Kosovo Police should increase assets and sensors to monitor the situation in the North of Kosovo, while the border police should increase the presence and patrols along the border with Serbia. (DETECT)
- The Government should enhance cooperation with strategic partners in information sharing (DETECT).
- Launch a New Strategic Security Sector Review (SSSR): Given the significant changes in the security landscape since 2014, it is imperative to conduct a comprehensive review of the current security sector. This review should aim to understand the rapid developments and challenges that have emerged since the last Strategic Security Sector Review was launched in 2014. The new SSSR should not only analyze the existing security infrastructure, which has seen minimal adjustments aside from sporadic changes influenced by key figures, but also propose a restructured approach that aligns with the current realities (DETECT).
- NATO extending an invitation for Kosovo to join the Partnership for Peace would be a significant step in the overall efforts of prevention and deterrence of plans that may be organized and/or sponsored by Serbian security institutions to use violence in order to change the status of the north of Kosovo (PREVENT/DETER).

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- The Government of Kosovo in close consultation with the international partners and the security institutions should consider strategic disclosure of sensitive information to the public as means of prevention of potential planned attacks and violence from paramilitaries of Serbian origin (PREVENT/DETER).
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- The Government should take concrete steps toward meaningful integration of Serbs in the north of Kosovo, including by implementing agreed mechanisms from the EU-facilitated dialogue for normalization of relations and the Agreement on the Path to Normalisation of Relations between Kosovo and Serbia agreed in February of 2023. (PREVENT).
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- Kosovo's security organizations should conduct joint exercises with KFOR to respond to situations like Banjska and conduct/continue joint patrols (PREVENT/DETER)
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- Kosovo's security organizations should continue drafting and rehearsing reaction plans for scenarios similar to Banjska (PREVENT/DISRUPT)
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- Kosovo should have Quick Reaction Forces (QRF) positioned in the north and ready to intervene at an early stage if an operation like Banjska is underway. (DISRUPT)

Katalogimi në botim – **(CIP)**

Biblioteka Kombëtare e Kosovës “Pjetër Bogdani”

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About KCSS

Established in April 2008, the Kosovar Center for Security Studies (KCSS) is a specialized, independent, and non-governmental organization. The primary goal of KCSS is to promote the democratization of the security sector in Kosovo and to improve research and advocacy work related to security, the rule of law, and regional and international cooperation in the field of security.

KCSS aims to enhance the effectiveness of the Security Sector Reform (SSR) by supporting SSR programs through its research, events, training, advocacy, and direct policy advice.

Advancing new ideas and social science methods are also core values of the centre. Every year, KCSS publishes numerous reports, policy analysis and policy briefs on security-related issues. It also runs more than 200 public events including conferences, roundtables, and debates, lectures – in Kosovo, also in collaboration with regional and international partners.

A wide-range of activities includes research, capacity-building, awareness raising and advocacy. KCSS's work covers a wide range of topics, including but not limited to security sector reform and development, identifying and analyzing security risks related to extremism, radicalism, and organized crime, foreign policy and regional cooperation, and evaluating the rule of law in Kosovo.

This year, KCSS celebrated its 15th Anniversary. For more details about KCSS, you can check on the following official platforms:



www.qkss.org

www.securitybarometer.qkss.org



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