

DEPOLITICIZING INTELLIGENCE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF LEADERSHIP APPOINTMENTS IN WESTERN BALKAN NATIONS

DESPOLITIZAÇÃO DOS SERVIÇOS DE INTELIGÊNCIA: UMA ANÁLISE CRÍTICA DAS NOMEAÇÕES DE LÍDERES NOS PAÍSES DOS BALCÃS OCIDENTAIS

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Abstract

This study examines the legal frameworks governing the appointment of intelligence service leaders in the Western Balkans, focusing on their relationship with patterns of politicization and institutional development. Through a doctrinal analysis of legislation in Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the study finds that formal appointment procedures often coexist with divergent practical outcomes. These range from centralized executive control to institutional fragmentation and reform-driven dispersion of authority. The findings indicate that politicization is a common feature across the region, though it manifests through distinct governance models shaped by legal design and political context. The paper argues that strengthening merit-based appointment procedures and institutional safeguards could reduce political influence and enhance both effectiveness and democratic accountability in intelligence governance.

Keywords: Intelligence Leadership. Appointments. Dismissal. Western Balkans. Politicization.

Resumo

Este estudo examina os marcos jurídicos que regem a nomeação dos dirigentes dos serviços de inteligência nos Balcãs Ocidentais, com foco em sua relação com os padrões de politização e desenvolvimento institucional. Por meio de uma análise doutrinária da legislação na Sérvia, Montenegro, Albânia, Kosovo, Macedônia do Norte e Bósnia e Herzegovina, o estudo constata que os procedimentos formais de nomeação frequentemente coexistem com resultados práticos divergentes. Estes variam desde o controle executivo centralizado até a fragmentação institucional e a dispersão da autoridade impulsionada por reformas. As conclusões indicam que a politização é uma característica comum em toda a região, embora se manifeste por meio de modelos de governança distintos, moldados pelo desenho jurídico e pelo contexto político. O artigo argumenta que o fortalecimento de procedimentos de nomeação baseados no mérito e de salvaguardas institucionais poderia reduzir a influência política e aumentar tanto a eficácia quanto a responsabilidade democrática na governança da inteligência.

Palavras-chave: Liderança dos serviços de inteligência. Nomeações. Demissão. Balcãs Ocidentais. Politização.



1 INTRODUCTION

The Western Balkans, a region steeped in a rich but turbulent history, has been navigating a complex path toward political stability and integration into broader European structures. Central to this journey is the role of intelligence services, which operate in a landscape marked by past conflicts, evolving security challenges, and the ongoing process of democratic consolidation. Intelligence services in the Western Balkans, as in other states, are tasked with safeguarding national security and contributing to the broader goals of peace and stability in the region. These organizations play a critical role in countering threats, both internal and external, ranging from organized crime and corruption to terrorism and foreign interference/threats, depending on their role and mandate. In contrast to comparable services provided in democratic nations, the impression shaped by legal frameworks is that the institutions within these countries, outlining their roles, powers, and mandates, represent democratic entities associated with NATO member countries.

Given the region's strategic geopolitical position and its history of ethnic conflicts and political upheaval, the role of intelligence services becomes even more relevant. The appointment of leaders within these intelligence services is of paramount importance. In our fast-changing world, intelligence leadership is crucial across sectors like government, military, law enforcement, business, and cybersecurity. It involves guiding intelligence activities to collect, analyze, and share vital information for informed decision-making. Additionally, it plays a key role in upholding democratic principles and human rights standards. It is widely acknowledged within scholarly discourse that politicization poses a significant detriment to the credibility of intelligence operations. The capacity of leaders to uphold autonomy from political pressures is deemed indispensable for fostering the legitimacy and operational efficacy of such entities. Furthermore, "the myopic and turf-conscious leadership of intelligence organizations who allow inefficient procedures to block the integration, dissemination, and use of available information" could be among the enemies of intelligence. However, historical scrutiny reveals a recurring trend wherein political considerations exert undue influence over the appointment processes for intelligence leadership in the Western Balkans. In the Western Balkans, a prevalent practice entails newly installed political leadership appointing individuals deemed most

loyal to their cause, with paramount consideration given to their allegiance to the ruling party's ideology and agenda. Consequently, this phenomenon often culminates in a convergence of interests between political leaders and intelligence officials, whereby both parties share a vested interest in the realization of policy outcomes, potentially leading to a state of undue concordance and susceptibility to wishful thinking. Such politicization of intelligence processes engenders multifaceted repercussions, notably compromising the transparency of governance structures, eliciting scrutiny regarding the competence and impartiality of appointees, and ultimately undermining the capacity to effectively address security imperatives.

