



# The Balkans Strategic Perspective





# 1 Introduction

Over the last decades, the Balkan peninsula witnessed numerous conflicts, some of them being the most serious since the end of the Second World War. It has also become one of the most important regions for the North Atlantic Alliance, as it was a scene of several of its "firsts" - both its very first combat operation and subsequently its very first peacekeeping mission took place during the Balkan Wars<sup>1</sup>. This meant a remarkable twist in the alliance's direction, as until then, it had served almost exclusively as an opposition to the Soviet-controlled Warsaw pact, aiming to ensure the collective defence and security of its members, without any ambitions to military intervene outside its borders<sup>2</sup>.

Since the tense 1990s, the region has undergone dramatic changes and many of the states which emerged from the devastating conflict are now on their way towards a full Euro-Atlantic integration. Yet, despite its relative stability, the Balkan peninsula lost nothing of its strategic importance to the alliance. Nowadays, some of the Western Balkan states, created after the breakup of Yugoslavia, often find themselves on the border between the Euro-Atlantic integration and the Russian influence from the East<sup>3</sup>.

Now that the peace has largely been ensured, the alliance has to face a new challenge: creating a strategic concept, which will address the current challenges and will help to provide a stable and secure environment for long-term development of the region.

## 2 Breakup of Yugoslavia and first NATO involvements

Understanding of the current political situation in the Western Balkan region is largely contingent upon understanding its historical context. The state body, later known as Yugoslavia, was founded shortly after the First World War by merging several provisional nation-states<sup>1</sup> with a vision of creating a 'state of Southern Slavs'.<sup>4</sup> Except for the Second World War period, when it was divided into several states usually controlled by Nazi puppet governments, it lasted united until the end of the Cold War<sup>5</sup>.

During the Cold War period, Yugoslav communist leader Josip Broz Tito managed to escape from the direct influence of the Soviet Union. It was in Tito's highest interest to preserve united Yugoslavia and he had various methods to do so, in some cases including even the use of force<sup>6</sup>.

The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was comprised of six republics and two autonomous provinces (including Kosovo), inhabited by several ethnic groups. Besides ethnical diversity, there were also three dominant religious groups<sup>7</sup> - Catholic Christians mainly among Slovenes and Croats in the North, Orthodox Christians among Serbs, Montenegrins or Macedonians, but also a significant number of Muslims living in the region of Kosovo (Kosovan Albanians) or in Bosnia and Herzegovina (known as Bosniaks)<sup>8</sup>.

Following Tito's death in 1980, the power of the federal government began to weaken, which resulted in strengthening the influence of several centrifugal nationalist movements.

The beginning of the serious conflicts is usually being connected with the rise to power of nationalist Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević, who soon begun to

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<sup>1</sup> The provisional State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs (itself formed from territories of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire) with the formerly independent Kingdom of Serbia; the Kingdom of Montenegro had united with Serbia five days previously.



strongly enforce the rights of Serbian minorities in the other Yugoslav republics<sup>9</sup>. The federal ruling party, League of Communists of Yugoslavia, began to weaken and, instead, the nationalist parties came to power in most of the republics.

This resulted in Slovenia, soon after followed by Croatia and Macedonia, declaring independence, which began a series of bloody conflicts. While Macedonia left the federation completely peacefully and even Slovenia gained its independence without significant losses, Croatia was thrown into a war resulting in tens of thousands of deaths. In August 1990, minority Serbs in the Serb-majority Krajina district of Croatia began to agitate for autonomy, as they argued that if Croatia could leave Yugoslavia, they in turn could leave Croatia. Milosević supported the Serbian cause by his announcements that if Yugoslavia broke apart, there would have to be border changes that would unite all ethnic Serbs in a single political entity<sup>10</sup>. The conflict soon escalated to a war which lasted until 1995. Even though the war eventually ended with Croatian victory, the country begun its independence deeply shaken, as it is estimated that 21–25% of its economy was destroyed<sup>11</sup>.

Nonetheless, the most devastating war, which brought the worst atrocities Europe had seen since the Nazi era, was yet to come in the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bosnia and Herzegovina was the most multi-ethnic part of Yugoslavia, with the relative majority of population identifying as Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks), but also with large Serb and Croat minorities<sup>12</sup>. While the Bosniaks generally favoured independence from Yugoslavia, the Bosnian Serbs, led by Radovan Karadžić, and the Croats preferred unification with their respective 'motherlands'. From the very beginning, the conflict was accompanied by ethnic cleansing, where the Bosnian Muslims formed the majority of victims<sup>13</sup>.

