



# THE KOSOVO LIBERATION ARMY (UÇK) and the dynamics of regional cooperation: the metamorphosis from insurgent actor to NATO partner

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## ABSTRACT

This paper<sup>1</sup> examines how the Kosovo Liberation Army (UÇK) evolved from an insurgent movement initially labeled a terrorist organization into a political actor and de facto NATO partner during the 1999 intervention. The study explores the factors that led to the rise of the UÇK, its role in the Kosovar conflict, and how international perceptions shaped its legitimacy. It also analyzes the broader implications for regional security and the geopolitical balance in Southeast Europe. The findings suggest that the pragmatic engagement between NATO and the UÇK reflected a broader pattern in which international actors have, in specific contexts, cooperated with non-state armed groups to achieve strategic objectives – a phenomenon observable in other cases as well. Rather than fundamentally altering the nature of relations between international organizations and non-state actors, this cooperation underscored the instrumental nature of global interventionism, driven by concrete goals and shaped by the complexities of the conflict environment. Meanwhile, Romania, as a NATO member since 2004, has continued to support Allied operations and regional stability through active participation and logistical cooperation, consolidating its image as a reliable strategic partner and a key stabilizing actor in Southeast Europe. The analysis underscores the importance of regional cooperation and the integration of the Western Balkans into Euro-Atlantic structures as a sustainable path towards long-term stability.

**Keywords:** *Kosovo Liberation Army, NATO intervention, non-state actors, international legitimacy, regional security.*

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## Introduction

The region's strategic importance stems from its geographic location at the crossroads of Central Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East. This position makes the Western Balkans not only a transit route but also a crucial area for the security and stability of the entire continent. Additionally, the abundance of natural resources and the potential for economic growth heighten international actors' interest. From a geopolitical perspective, the Balkan region has consistently been an area of intervention by major powers. The main centers of development – Athens in ancient times, Constantinople during the Byzantine era, Habsburg Vienna, and Hungarian Budapest – shaped historical events, and the Ottoman period was the only moment of relative cohesion (Hayden, 2013). Western Europe perceived the Balkans through a "divide and rule" approach, treating the region as a periphery, as a different territory, where European interest led to ignoring local actors or selectively supporting certain state entities (Kolstø, 2016).

Over the last twenty years, the countries in this region have steadily pursued Euro-Atlantic integration, aligning with the European Union and NATO through political and institutional reforms aimed at promoting democratization and reinforcing the rule of law. However, the process remains complicated and often fragile, continuing to limit internal stability and influence the development of regional cooperation.

The literature indicates that the political and economic transition in the Western Balkans is among the most complex in Europe. After the armed conflicts of the 1990s, the countries in the region have worked towards institutional reform and consolidation, the implementation of the rule of law, economic recovery, dispute resolution between states, and the management of inter-ethnic tensions. The European Union, NATO, and other international organizations have offered concrete support to the Balkan countries for comprehensive (political, social, and economic) recovery and integration into the Euro-Atlantic community.

Scholars have often conceptualized the region as a framework for understanding post-conflict reconstruction, which is why research primarily focuses on significant issues such as ethnic conflicts, EU and NATO enlargement, migration, post-socialist transition, and economic development. All these areas of research are relevant from both theoretical and practical perspectives, with implications for European and international policies. Analysis of the region concerns not only the local area, but also the stability and security of the entire continent.

Although the Western Balkans have been extensively studied, and the UÇK has been discussed in numerous works, particularly in analyses of interethnic conflicts in the region, certain aspects of the movement's evolution and international perception remain less systematically explored. Much of the existing literature situates the UÇK within the broader context of the Yugoslav conflicts, often without an in-depth examination of its internal dynamics or its evolving role vis-à-vis international actors.

In general, studies on the conflict in the province of Kosovo focus mainly on the role of the Kosovo Liberation Army (UÇK) in the dynamics of the fighting and on the internal mechanisms of the conflict. This approach has provided a detailed picture of the balance of power and military strategies. Still, it has placed the immediate impact on the regional environment and neighboring states on the back burner. Furthermore, the process by which the UÇK went from being a contested actor to a recognized interlocutor on the international stage remains insufficiently explored in terms of its effects on the criteria for legitimizing external interventions. Furthermore, the relationship between the UÇK and external actors remains insufficiently documented, making it difficult to understand the actual impact that this organization had on the conflict's evolution and the region's stability.

The study aims to examine the political, economic, and social developments in the Western Balkans during the post-conflict period, with a focus on European integration dynamics, external actors' influence, and the region's development prospects. It also seeks to identify the obstacles hindering this process and to provide an overview of the Western Balkans' future within European and global contexts. The study of the Western Balkans attracts the attention of researchers in political science and international relations, as well as of European institutions and international organizations involved in regional stabilization and integration efforts. The growing interest in this area is driven by its strategic importance to Europe's security framework and by the internal challenges that continue to impact the development of states in the region.