Moreover, instances of politicization within intelligence agencies may precipitate the diversion of intelligence assets towards the advancement of singular political objectives, thereby eroding the foundational tenets of democratic governance and eroding public trust in institutional integrity. This dynamic underscores a pervasive tension between political influence and the imperative for impartial and expert oversight in matters of national security within the Western Balkans. Consequently, the selection and appointment procedures relating to intelligence agency leadership assume a pivotal and contentious role, reflecting broader concerns surrounding the preservation of institutional integrity and the mitigation of undue political interference in critical security affairs. This paper examines the complex legislative structure that regulates the nomination of the leadership of intelligence structures in this region, with a focus on the important problem of removing political influence from these appointments. Although these posts play a crucial role in carrying out national security policies, there is a noticeable pattern where appointments are influenced more by the capricious decisions of political authorities rather than the necessities of national security. The objective of this research is to critically analyze and understand the intricacies and contradictions in the appointment procedures in Kosovo, Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia. It seeks to examine how these differences can lead to institutional deadlock and the excessive influence of politics on intelligence agencies. The results indicate that making even small changes to the appointment procedures, particularly those that promote the advancement of experienced individuals from within these organizations, could lead to the development of stronger security frameworks, more professional intelligence products and therefore higher protection of national interests from the Security and Intelligence

Agencies. Reforms are necessary to reduce the current political control on these appointments, thereby enhancing the integrity and efficacy of these intelligence services in safeguarding their respective national interests.

The study is organized into several sections starting with the abstract, and introduction, followed by a literature review, a case study of the WB countries, closing with the findings and recommendations and at the end of the study, the references.

2 METHODOLOGY

This article employs a comparative qualitative case study design to examine how leadership appointment mechanisms influence politicization and institutional autonomy in intelligence agencies across the Western Balkans. A comparative design is particularly appropriate because the selected states share several structural characteristics—post-socialist transition, exposure to security sector reform, European integration pressures, and legacies of politicized state institutions—while differing in constitutional arrangements, party systems, and executive structures.

The six cases examined are:

- Albania
- Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Kosovo
- Montenegro
- North Macedonia
- Serbia

Taken together, these countries constitute a coherent regional cluster while providing sufficient institutional variation for meaningful comparison.

The study examines constitutional provisions, intelligence service laws, appointment procedures, and leadership turnover patterns in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. In addition to legal texts, the study uses official records and credible documentary sources to compare (1) appointing authority, (2) leadership continuity, (3) relationship between political transitions and leadership change, and (4) institutional safeguards. Through structured cross-case comparison, the study evaluates how legal frameworks interact with political

practice.

Incorporating relevant academic articles, books, expert commentary, and NGO reports providing contextualization, theoretical frameworks, and comparative perspectives on intelligence governance and politicization enriches the analysis. A thorough content analysis of legal documents was used to identify key provisions, terms, and criteria related to the appointment process. The study employs comparative analysis across countries to discern similarities and differences in legal frameworks, elucidating how subtle variations in law can produce significant practical disparities. Legal provisions are examined within the political and historical contexts of each country, exploring their evolution and interaction with broader political and governance structures.

The study critically evaluates the effectiveness of existing legal frameworks in ensuring impartial and professional appointments by assessing them against standards of good governance, transparency, and accountability. This evaluation involves scrutinizing the laws' practical implications and their alignment with principles of sound governance, to provide insights for enhancing the integrity and efficacy of intelligence service leadership appointment processes in the Western Balkans.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

While existing literature has examined intelligence politicization in established democracies, comparatively little attention has been devoted to leadership appointment mechanisms in post-transition Western Balkan states. Most studies focus on intelligence failures, oversight, or operational abuse rather than leadership selection as a recurring institutional process. This article addresses that gap by comparatively examining how appointment frameworks shape politicization and institutional autonomy in six Western Balkan countries.

As articulated by Robert Gates, the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in 1992, the issue of politicization within intelligence operations has persisted over time, defying easy resolution. Despite its enduring presence, scholarly literature addressing this concern is relatively scarce and lacks robust scientific foundations, often relying on anecdotal evidence and historical recollections. Consequently, there exists a paucity of rigorous academic inquiry into politicization as a potential pathology within

the interface of intelligence and politics. Lowenthal argues that politicized intelligence weakens analytical credibility, while Treverton emphasizes the danger of policy-driven intelligence shaping. Gill and Phythian further highlight the governance challenge of secrecy within democratic systems.

An area particularly susceptible to the deleterious effects of politicization is the appointment process for leaders within intelligence agencies. This vulnerability stems from the expectation placed upon these appointed officials to produce intelligence outputs that align with predetermined political agendas. Throughout various geopolitical contexts, including but not limited to the Western Balkans, the appointment of intelligence agency heads has consistently engendered controversy and complexity within political discourse. This process entails the selection and placement of individuals into senior intelligence roles by political leaders, thereby imbuing the management and strategic direction of intelligence entities with a distinct political dimension. In the realm of intelligence politicization, akin to pivotal political determinations, there exist both merits and demerits that impact not only the efficacy of intelligence bodies but also their interfacing with a nation's domestic and foreign policies, notably within the sphere of national security. Lowenthal contends that politicized intelligence compromises analytical effectiveness. Rubin concurs with Lowenthal, asserting that politicization is escalating both in variety and volume. Through an examination of Western Balkans states and beyond, it has been discerned that political appointments tend to instigate a heightened level of politicization within intelligence agencies, potentially steering decisions towards political expediency rather than objective analysis and the generation of professional intelligence outputs. Treverton characterizes politicized intelligence as the inclination towards certain perspectives or conclusions during intelligence analysis or policy interactions, which may suppress alternative evidence or viewpoints. Scholars vary in their conceptualizations, with some attaching negative connotations to politicization while others recognize it as an inherent aspect of the intelligence-policy nexus, potentially beneficial in specific contexts. Our research indicates that political appointments often fluctuate with changing administrations, resulting in instability and discontinuity in intelligence agency leadership, thereby impeding effectiveness and the cultivation of a robust organizational ethos. The frequent upheavals stemming from political appointments in leadership engender the perpetual risk of intelligence data being utilized