Meanwhile, the West has been reluctant to directly intervene. As several attempts to achieve peace by negotiations failed, the United Nations decided at least to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid and to create several 'safe areas' for Bosnian refugees within its mission UNPROFOR<sup>14</sup>. This effort, nevertheless, did not prevent the worst episode of mass murder within Europe since World War II<sup>15</sup> - the Srebrenica<sup>16</sup> massacre, where more than 7.000 Bosniak boys and men were slayed by the Bosnian Serb forces.

This event made the West take more concrete steps in order to solve the situation. In 1994, NATO fighters shot down four Bosnian Serb aircrafts violating the UN imposed no-fly zone<sup>17</sup> and from 1995 on, its campaign commenced to be even more concentrated. Its operation was named Operation Deliberate Force<sup>18</sup> and aimed to defeat the Bosnian Serb forces. Later on, when the all the sides of the conflict agreed to comply with the conditions proposed by the UN, the operation was concluded as successful.

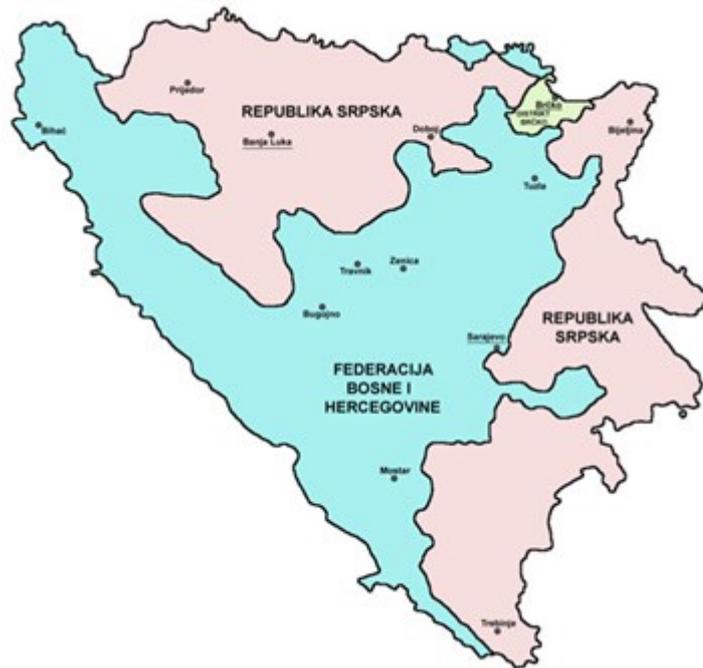
The war ended by the conclusion of the so-called Dayton agreements, which set the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina as of the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Republika Srpska. Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is inhabited primarily by Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats, while Republika Srpska primarily by Serbs. At an entity level, both the Federation and the Republika Srpska have significant autonomy<sup>19</sup>.

What remained from the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was the Republic of Serbia and Republic of Montenegro, which formed a state called Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Slobodan Milošević remained in power until he was forced to resign from his office following disputed elections in 2000. He was arrested a year later and extradited to the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague where he remained until his death in 2006<sup>20</sup>. In the same year, Montenegro emerged as a sovereign state after just over 55% of the population opted for independence<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>i</sup> According to the Research and Documentation Center in Sarajevo, 65% of those killed were Bosnian Muslims, 25% of the dead were Serbs and more than 8% Croats.



Figure 1: Political division of Bosnia and Herzegovina



### 3 The way to stability

After the end of war conflicts, the North Atlantic Alliance took on a role of peacekeeper, aiming to ensure stability and possibly, facilitate the way of the newly created countries towards Euro-Atlantic integration.

#### 3.1 Bosnia and Herzegovina

NATO's first peacekeeping mission, the Implementation Force (IFOR), was deployed in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995, following the end of the War. IFOR, a 60,000-person<sup>22</sup>, at its height 32-nation coalition force<sup>23</sup>, was responsible mainly for the implementation of the military aspects of the Dayton Agreements. Apart from NATO members, a significant number of other nations participated in the IFOR - for example Russia, whose involvement in the operation was a crucial step in the evolving NATO-Russia cooperative relationship<sup>24</sup>.

