

KKI

4:1

What is the Purpose and Benefit of Engaging in the Stabilization of Kosovo?



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In the 4:1 series of the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, four experts give a short answer to the same question concerning international politics and economics. Our aim is to launch scientific debates in and beyond Hungary and promote dialogue among experts. In this issue our topic is *“What is the purpose and benefit of engaging in the stabilization of Kosovo?”*

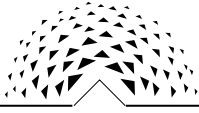
TAMÁS CSIKI VARGA

Beyond the geostrategic arguments that Kosovo is an important actor in Hungary’s southern neighbourhood given its geographical proximity, the interdependence in regional security, and as a natural sphere of interest and influence for Budapest, there are several reasons why Kosovo is of outstanding importance for Hungary.

The [2020 National Security Strategy](#) emphasizes the fragile situation of the Western Balkans region, which stems from an unfinished Euro-Atlantic integration, political and economic instability, ethnic tensions, and occasional religious radicalization. Fixing these negative triggers are long-standing foreign and security policy goals for Hungary that stem from the 1990s and the bloody break-up of Yugoslavia. Avoiding the return of extremist nationalism that could trigger violence and even military confrontation in the medium to long term, as well as supporting the prosperous development of the economy and society are key goals.

Projecting stability to the region is a tool Hungary relies on, as the Western Balkans is also a primary area for multilateral crisis management engagement, should the need remain or arise again. NATO is named as first responder for such military operations, while the EU as well as ad hoc multilateral and bilateral co-operation formats such as the V4 are available for other prioritized challenges of a non-military nature, for example uncontrolled mass migration. Hungary is also engaged in developing a robust supporting structure in Central Europe that could be a framework for stabilization cooperation for Western Balkans countries as well, such as HQ Multinational Division – Central within NATO, and the Regional Special Operations Component Command. The [2021 National Military Strategy](#) also reinforces these goals.

The interest vested in Kosovo’s stability and development can be identified in practical actions. Since Hungary’s NATO accession in 1999, Kosovo has seen the largest deployment of Hungarian troops cumulatively among any mission, exceeding 7,500 by now, compared to approx. 4,500 troops deployed to Afghanistan throughout ISAF and RSM. Kosovo was also the largest peacekeeping mission for the Hungarian Defense Forces prior to 2008; since 2015 Hungary has again had an average troop number of 300+ in Kosovo at any given time, with ISAF topping the period between 2008-2015. The tasks undertaken have



included force protection, riot control, patrolling and road controls, security, and confidence-building through CIMIC activities. In 2015-2016 Hungary held the deputy commander position and currently holds KFOR command, which not only shows the Hungarian commitment to the mission but also confidence on behalf of its allies and local partners.

Civilian contributions in key functional areas (e.g. HungaroControl has been [providing airspace management since 2014](#)) and supporting the economic development of Kosovo through an increasing foreign direct investment profile are also significant, forecasting a long-term partnership.

DÁNIEL HARANGOZÓ

I would like to call attention to the role KFOR plays in the stabilization of Kosovo.

The NATO mission in Kosovo is among the most successful peace support operations in the history of the Alliance. Since its inception in 1999, KFOR has made essential contributions to the establishment and maintenance of peace and security in Kosovo. While at the moment the probability of a new violent conflict is very low, the political situation continues to be unstable, and events with the potential of escalation occur from time to time (for example, the recent license plate [controversy](#)).

Given the continuing turbulent political situation, the deployment of KFOR continues to have a preventive and confidence-building effect. The mission also has a high level of acceptance and [trust](#) by both the Serb and the Albanian communities in Kosovo, although for different reasons. The Albanian community associates KFOR with the role NATO played in the 1999 war and the prospect of a future Alliance membership, while the Serbian minority considers the mission a guarantor of their own safety. Therefore, even though NATO and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia were on opposite sides of the 1999 conflict, KFOR largely managed to establish itself in the role of an “honest broker” in Kosovo.

Beside maintaining peace and security, as [pointed out](#) recently by Major General Ferenc Kajári, the current Commander of KFOR, the tasks of the mission are not strictly military: KFOR engages both in continuous important [cooperation](#) and liaising work with the government and non-government/civil society [stakeholders](#), as well as outreach activities such as operating a [radio station](#). During the coronavirus pandemic, KFOR also offered [assistance](#) to institutions in Kosovo, as well as international organisations such as EULEX. Moreover, providing security to Serbian Orthodox religious sites such as churches and monasteries features prominently among the tasks of KFOR, which is an important factor to take into account given the highly symbolic nature of the issue of Kosovo for Serbia and the Serbian community. It is important to point out that, with the security situation improving, in 2013 KFOR [began](#) to hand over the protection of designated cultural heritage sites to local authorities in the so-called “unfixing” process.

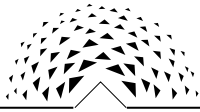
While not directly related to the tasks of the mission, the presence of KFOR also provides an important area of cooperation between NATO and Serbia, the only Western Balkan nation which has no intention of joining the Alliance. However, the long-term stabilization of Kosovo would require a sustainable resolution of the country's status in a way that is acceptable to both Kosovo and the Republic of Serbia. Such a resolution is also an essential requirement for the eventual European integration of Kosovo.

Due to its geographic proximity, economic and trade links, as well as political and security reasons, the stability of the Western Balkans in general and that of Kosovo in particular is of paramount importance for Hungarian foreign and security policy. Hungary (particularly relative to its size and military capabilities) has consistently made an important contribution to KFOR in the past, and the country currently ranks third among troop contributing [nations](#) (with a 469-strong deployment, after the 635-member contingent of the US and the 628-member contingent of Italy). The appointment of Major General Ferenc Kajári as the 26th commander of KFOR in October 2021, the first such appointment for a "minor" NATO power, can also be interpreted as recognition of these past efforts.