to bolster political agendas rather than serving as a basis for evidence-based and impartial decision-making processes. As pointed out in the context of these political appointments, the studies also examined the possible advantages in the way of applying these appointments, such as political compatibility in these appointments, where it is known that political appointments can ensure that the heads of intelligence are in line with policies and approaches of the political leadership of the country and consequently of their political vision for the direction of the country and in the aspects of national security, both internal and external. Eisenfeld when it comes to the pros and cons, argues that neither the quest for a standardized definition nor the concept of politicization leads to definitive conclusions. Under these circumstances, these appointments can help ensure clear and effective coordination between intelligence agencies and political leadership, with particular emphasis on heads of government and the President. In this relation, “well-known individual in the world of intelligence analysis” Sherman Kent states that “intelligence must be close enough to policy, plans and operations to have the greatest amount of guidance, and must not be so close that it loses all its objectivity and integrity of judgment”. According to some studies, another positive aspect in this context could be that of democratic accountability, being appointed by elected leaders, these leaders are, in a way, more accountable to the public and elected representatives. This can increase accountability and transparency in intelligence activities. There are also opinions of that nature that these appointments usually occur with the changes that come as a result of new elections and the establishment of new political leadership in institutions that emphasize that these appointments can also bring refreshment of perspectives where according to this approach the new appointments can bring new perspectives and innovative ideas to the management of intelligence services, which can be useful in adapting to changing global threats and challenges. “The best analysis is useless if those with authority to act on it do not use it”.

This research draws on the work of the pertinent insights proffered by Gregory F. Treverton and Glenn Hastedt, whose theoretical constructs illuminate the intricacies of politicization within intelligence realms.

Treverton delineates the politicization of intelligence as involving high-ranking policymakers exerting direct pressure to manipulate conclusions in alignment with their agendas, while selectively disregarding contradictory data and favoring analyses

supportive of their objectives. Additionally, the structuring of inquiries is geared towards steering analyses towards preconceived outcomes, potentially fostering a collective mindset akin to groupthink, wherein both intelligence and policy circles adopt a homogeneous viewpoint.

In contrast, Hastedt distinguishes between soft and hard politicization of intelligence. Soft politicization entails contextualizing information for consumers without altering its essence, while hard politicization involves explicit efforts to compel analysts to adopt predetermined assumptions or conclusions.

These conceptual frameworks furnish a nuanced comprehension of the diverse manifestations of politicization within intelligence processes, underscoring the paramount importance of upholding independence and objectivity in intelligence analysis and decision-making. By dealing with these complexities, scholars and practitioners can endeavor to uphold the integrity and efficacy of intelligence institutions amidst the dynamic geopolitical landscape.

3.1 Assessing the current nomination procedures for leadership in Western Balkan intelligence agencies: Trends, issues, and prospects

The regulatory frameworks governing the appointment and dismissal procedures of Heads of Intelligence Services in the Western Balkans (WB) countries exhibit considerable heterogeneity. While certain nations address this matter directly within their highest legal document, namely the Constitution, others rely on specialized legislation. This discourse shall concentrate on individual countries within the region, elucidating the legal and procedural mechanisms employed in handling such appointments. Further details on how Balkan states have formalized these appointments are provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Comparative Appointment Structures and Politicization Risk in Western Balkan Intelligence Agencies

State	Main Intelligence Agency	Formal Appointing Authority	Parliamentary Involvement	Explicit Professional Eligibility Requirements	Executive Discretion Level	Indicative Politicization Risk
Kosovo	Kosovo Intelligence Agency (AKI/KIA)	President and Prime Minister (joint appointment)	Limited	No explicit prior intelligence service requirement identified	Medium	Medium
Serbia	Security Information Agency (BIA)	Government of Serbia	Limited	No explicit prior intelligence service requirement identified	High	High
North Macedonia	National Security Agency (ANB); Intelligence Agency (AR)	Government (ANB); President (AR)	Limited	No explicit prior intelligence service requirement identified	Medium	Medium
Montenegro	National Security Agency (ANB)	Government of Montenegro	Limited	No explicit prior intelligence service requirement identified	High	High
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Intelligence-Security Agency (OSA/OBA)	Multi-actor state appointment procedure	Moderate	No explicit prior intelligence service requirement identified	Medium	Medium-High
Albania	State Intelligence Service (SHISH)	President and Prime Minister / executive coordination	Limited	No explicit prior intelligence service requirement identified	Medium	Medium

Notes: Executive Discretion Level refers to the extent to which political executives can influence appointments without strong institutional veto constraints. Indicative Politicization Risk is an analytical assessment derived from appointment concentration, institutional safeguards, and comparative governance patterns.

Risk levels are interpretive rather than deterministic and should be read as comparative indicators.