After the expiration of IFOR mandate, it was replaced by a Stabilisation Force (SFOR)<sup>25</sup>. While IFOR's role was often described as 'creating peace', SFOR was responsible for 'maintaining peace'. This was done for instance by collecting and destroying unregistered weapons, de-mining or reforming the country's defence structures.

In June 2004, it was decided to bring the SFOR mission to its end. By that, NATO handed the mission over to the European Union, which launched its Operation Althea. The Alliance stayed involved by providing planning, logistic and command support for the EU mission.

#### 3.2 Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

Another scene of NATO's peacekeeping mission was the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. As it has been already mentioned earlier, Macedonia's breakup with Yugoslavia was completely peaceful, with the country declaring its independence after a clear result of a referendum<sup>26</sup>. It, nonetheless, needs to be highlighted, that the



ethnic Albanians boycotted the referendum in protest against their perceived inferior constitutional status<sup>27</sup>.

A decade later, this long-term ethnical conflict between the Slavic majority and the Albanian minority resulted into an outbreak of violence<sup>28</sup>. NATO was thus invited by Skopje to intervene and prevent a possible escalation of the conflict. Three separated operations (Operation Essential Harvest, Operation Amber Fox and Operation Allied Harmony<sup>29</sup>) were launched, in whose framework NATO helped to achieve an agreement between the government and Albanian forces and continued to minimise the risk of destabilisation<sup>30</sup>.

## 4 Kosovo

A conflict deserving a specific attention is the War in Kosovo. In the year 1997, Kosovo was a part of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (comprising Serbia and Montenegro), however the vast majority of its population was ethnically Albanian. Under Communist Yugoslavia, the region enjoyed vast amount of autonomy, which was even proclaimed in the Yugoslav constitution naming Kosovo 'Socialist Autonomous Province of Kosovo'<sup>31</sup>. Later, under Milošević, the level of autonomy was reduced and many formerly autonomous rights were returned to the central authorities in Belgrade. Dissatisfied with this status, Kosovo unsuccessfully tried to declare itself independent already in 1991, but the attempt was suppressed by the Serbs, who subsequently limited Kosovan autonomy even more significantly<sup>32</sup>. This led to a formation of several armed resistance organisations, such as the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA).

The Kosovo War itself can be divided into two parts – the first one being effectively a civil war between the KLA and Yugoslav army, the second one beginning with the intervention of the North Atlantic Alliance<sup>33</sup>.

Lessons learnt from the development in Bosnia, this time the Western powers attempted to solve the situation in Kosovo from the very beginning.

The North Atlantic Alliance could not, however, count on being provided a mandate to interfere from the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), as two of its permanent members, Russia and China, claimed the Kosovo problem to be an internal affair of Yugoslavia which shall thus not be solved by foreign intervention<sup>34</sup>. The representative of the Russian Federation has even stated that 'the attempts to justify the military action under the pretext of preventing a humanitarian catastrophe bordered on blackmail'<sup>35</sup>.

Some argue that the turning point in the war was the Račak massacre in 1999 – a mass killing of 45 Kosovo Albanians perpetrated by the Serbian security forces in a small village in central Kosovo. A few days after the incident, NATO issued a statement which declared that the Secretary General may authorise airstrikes against targets on the territory of Federal Republic of Yugoslavia<sup>36</sup>.

The NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, known as the Operation Allied Force, begun in March 1999. The controversy of this operation is caused mainly by the absence of authorisation from the UNSC<sup>i</sup> and of numerous accusations of NATO bombing the civilian targets in several occasions<sup>37</sup>.

The overall effectivity of the operation is also questionable, as Milošević even intensified the ethnic cleansing of the Kosovan Albanians during the campaign<sup>38</sup> and tens of thousands of Kosovan Albanian refugees were pouring out of the province with accounts of killings, atrocities and forced expulsions at the hands of Serb forces<sup>39</sup>. Even though it was estimated that Milošević would surrender within a matter of weeks from the initiation of the air-strikes, the operation eventually

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<sup>i</sup> Under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, the Security Council may 'take such action by air, sea, or land forces as may be necessary to maintain or restore international peace and security'. The individual member states must not take unilateral military actions, unless they exercise their right of individual or collective self-defence.



lasted three months, until NATO and Yugoslavia finally signed a peace accord outlining troop withdrawal.