FERENC NÉMETH

The advantages of actively engaging in the stabilisation of Kosovo are manifold. From a Hungarian perspective, the proximity and importance of the Western Balkans, and the prospect of flourishing economic investments are often mentioned as driving forces in maintaining peace and security. Beside the politico-military reasons, there are several other factors that can justify the strong emphasis on stabilisation in Kosovo, even in a secure environment.

We must first acknowledge that the security situation in Kosovo is nothing like it was twenty years ago. As the country itself, the environment has evolved positively in the last decade(s); although there have been [sporadic episodes](#) of violence (most notably in 2004, 2008, and 2012), the "field of operation" has remained stable. There are, of course, challenges, but thinking about Kosovo in a post-conflict framework can do more harm than good. The reduction of KFOR's personnel and the slight shift to Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) and Psychological operations (PSYOPS) within the NATO-led peacekeeping force also highlights this realisation. Maintaining security, on the other hand, clearly remains a top priority for the international community in Kosovo. In recent years, however, only the countries with strong strategic/foreign policy interest in the region have remained fully committed to this goal, and Hungary is no exception.



Hungary is not a newcomer in peacekeeping operations in the post-Yugoslav space. Kosovo, similarly to the entire region, has a lot of untapped economic potential that companies could benefit from. In this regard, [investor confidence](#) bears a significant role: the promise of having a stable environment for one's business endeavours can result in [FDI inflow](#), economic growth, and development. Although Kosovo's security level is sufficient, (international) media outlets never fail to mention the armed conflicts of the 1990s, which can make companies shy away from investing in the country. The fact that KFOR is present can be beneficial in increasing the trust of investors, thus having a positive impact on the local economy.

The benefit of engaging in the stabilisation of Kosovo can also be understood on a societal level. The involvement of Hungarians in KFOR has an influence on how the country, and Hungary's economic investments in Kosovo, are being perceived by local communities. Hungarian troops have always enjoyed a good reputation among all the communities in Kosovo; although there are no surveys on the perception on Hungary, the Kosovo Security Barometer (2017) [shows](#) that in the case of France, the French troops' involvement in (North) Mitrovica still negatively impacts how the public perceives the country. Public perception thus greatly matters, and the active Hungarian presence does not go unnoticed on the political and societal levels, either. For Hungarian troops Kosovo is, on the one hand, a good place to get first-hand experience in an international peacekeeping operation in a friendly environment; on the other hand, their presence and day-to-day activities, especially through CIMIC actions, make them unofficial representatives of their home country.

DÁVID VOGEL

Focusing on the military experiences of the engagement in the stabilization of Kosovo, one benefit is no doubt Hungary's involvement in the KFOR mission. Hungary has been an active troop contributor to NATO's Kosovo peacekeeping mission, which serves as an important tool in Hungary's foreign relations, but the mission itself is probably one of the best military assignments a soldier can get as a first foreign tour, either as part of a unit or in an individual position. Having served as Deputy Team Leader of the Liaison Monitoring Team of the largest municipality in Kosovo, I cannot think of a better place to apply the knowledge a soldier has learnt in order to test themselves in a truly international environment away from home, very likely out of their comfort zone. Years of education, training, and practice cannot replace learning in the field. For years before my deployment, I gave lectures and provided training for outgoing soldiers of all ranks, NCOs, officers, to the best of my knowledge, but my class was never the same after I returned to my unit in Hungary after my seven months in Kosovo.

Even though the study materials used by the Hungarian Defence Forces come from various sources now, better courses include the lessons learnt by military personnel throughout the Alliance or even beyond, and as a limited number of soldiers can attend courses held by allied armed forces or NATO centres of excellence, they cannot possibly match personal experience on the ground. It is easy to participate in a training or an exercise in a foreign language, but solving a real-life problem in a foreign language with foreign (civilian) people, in a foreign environment, often with equipment different from the one used at home, and possibly with foreign soldiers involved, is very likely to be more complex and likely more challenging. Beside learning the best practices and know-how of other nations (in the case of KFOR, usually more than two dozen different nations), with various social, historical, and cultural backgrounds, real life examples are the best to learn from. Some takeaways might even come after an event or a process has ended, knowledge or conclusions unlikely to emerge in a training or in a scenario in a military exercise, which are usually limited in terms of time.

However, these are only the professional gains. Then there is the other side of this learning or even maturing process: the personal gains. Growing independence far from home or unit, growing confidence and self-esteem even if the feedback does not come from a commander in the form of a decoration but from a fellow team member. Growing personal strength from situations away from loved ones, wives, newborn babies, and a growing number of friends and connections that can mean a lot during and even after the mission. This unique circumstance for personal growth cannot be copied or manufactured elsewhere.

When wearing the uniform outside your country, with the country's name on it above your heart, and usually the national colours as well, you represent your country, and even if unconsciously, you are aware of this. You feel a healthy national pride, and you might even become more competitive, for the better, whether it is a task in your daily routine or as a contestant in a military march, like the one organised by the Royal Danish Army in Kosovo. Wearing your country's uniform will give you the extra push to be better, to achieve more.

For all these reasons, KFOR is an excellent mission, where both Hungary and the individual soldier contributes to the safe and secure environment of Europe and its closer neighbourhood, and it is also a training ground where one can excel at their job and come home as more. Sending hundreds of soldiers twice a year on a rotational basis might be difficult for the military or the particular unit, since the missing person's job needs to be taken care of, but there is much to be gained from sending personnel from the unit. Thus, I support the official motto of my mission, and not just for the time spent in Kosovo, "Forward Together".¹

1 The official motto of KFOR XVII.