Source: Compiled by the author from constitutions, intelligence legislation, official institutional procedures, and comparative legal analysis.

The Republic of North Macedonia (RNM), within the ambit of its security infrastructure, maintains two distinct intelligence services: one dedicated to External Intelligence (referred to as AR in the local parlance) and the other focused on domestic Intelligence activities (known as ANB in the local language). Notably, the RNM Constitution does not explicitly delineate provisions pertaining to the appointment of the heads of its security and Intelligence services. Instead, this aspect finds regulatory clarity through separate legislative instruments governing each service, namely Laws No. 08-3047/1 of 2019 and No. 08-475/1 25 of 2021. In consonance with this framework, the RNM operationalizes distinct procedures for appointing the leaders of its two intelligence/security services, each governed by its own legislative mandate. Notably, the appointment process diverges between the Director of the External Intelligence Agency and the Director of the Internal Intelligence Service. The appointment and dismissal of

the Director of the External Intelligence Agency fall within the prerogative of the President of the Republic, as stipulated by Article 5 of the Intelligence Agency Law.

Conversely, the appointment mechanism for the Director of the Internal Intelligence Services (renamed from UBK to ANB following legislative revisions) follows a distinct trajectory, with the appointing authority differing from that of the external service. Accordingly, the Director of ANB is appointed by the Government upon the proposal of the Prime Minister of RNM.

The Republic of Albania operates a unified civil intelligence service tasked with the acquisition of strategic information pertinent to national interests both domestically and abroad. The process for nominating the Director of the State Information Service of Albania (referred to as SHISH locally) is delineated within Article 92, paragraph f) of the Constitution. This constitutional provision stipulates that the Prime Minister proffers a nomination for the directorship; however, the ultimate authority for appointment rests with the President of the Republic. Furthermore, the responsibilities and *modus operandi* of SHISH are codified within a specialized legislative framework. According to the pertinent law, specifically Article 4, the National Information Service operates as a central agency under the auspices of the Prime Minister. Additionally, Article 5, as amended by Law No. 8479 dated April 29, 1999, reiterates the process for appointing the director. Notably, it is elucidated that the Director of the National Information Service, along with the Deputy Director, is appointed and dismissed by the President of the Republic upon the recommendation of the Prime Minister.

The State of Bosnia and Herzegovina maintains a singular Civilian Intelligence Service, established under the designation of the Intelligence and Security Agency, as outlined in its founding legislation. The procedural framework governing the appointment of the Director of the Intelligence and Security Agency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, colloquially known as OSA, reflects a notably intricate process due to the intricate political structure regulated by the Dayton Agreement. Contrary to the Constitution, which lacks explicit provisions concerning the appointment and removal of the OSA Director, the method for appointing and dismissing OSA Director is delineated in a distinct legislative instrument. By the Law, the assent of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina is mandated for the appointment of the OSA Director and his Deputy. Despite the Chair of the Council of Ministers holding primary responsibility for

appointing and dismissing OSA leadership, the process is considerably intricate, which stipulates that the Director-General and Deputy Director-General shall be appointed and dismissed by the Council of Ministers, upon the recommendation of the Chair of the Council of Ministers and in consultation with members of the Presidency, the Executive Committee, and the Intelligence-Security Committee.

Furthermore, the Law (article 6) institutes a comprehensive reporting framework for the OSA Director. It mandates timely dissemination of intelligence-related information to various officials and bodies, both proactively and in response to requests. These entities include the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Chair of the Council of Ministers, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Security, and Defense, as well as the Presidents, Vice-Presidents, and Prime Ministers of the Federation and Republika Srpska, among others. Additionally, the Intelligence-Security Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina is included in this list. In contrast to the explicit provisions found in the constitutions of Kosovo and Albania, the Constitution of Serbia lacks clear stipulations regarding the appointment process for the heads of the Security Information Agency (BIA). Instead, the appointment procedures for the heads of Serbia's Intelligence Service, namely the BIA, are delineated within the framework of the Law on Security Information Agency. According to Article 5 of this legislation, the responsibility for appointing and dismissing the Director of the Agency lies with the Government. This absence of a robust legal framework provides ample opportunity for politically motivated appointments.

Scholarly inquiries corroborate the assertion that "...High-ranking officials are appointed and dismissed without adherence to legal provisions and clear justifications", thereby exacerbating the vulnerability to politically motivated appointments within the intelligence services, both civilian and military. This state of affairs poses a significant threat to democratic governance, particularly considering the substantial police powers vested within the agency's purview.

In Montenegro, the State Constitution does not explicitly outline the procedures for appointing the heads of the Civil Intelligence Service, known as ANB. However, the appointment and dismissal process for Intelligence Service heads is governed by a distinct legislative framework, specifically the Law on the National Security Agency (NSA or ANB in the local language). According to Article 25 of this law, the Director of the

Agency is appointed and relieved of duty by the Government upon the recommendation of the Prime Minister. Additionally, the Government is obligated to submit the proposal for the appointment of the Agency Director to the Parliament of Montenegro for its evaluation.