In the aftermath of bloodshed and war, NATO began to lead a peace-support operation in Kosovo – the Kosovo Force (KFOR) – in June 1999. This force is operating up to this day and currently consists of approximately 4,500 troops provided by 31 countries<sup>40</sup>. The mission is cooperated with the United Nations, European Union and other international actors in order to ensure stability in the region.

Initially, the main tasks of KFOR were to assist the return of Kosovan refugees, reconstruction, de-mining or weapons destructions. Later on, NATO began to implement additional tasks, such as establishing the Kosovo Security Force, a lightly armed volunteer force which is responsible for tasks which are not a primary concern of police, such as firefighting or civil protection<sup>41</sup>. The role of this force is still a matter of discussion, as the Kosovars have repeatedly called for it being transformed into a regular army.

This possible transformation still is, however, highly problematic due to disagreements among the Kosovan authorities, Belgrade and the North Atlantic Alliance. The Serbian government opposes such a move, as it considers it to be designed to reinforce Kosovo's statehood, which Belgrade rejects. The North Atlantic Alliance has been generally in favour of the transformation, it has nonetheless highlighted that there should be no unilateral steps without prior constitutional changes or consent among all the communities<sup>42</sup>. This question is thus still open and reaching a consensus in this matter would be highly desirable.

In 2008, Kosovo unilaterally declared its independence from Serbia. International recognition of the newly founded state has nevertheless been mixed, and the international community continues to be divided on the issue - up to this date, Kosovo has received 114 diplomatic recognitions from UN member states<sup>43</sup>. Serbia, as can be expected, does not recognise Kosovo as an independent state, however recent years have seen a series of agreements in key areas, in a major step towards normalising ties<sup>44</sup>.

## 5 Contemporary relations

Since the military interventions in the 90s, a great progress has been made in the region. Apart from Kosovo, all the countries in the region became members of NATO's Partnership for Peace programme;<sup>45</sup> Moreover, Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina were both invited to join the Membership Action Plan<sup>i</sup> and Slovenia, Croatia, Albania and Montenegro are already members.

### 5.1 Bosnia and Herzegovina

Contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina has become even more ethnically divided than it used to be prior to the war. This division is, of course, projected in the country's politics and its attitude towards NATO.

The differences between the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska are very visible when observing the general public opinion on the possibility of joining the North Atlantic Alliance. While around 90% of citizens of the FBiH would be in favour of such move, only 33% of respondents from Republika Srpska share the same opinion<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>i</sup> The Membership Action Plan (MAP) is a NATO programme of advice, assistance and practical support tailored to the individual needs of countries wishing to join the Alliance. However, participation in the MAP does not prejudice any decision by the Alliance on future membership. Current participants are Bosnia and Herzegovina and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Further information to be found at:

[http://www.nato.int/cps/fr/natohq/topics\\_37356.htm?selectedLocale=en](http://www.nato.int/cps/fr/natohq/topics_37356.htm?selectedLocale=en)



One of the main obstacles on the Bosnian road towards NATO membership is a great number of military facilities located mainly in the subdivision Republika Srpska<sup>47</sup>, which has not yet been transferred to the federal government. The main reason is a continuous refusal of such transfer mostly by Republika Srpska's local authorities. The case of several such facilities has even been put before the state court, which ruled that the military property belongs to the state. Yet, both the president and the prime minister of Republika Srpska rejected the ruling and accused the federal authorities of 'trying to seize the property of Republika Srpska'<sup>48</sup>.

There is, furthermore, a large level of Russian influence in the region. Some even argue that the president of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, is by far the closest ally of Moscow in the whole Balkan region<sup>49</sup>. During his time in power, Dodik has repeatedly called for independence for Republika Srpska and questioned the legitimacy of the judiciary. The leader even faces sanctions from the United States for actively obstructing efforts to implement the 1995 Dayton Accords<sup>50</sup>. Moscow has been providing overt support for his efforts and even established close trade relations – for example, a majority stake in the Republika Srpska energy sector has been sold to Zarubezhneft, another Russian state-owned company, in 2007<sup>51</sup>.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is, despite these issues, already extensively cooperating with the North Atlantic Alliance in many areas, notably defence and security, as the two subjects are sharing information in order to combat terrorism and the Alliance provides Bosnia necessary expertise in order to enhance its military capabilities. The country has also been involved in NATO missions in Afghanistan since 2009. Furthermore, NATO closely cooperates with Bosnian scientists mainly in the cyber-defence area and the Bosnian authorities have expressed hope collaboration being further expanded<sup>52</sup>.

