

Balkans: Why Withdrawing U.S. Troops from the KFOR Mission Would Be a Gift to Moscow

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As the Pentagon prepares to finalize its review of the U.S. military posture in Europe, one relatively small contingent deserves to be spared budget cuts: the approximately 600 American soldiers assigned to the NATO Kosovo Force (KFOR) mission. This is the argument advanced by analysts **Mark Montgomery and Ivana Stradner in a commentary published on November 11, 2026**, who contend that withdrawing these troops would yield negligible savings while handing Moscow a low-cost strategic victory.

The political and military value of the U.S. presence

According to Montgomery and Stradner's analysis, while the Trump administration's review of its European defense commitment is a legitimate effort to push allies to assume responsibility for their own conventional defense, Kosovo is a crucial exception. The U.S. contingent accounts for less than 1% of all American troops in Europe — often made up of National Guard personnel —

but carries irreplaceable operational and political weight, not least because Washington currently leads Comando Regionale Est.
As the authors note, citing a bipartisan group of U.S. lawmakers, the force serves as a «political deterrent to those seeking to fuel ethnic violence.» The American presence has preserved a hard-won peace since June 1999, when NATO intervened to halt violence by Slobodan Milosevic's Serbian forces against the ethnic Albanian population.

The Russian threat and tensions in the Balkans

Montgomery and Stradner stress that the Balkans are Europe's "soft underbelly," an area Vladimir Putin continues to exploit to divert Western attention from Ukraine. The Kremlin employs multiple levers:

- **The Serbian connection:** Belgrade, backed by Russia and China, does not recognize Kosovo's independence, declared in 2008. Despite Aleksandar Vucic's electoral defeat in the parliamentary elections on October 25, the future direction of Serbian foreign policy remains uncertain.
- **Provocations and intelligence:** From the confrontation involving the Russian-made train bearing the slogan "Kosovo is Serbia" in 2017 to the so-called Russian humanitarian center near the Kosovo border (suspected of being an intelligence base), Moscow maintains close ties with local nationalist groups.
- **Recent crises:** In 2023, clashes injured more than 90 NATO peacekeepers, culminating in September with the Banjska attack by Serbian gunmen.More recently, in October 2026, Russia's ambassador to the UN warned that the situation in Kosovo remains «constantly tense and literally on the brink of the abyss».

The comparison with Bosnia and deterrence

To demonstrate why American leadership is indispensable, the article published on November 11 compares KFOR with Operazione Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina (EUFOR). The latter, led by the European Union with around 1,500 personnel but lacking a U.S. backbone, has struggled to contain the secessionist provocations of Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik, going so far in 2025 as to forgo executing an arrest warrant against him for fear of political risks.
By contrast, KFOR has demonstrated that it can respond firmly: after the Banjska incident in 2023, the rapid increase in NATO troops prompted Serbia to withdraw its military deployment

from the border, defusing the crisis. A U.S. disengagement, Montgomery and Stradner conclude, would instead risk reinvigorating nationalist agendas between Serbia and Kosovo and separatist pressures in Republika Srpska, undoing a quarter-century of stability.

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