Conversely, Kosovo has codified the procedures for appointing the heads of the intelligence agency, also known as AKI, within its Constitution. Specifically, Article 129 delineates the appointment process, affirming that the President of the Republic of Kosovo and the Prime Minister, in consultation with the Government, jointly appoint the Director, Deputy Director, and General Inspector of the Kosovo Intelligence Agency. Furthermore, Article 84 of the Constitution, which outlines the President's competencies, reiterates this joint appointment authority with the Prime Minister for the Director, Deputy Director, and Inspector General of the Kosovo Intelligence Agency.

In contrast to other Western Balkan states, Kosovo explicitly delineates in both its constitution and specific legislation the shared responsibility of the President and the Prime Minister in appointing the leadership of the Kosovo Intelligence Agency (AKI). Furthermore, the special law (03/L-063) governing the activities of AKI reaffirms the procedures for appointing the agency's leaders. Specifically, it details the process for appointing the Director, Deputy Director, and General Inspector of AKI. Additionally, this legislation elucidates the roles, responsibilities, and interrelations of these positions with the heads of state.

3.2 Political changes reflected in the management structures of intelligence services in Western Balkan States (2010–2026)

When examining trends and influences shaping the leadership of intelligence services in the Western Balkan states, a prominent feature is the reflection of political transitions in the leadership of these agencies. This pattern often entails a recurrent cycle wherein political shifts and alterations in state governance directly impact the composition and trajectory of intelligence services. Consequently, new intelligence chiefs are frequently appointed, often with close affiliations to the ruling political parties or prevailing political agendas.

These leadership changes are observed to have enduring ramifications on the efficacy and professionalism of intelligence services, influencing their information management practices and responses to security challenges.

In Montenegro, spanning from 2010 to 2026, there have been eight directors of the National Security Agency (ANB). Analysis of these changes reveals a discernible correlation between shifts in intelligence leadership and political transformations within the country. Between 2005 and 2020, the ANB witnessed four Directors: Duško Marković (2005-2010), Vladan Joković (2010-2011), Boro Vučinić (2012-2015), and Dejan Peruničić (2015-2020). The stability and longevity of these ANB leaders correspond to the enduring tenure of the Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (DPS), with Milo Đukanović at the helm.

However, following the DPS's loss of power and subsequent political shifts, spanning from 2020 to 2024, Montenegro experienced three Prime Ministers: Zdravko Krivokapić (2020-2022), Dritan Abazović (2022-2023), and Milojko Spajić (2023-incumbent). Concurrently, during this period, the ANB witnessed four Directors: Dejan Peruničić departed from his position in December 2020 with the advent of the new government, succeeded by Dejan Vukšić (2020-2022), and subsequently Savo Kentera (2022-2022). Presently, the position of the director is occupied by Boris Milić. Milić served as acting director of the ANB for six months and that was the maximum legal space for acting this position according to the law on ANB. Milic was succeeded by another acting director Artan Kurti, the National Security Agency (ANB) has witnessed four changes in its directorship, and the current Director was appointed without the Parliament opinion as required by the Law in place. "As until the date of submission of this proposal, even after the passage of two and a half months, i.e. 77 days, the Assembly did not submit an opinion on the appointment proposal".

Currently, the newly proposed law concerning the National Security Agency (ANB) has been returned to Parliament for reconsideration. This decision was made by the President of Montenegro in March 2026, reflecting ongoing political and institutional debate surrounding the legal framework governing the country's intelligence sector. "They were rightly flagged by the European Commission (EC) as well as by NGOs working in this field (MANS, Institut Alternativa, HRA and others)", said Milatovic. "By returning this law for reconsideration, I am enabling the proposer of the law to address

the mentioned normative deficiencies and submit a version to the Parliament that will be fully compliant with the Constitution and European standards” The leadership of the National Security Agency (ANB) in Montenegro over the past fifteen years has been characterized less by consistent political consolidation and more by institutional instability, particularly after 2020. During the earlier period, under figures such as Duško Marković, the agency maintained relatively stable leadership closely aligned with the long-standing rule of the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS). However, following the political transition in 2020, which ended decades of DPS dominance, the ANB entered a phase of frequent leadership changes and contested appointments. Directors such as Dejan Vukšić and Savo Kentera were appointed amid shifting coalition dynamics, often lacking broad political consensus. Additionally, the repeated reliance on acting directors, including Boris Milić and Artan Kurti, further reflects the fragility of institutional continuity. Unlike the Serbian case, where political loyalty has produced stability at the cost of autonomy, the Montenegrin intelligence sector illustrates a different challenge: persistent politicization combined with fragmentation, resulting in weakened governance capacity and reduced institutional coherence. These dynamics raise important concerns regarding both the effectiveness and the democratic oversight of intelligence services in Montenegro.

In the Republic of Serbia, between 2010 and 2026, the Security Information Agency (BIA) had six different Directors: Saša Vukadinović (2008-2012), Nebojsa Rodić (2012-2013), Aleksandar Djordjevic (2013-2017), Bratislav Gasic (2017-2022), Alexander Vulin (2022-2023), and Tomislav Radovanović served in an acting capacity since December 2023 (bia.gov.rs, 2024). From 2024 and currently serving as director Vladimir Orlić, there has been a notable degree of stability in BIA leadership, with the exception of Aleksandar Vulin’s resignation from the directorship due to perceived unfavorable geopolitical alignments. The U.S. designation of Aleksandar Vulin underscores the United States’ determination to hold accountable those engaged in corrupt dealings that further their own political agendas and personal interests at the expense of peace and stability in the Western Balkans. These corrupt dealings facilitate Russian malign activities in Serbia and the region.