## 5.2 The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is even closer to the goal of full Euro-Atlantic Integration. The country commenced its Membership Action Plan along with Albania already in 1999 and since then it has been active in several NATO missions, including for instance the already discussed Operation Allied Force.

Nonetheless, similarly to Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is one important obstacle, which has been blocking the country's accession to NATO – the so-called "name dispute". The self-assigned name of the state, the Republic of Macedonia, is unacceptable for the Greeks, who are interpreting the name choice as a territorial claim to the northern Greek province with the same name<sup>53</sup>. This issue caused Athens to veto Macedonian application to the North Atlantic Alliance during the 2008 Bucharest Summit<sup>54</sup>. Nowadays, the country has made several attempts to solve the dispute. In spring 2017, it was announced that there was a possibility of attempting to join under a provisional name, such as, for example, the Upper Republic of Macedonia<sup>55</sup>. The public opinion is, however, very divided on this question. According to a survey conducted after the Bucharest Summit, while entering the North Atlantic Alliance is backed by 85,2% of the population, only 31,1% would be willing to change the name in order to accomplish that<sup>56</sup>.

## 5.3 Serbia

The country with a special position is Serbia. The country has experienced a turnaround in its relations with NATO, as, after Milošević's defeat, the new government in Belgrade has set a completely different foreign policy course, aiming to get closer to the alliance<sup>57</sup>.

This does not mean, however, that the country would aspire to join NATO. Officially, Serbia has a neutral policy, which the alliance fully respects<sup>58</sup>. Nonetheless, a full neutrality within an area such as Balkan is nearly an impossible concept.



The first reason why Serbia is unlikely to join NATO are its long-term maintained strong ties with the Russian Federation. The cooperation between the two countries lasts for nearly two centuries, as Russia has always played a positive role in most of the important events in the history of a Serb state. Should it be the First Serbian Uprising against the Ottoman Empire in 1804, the Serb-Ottoman “War for Independence”<sup>59</sup> in 1876 or the First World War, Russia has always entered on the side of the Serbs, which created strong ties and made Serbs very grateful. Serbia also remains heavily dependent on Russian energy exports, as 80% of its gas imports come from Russia<sup>60</sup>. For those reasons, it is not probable that the Serbs would be willing to join an alliance which has not always had friendly relations with the Russian Federation, as it would be a highly controversial deflection in the context of Serb foreign policy.

Second great obstacle would be the public opinion. We could already observe a significant diversity of attitudes towards the alliance in several other Balkan countries – nonetheless, in none of these NATO has played such a controversial role as it had in Serbia. Despite the fact that the relations between the alliance and Serbia have significantly improved since the Operation Allied Force, the majority of Serbian population still has highly negative sentiments about NATO. It is probable that it would not be possible to find enough support of the public in an eventual referendum about joining the alliance<sup>61</sup>.

This anti-western sentiment has been often directly or indirectly nurtured by Moscow, mainly by media. Russia has invested into the development of Serbian-language version of its main media, such as Russia Today or Sputnik, with whose help the Russian worldview is promoted among the Serbs. Russia has also been supporting Serbia in the International Community by representing its position for example in the UN Security Council, where it embraced Serbian stances for example on the Kosovan question<sup>62</sup> and blocked the resolutions which may have possibly been conflicting the Serbian interests.

Nonetheless, as the neighbouring and strategically important countries around Serbia are part of NATO, it is convenient for the Serbs to maintain friendly relations and tight cooperation with the Alliance, even though not within its structures. Currently, NATO and Serbian personnel are conducting joint trainings and the Alliance provides Serbia assistance within the framework of the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP)<sup>63</sup> in order to develop Serbian defence and security sector. What may be surprising regarding the previously mentioned strong ties between Serbia and Russia, according to the information provided by the Serbian defence ministry, in 2016 Serbia has been involved in more than 116 joint military activities with NATO and more than 90 bilateral military activities with the United States but only around two dozen with the Russian Army<sup>64</sup>. This means that Serbia has ten times more military cooperation with the West than with Russia<sup>65</sup>.