This stability in BIA’s leadership can be attributed largely to the political continuity in Serbia since 2012, following the rise of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS)

led by President Aleksander Vucic, which has secured victory in five consecutive parliamentary elections.

Over the past fifteen years, the leadership of the Security Information Agency (BIA) in Serbia has become increasingly intertwined with the country's political executive, particularly following the rise to power of Aleksandar Vučić in 2012. Prior to this period, the agency's leadership, such as under Saša Vukadinović, reflected a more institutional and less personalized model of governance. However, subsequent appointments indicate a clear shift toward political alignment. Directors including Nebojša Rodić and Aleksandar Đorđević were closely associated with the emerging ruling structures, while later figures such as Bratislav Gašić and Aleksandar Vulin were prominent political actors and long-standing allies of Vučić. Their appointments suggest a deliberate consolidation of executive influence over the intelligence sector. The current director, Vladimir Orlić, a former Speaker of Parliament and senior member of the ruling party, further reinforces this pattern. Collectively, these developments point to a broader trend of politicization, where institutional autonomy has been reduced in favour of political loyalty, raising concerns regarding the independence and neutrality of intelligence governance in Serbia.

Similarly, in Albania, the State Information Service (SHISH) has undergone leadership transitions echoing those in Serbia. From 2010 to 2024, SHISH had four directors: Bahri Shaqiri (2005-2012), Visho Ajazi Lika (2012-2017), Helidon Bendo (2017-2023), and currently, Vlora Hyseni, who assumed office on April 3, 2023, and continues in her role as Director of SHISH.

Since 2013, Albania has been governed consistently by the Socialist Party of Albania, led by Edi Rama, marking a period characterized by four consecutive electoral victories for the party. Throughout this tenure, the administration has exercised authority over appointments and dismissals within the State Information Service (SHISH). An examination of leadership transitions within SHISH during the Rama administration reveals a pattern of three directorial changes. This alignment of political leadership with rotational shifts at the helm of SHISH offers valuable insights into governance dynamics and the management of state intelligence services within Albania's political landscape. The leadership of the State Intelligence Service (SHISH) in Albania over the past fifteen years reflects a hybrid pattern combining elements of political influence with periods of

relative institutional continuity. Unlike the increasingly centralized and politically aligned model observed in Serbia, and the post-2020 instability seen in Montenegro, the Albanian case demonstrates a more moderated form of politicization. Leadership transitions, such as the shift from Visho Ajazi Lika to Helidon Bendo, and more recently to Vlora Hyseni, have generally occurred in line with broader political changes, particularly under the prolonged governance of Edi Rama. However, these appointments have not exhibited the same degree of overt political personalization as in Serbia, nor the level of fragmentation observed in Montenegro. Instead, SHISH appears to operate within a framework where executive influence is present but partially balanced by institutional norms and continuity in leadership. This has contributed to a relatively more stable intelligence governance structure, although concerns regarding political sensitivity and the limits of institutional independence remain relevant within the broader context of democratic oversight.

Kosovo, as the youngest state in the region, established its security institutions following the 1998-1999 war, completing the process after declaring independence in 2008. Since the establishment of the Kosovo Intelligence Agency (AKI) in 2009, there have been six different directors and one acting director: Bashkim Smakaj (2009-2015), Agron Selimaj (2015-2017), Driton Gashi (2017-2018), Shpend Maxhuni (2018-2019), Kreshnik Gashi (2019-2020), Vlora Hyseni (2020-2021, acting Director), and Petrit Ajeti (2021-Incumbent).

Notably, the six-year tenure of Director Smakaj coincides with the governance under the Democratic Party of Kosovo led by Hashim Thaqi. Subsequent to 2014, Kosovo witnessed more frequent changes in governance, reflected in the frequent turnover at the helm of AKI, with five different Directors within six years. The current Director's tenure is emblematic of Kosovo's political stability, as the party with a significant majority just reentered the new mandate. It is noteworthy that Kosovo for the first time has experienced a government that has completed a full mandate since declaring independence. With the exception of Smakaj, who completed the legally mandated five-year term, this is only the second case in the short institutional history of AKI in which a director has served a full term and entered a second mandate.

The leadership of the Kosovo Intelligence Agency (AKI) in Kosovo over the past fifteen years reflects a distinct trajectory compared to other Western Balkan intelligence services, characterized by relatively limited direct political personalization in its

leadership structure. As a post-independence institution, AKI was established within a framework that emphasized professionalization and institutional neutrality. The appointment of early leadership figures, such as Bashkim Smakaj, is widely understood not as a product of partisan alignment but rather as part of a broader national compromise aimed at ensuring institutional legitimacy and cross-political acceptance during the agency's formative phase. Subsequent directors, including Driton Gashi and Petrit Ajeti, have generally maintained a lower public political profile, reinforcing the perception of a more technocratic leadership model. While political dynamics have inevitably influenced appointments at the executive level, overt and publicly recognized political affiliations among AKI leadership have remained comparatively limited. Notably, among senior figures associated with the institution, Burim Ramadani has been more explicitly identified with political activity prior to his appointment, representing an exception rather than the norm. AKI illustrates a comparatively restrained model of politicization, where efforts toward professionalization and institutional credibility have played a more central role than direct political loyalty, although the influence of executive authority in appointments continues to raise important considerations for democratic oversight. Overall, the case of AKI illustrates a transitional model, where institutional development and professionalization coexist with persistent, though comparatively moderated, political influence, raising ongoing questions regarding the balance between executive control and the independence of intelligence governance in Kosovo.

The Republic of North Macedonia adheres to a consistent pattern wherein changes in the leadership of its intelligence services correspond to shifts in the country's political leadership. Over the period spanning from 2010 to 2026, six Directors of the Internal Service, formerly known as the UBK and currently referred to as the ANB, underwent changes: Sašo Mijalkov (2006-2015), Ljupčo Andonovski (2015-2016), Vladimir Atanasovski (2016-2017), Goran Nikolovski (2017-2019), Viktor Dimovski (2019-2022), and Zarko Milosevski (2022-2024) and Bojan Hristovski (2024- incumbent).

Similarly to the internal Intelligence Service, within the External Service, abbreviated as the AR, four Directors held office from 2010 to 2024: Aleksandar Bocinov (2009-2013), Nakje Chulev (2013-2017), Zoran Ivanov (2017-2019), and Eroid Musliu (2019-2024), Gabriela Jakovleva (2024-incumbent). Notably, a divergence in approach is observed in the last three appointments of directors within the External Service, whereby

these appointments were primarily not publicly associated with political parties. This stands in contrast to the Internal Service, where historical trends indicate that directors were often appointed based on political alignments. In the context of North Macedonia (NM), political shifts have notably influenced the appointments of heads within the Intelligence Services, particularly the Agency for National Security (NSA). The prolonged tenure of Sašo Mijalkov as the head of the UBK/ANB for nearly nine years is largely attributed to the governance of the VMRO-DPMNE party under Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, who held office from 2006 to 2016. However, as political instability emerged in NM and changes in political leadership ensued, frequent turnovers at the helm of the intelligence services became apparent.

Conversely, the relative stability observed within the External Service (AR) appears to mirror the consistent leadership within the Presidency of NM, which witnessed three Presidents from 2009 to 2024. Notably, the appointments at the head of the AR of NM also reflect the inclusion of demands from the Albanian Community of North Macedonia. This was exemplified by the historic appointment of an Albanian Director to lead the Republic of Macedonia External Intelligence Agency, a decision influenced by the necessity to secure the votes of Albanian deputies in the Assembly of Macedonia, including the election of President Pendarovski. The intelligence governance structure in North Macedonia presents a distinct case in the Western Balkans, characterized by structural reform and institutional differentiation rather than purely leadership-driven dynamics. Following the major surveillance scandal associated with the former UBK, the country undertook comprehensive reforms in 2018–2019, resulting in the establishment of the National Security Agency (NSA) as a domestic counterintelligence body and the continuation of the Intelligence Agency (IA) for foreign intelligence. Since its creation in 2019, the NSA has had a limited number of directors, including Viktor Dimovski, Zharko Miloshevski, and Bojan Hristovski, reflecting a relatively stable leadership trajectory compared to Montenegro's frequent turnover. At the same time, leadership appointments have remained closely linked to governing coalitions, indicating the persistence of executive influence. However, unlike Serbia's centralized and personalized model, North Macedonia's dual-agency system introduces a degree of institutional dispersion, which may mitigate the concentration of power within a single intelligence body. Overall, the North Macedonian case illustrates a reform-oriented model of intelligence governance,

where efforts to enhance oversight, reduce systemic abuse, and align with Euro-Atlantic standards coexist with ongoing challenges related to political influence and institutional consolidation.

Within the broader context of Western Balkan states, Bosnia and Herzegovina presents a unique scenario concerning changes in leadership within the Intelligence and Security Agency (OSA). Since its establishment in 2004, OSA has witnessed two Directors. The stability in leadership changes within the Agency can be attributed to the uninterrupted tenure of the SDA political party under Bakir Izetbegović, as well as the challenges posed by the multi-tiered decision-making processes within Bosnia and Herzegovina's political system, comprising Bosniak, Serb, and Croat entities. The Directors of OSA over the years have been Almir Džuvo (2004-2015), Osman Mehmedagić (2015-2020), and Almir Džuvo (2023-Incumbent). Three appointments involving two individuals. The leadership of the Intelligence-Security Agency in Bosnia and Herzegovina over the past fifteen years reflects a unique governance model shaped by the country's complex constitutional and political structure. Unlike the centralized patterns observed in Serbia or the reform-driven model of North Macedonia, OSA has operated within a highly fragmented political system defined by power-sharing among ethnic groups. Leadership appointments, such as those of Almir Džuvo and Osman Mehmedagić, have often been influenced by inter-ethnic political negotiations, resulting in extended mandates but also recurring institutional disputes. While the relatively low number of directors suggests a degree of continuity, this stability has not necessarily translated into strong institutional autonomy. On the contrary, controversies surrounding appointments, legal qualifications, and political affiliations—particularly in the case of Mehmedagić—highlight persistent tensions between formal institutional frameworks and political realities. Compared to Montenegro's instability or Serbia's executive consolidation, Bosnia and Herzegovina illustrates a third model: one of constrained stability, where intelligence governance is shaped less by a single dominant executive and more by competing political actors, thereby complicating both effective oversight and coherent institutional development.