The North Atlantic Alliance is also trying to mediate dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo. Even though the relations are still tense, the aspiration of both countries to join the European Union in the future is forcing them to at least attempt to find a possible solution.

To conclude, Serbia is currently playing a role of an officially neutral state, somehow balancing between the West and Russia, an Orthodox Christian and Slavic ally<sup>66</sup>. NATO has to decide to what extent does it wish to cooperate with Serbia as well as further consider its position towards the Serbia-Kosovo dispute.



## 6 Conclusion

The Balkans have always been an area of special concern to the Alliance, as the events in the region have strongly influenced NATO's post-Cold war evolution. Over the years, NATO has been active not only in preventing an outbreak of another hostilities, but also in helping the individual states to become fully part of the Euro-Atlantic area. In many cases, these attempts were successful.

Nonetheless, even though the possibility of an outbreak of a serious armed conflict in the Balkans is questionable, the achieved peace remains fragile. The Alliance is required to reconsider its strategy towards Balkan and respond to numerous challenges it is currently facing.

### Fundamental questions

These questions should help you to formulate the position of your country and might be helpful in further negotiations and Joint Statement drafting.

- What is your country's general position towards the Western Balkan states, who are your main allies in the region (take into consideration the historical relations, religion etc.)?
- Is your country generally in favour of further NATO enlargement?
- What is the position of your country towards the question of Kosovo? Does your country recognise it as an independent state?
- What should be the future of the KFOR and what should be the future of the Kosovo Security Force?
- How should NATO possibly win over the 'hearts and minds' of the people of the Balkan region?

### Recommended Reading

**BBC Documentary - "The Death of Yugoslavia"**, detailed explanation of the events resulting in the breakup of Yugoslavia.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oODjsdLoSYo>

**NATO's Humanitarian War over Kosovo**

<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/sipa/S6800/courseworks/NATOhumanitarian.pdf>

**Report ' Backsliding in the Western Balkans'**

<http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2017/Also-in-2017/backsliding-western-balkans-kosovo-servia-bosnia/EN/index.htm>

**List of articles/reports on the topic of NATO and Western Balkans**

<http://www.natolibguides.info/balkans>

A fairly **simple explanation of the political system of the system of government in Bosnia and Herzegovina** (be reminded that the article is two years old, therefore certain information is not up to date; when reading the article, focus on the parts dealing with Bosnian constitution)

<https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2014/oct/08/bosnia-herzegovina-elections-the-worlds-most-complicated-system-of-government>

Numerous articles reporting on the **current cooperation between Serbia and NATO** <http://www.bezbednost.org/BCSP/2514/Serbia-and-NATO.shtml>



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## Pražský studentský summit

Pražský studentský summit je unikátní vzdělávací projekt existující od roku 1995. Každoročně vzdělává přes 300 studentů středních i vysokých škol o současných globálních tématech, a to především prostřednictvím simulace jednání čtyř klíčových mezinárodních organizací – OSN, NATO, EU a OBSE.



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## Asociace pro mezinárodní otázky (AMO)

AMO je nevládní nezisková organizace založená v roce 1997 za účelem výzkumu a vzdělávání v oblasti mezinárodních vztahů. Tento přední český zahraničně politický think-tank není spjat s žádnou politickou stranou ani ideologií. Svou činností podporuje aktivní přístup k zahraniční politice, poskytuje nestrannou analýzu mezinárodního dění a otevírá prostor k fundované diskusi.



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## Lucie Slámová

Autorka je spolupracovnicí Asociace pro mezinárodní otázky a členkou přípravného týmu Pražského studentského summitu.

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Background report je materiál pro žáky středních škol účastnících se Pražského studentského summitu. Všichni partneři projektu jsou uvedeni [zde](#).

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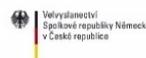
Generální partner  
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Ministerstvo zahraničních věcí  
České republiky



TOP  
partneři



Partneři

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**RESPEKT**

Mediální  
partneři



Za  
podpory