4 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined intelligence leadership appointment processes and governance patterns across Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The comparative findings demonstrate that politicization remains a recurring feature across the Western Balkans, although it manifests through different institutional forms and political dynamics.

Serbia reflects a highly centralized model of intelligence governance, where appointment authority is strongly concentrated within the executive branch. This structure has generated relative leadership continuity, but it has also raised persistent concerns regarding institutional autonomy and political dependence. Montenegro presents a contrasting pattern characterized by political transition, coalition instability, and frequent leadership turnover, suggesting politicization through fragmentation rather than centralized control.

Albania demonstrates a more moderate model in which executive influence coexists with periods of continuity and comparatively technocratic leadership. Kosovo likewise represents a relatively restrained form of politicization, where formal institutional legitimacy and professionalization have been emphasized despite continued executive involvement in appointments. North Macedonia illustrates a reform-oriented trajectory following governance crises, where structural reorganization sought to disperse intelligence authority and reduce opportunities for abuse, although political influence has not been fully eliminated. Bosnia and Herzegovina remains the most institutionally complex case, where intelligence governance is shaped by constitutional power-sharing arrangements that constrain unilateral control while simultaneously producing political contestation and governance inefficiencies.

Taken together, these findings indicate that intelligence politicization should not be understood as a uniform phenomenon. In some states it appears through stable executive dominance, while in others it emerges through instability, coalition bargaining, or contested legitimacy. Leadership appointments therefore provide an important observable indicator of how political power interacts with intelligence institutions in systems where operational transparency is limited.

The study further finds that frequent politically driven leadership changes may

weaken organizational continuity, reduce professionalization, and undermine the long-term production of reliable intelligence assessments. Conversely, continuity alone should not automatically be interpreted as institutional independence, since long tenure may also reflect sustained executive control. This distinction is particularly important for comparative intelligence governance research.

More broadly, the quality of intelligence governance in the Western Balkans remains closely connected to democratic consolidation, rule-of-law development, and European integration aspirations. As all six states continue, to varying degrees, to pursue closer cooperation with the European Union and Euro-Atlantic institutions, the reform of intelligence leadership selection processes remains politically and strategically significant.

4.1 Limitations

This study is subject to limitations common in intelligence research. Publicly available information regarding internal appointment deliberations, informal political bargaining, and classified institutional practices remains limited and uneven across countries. Consequently, the analysis relies on legal frameworks, official records, leadership timelines, and credible documentary reporting. Nevertheless, leadership appointments remain one of the most accessible and analytically valuable indicators through which politicization can be comparatively assessed.

4.2 Recommendations

4.2.1 Merit-based appointment criteria

Existing laws and regulations should be amended to reduce discretionary political influence in the appointment and dismissal of intelligence leaders. Clear professional criteria should be established, including managerial experience, security expertise, integrity standards, and demonstrated commitment to democratic governance and human rights.

4.2.2 Transparent and accountable procedures

States should strengthen transparency in appointment processes through parliamentary hearings, committee review procedures, and legally defined reporting obligations. While operational secrecy remains necessary, governance procedures should be subject to democratic scrutiny.

4.2.3 Fixed mandates and protected tenure

Leadership positions should be linked to fixed legal mandates with clearly defined dismissal grounds. This would reduce arbitrary turnover following elections or coalition changes and improve institutional continuity.

4.2.4 Professional internal career development

Governments should encourage structured career pathways that allow experienced internal professionals to advance into senior leadership roles. This would strengthen institutional memory and reduce dependence on externally imposed political appointments.

4.2.5 Regional cooperation and exchange of best practices

Western Balkan states should expand cooperation in intelligence governance reform, training standards, and oversight practices. The European Union and relevant international partners could facilitate such exchanges through technical dialogue and institutional support.

4.2.6 Continued international support

The European Union, NATO, and other democratic partners should continue

supporting intelligence sector reform through technical assistance, training, legal advisory mechanisms, and rule-of-law conditionality aimed at strengthening accountable governance.

4.3 Final observation

The depoliticization of intelligence governance does not require eliminating democratic control over security institutions. Rather, it requires ensuring that democratic control is exercised through law, professionalism, institutional checks, and accountability rather than through personal loyalty, patronage, or short-term political expediency. Across the Western Balkans, progress toward this standard remains uneven but achievable.

AI DECLARATION

The author confirms that no generative artificial intelligence tool was used to produce the empirical findings, legal analysis, comparative assessments, or substantive conclusions of this study. Artificial intelligence-assisted language tools may have been used in a limited capacity for grammar correction, language refinement, and stylistic editing only. All research design choices, source selection, interpretations, arguments, and final written content remain the sole responsibility of the author.

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