Consequently, the study is guided by the following central research question: To what extent did the key stages in the evolution of the Kosovo Liberation Army mirror and interact with the broader regional dynamics of Southeast Europe?

The primary purpose of this research is to examine the evolution and impact of the Kosovo Liberation Army's (UÇK) activities from both regional and international perspectives, while also considering their direct implications for Romania's national security,

particularly regarding regional stability and post-conflict challenges in the Western Balkans. The research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the UÇK's role during the Kosovo conflict (1996-1999) by employing an analytical framework that integrates historical context, strategic dynamics, legal dimensions, and the movement's interaction with international actors.

This approach seeks to highlight how the UÇK's evolution reflected broader regional transformations and how its emergence shaped, rather than redefined, international responses to the Kosovo crisis.

The proposed analysis includes, in the first stage, a historical and political contextualization of the Western Balkans, from the breakup of Yugoslavia to the emergence of the UÇK. Subsequently, the international perspective on this subject will be examined, along with the influence of its progressive recognition on Euro-Atlantic decision-making. A separate section will be devoted to Romania's role, which, although not directly involved in the conflict, supported NATO and contributed to strengthening regional cooperation.

The research makes a fresh contribution by analyzing the interaction between the process of legitimizing the UÇK and the regional security architecture, while also offering a perspective on Romania's role in this context. The final interpretation will focus on interdependence and cooperation as sustainable solutions for stability and common development in the Western Balkans.

For the multidimensional analysis of the impact of the Kosovo Liberation Army (UÇK) on regional and Romanian security, a qualitative methodology based on documentary research was used. The purpose of the method is to understand the role of the UÇK in the political and security transformations in the Balkan region and to assess the indirect impact on Romania's national security. Sources such as parliamentary reports, academic studies, and Romanian contributions are analyzed, with an emphasis on correlating historical, legal, and strategic narratives.

Sociologist Septimiu Chelcea, in his course *Sociological Research Techniques* (2001), notes that qualitative research is an investigation that uses interpretive and naturalistic methods, aiming to understand social phenomena in their natural context by exploring the meanings individuals assign to their experiences. This process involves using various sources to build a holistic, complex view of the reality being studied. At the same time, the sociologist describes descriptive research as the initial stage in the process of sociological knowledge, with the primary purpose of observing and describing social phenomena without trying to explain their causes.

It is characterized by the lack of pre-established models and the difficulty of organizing facts in a clear context. Through content analysis, theoretical and empirical perspectives on the evolution of the UÇK, international perceptions of this group, and implications for the regional security environment were identified and correlated, with an emphasis on Romania's strategic positioning in the period leading up to its accession to NATO. Septimiu Chelcea defines content analysis as a set of quantitative and qualitative techniques used for the systematic and objective study of communication, intending to identify and describe content in order to draw conclusions about individuals, society, or the communication process itself. To substantiate the content analysis, information was collected from sources accessible through specialized online databases, such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, Scopus, and ProQuest, complemented by journalistic publications translated from English and Serbian. This methodology provides an appropriate framework for a coherent investigation of the discourses and themes related to the role of the Kosovo Liberation Army in the Kosovo conflict.

## The research process: the Kosovo Liberation Army (UÇK)

Nation-states emerged late, in a context where Europe itself can be seen more as a cultural and historical construct than as a fixed geographical entity. In this sense, the Balkans have often been associated with an Orientalized identity (Pleić, 2021), characterized by religious diversity that has profoundly shaped collective identity and historical development. Ethnic and religious variety has heightened tensions, with the legacies of the Byzantine, Ottoman, and Austro-Hungarian empires leaving unresolved territorial and identity issues.

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Western Balkans was one of the most sensitive geopolitical regions in Europe, characterized by ethnic tensions, political instability, and diverse imperial legacies. After World War I, the formation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes—later renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia—brought together communities with often conflicting identities, traditions, and political goals under a single state. From the very beginning, Kosovo was a constant source of tension, due to the nationalist claims of the Albanians and the challenge to the Yugoslav state's authority by various radical groups.

The breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s rekindled

these divisions and brought Kosovo to the forefront of international attention. The creation of the seven successor states posed significant challenges, particularly regarding ethnic and demographic issues. Despite these hurdles, all of the new states declared independence and gained international recognition, except for Kosovo. The West aimed for a rapid democratic transition, but weak institutions led to ongoing instability (Krastev, 2002). The continued inter-ethnic tensions, particularly in northern Kosovo, underscore the complexity of post-conflict social dynamics integration.

Developments in the 1990s brought significant changes that affected European security and international cooperation. The armed conflicts of that time highlighted the vulnerability of the Western Balkan states, leading to NATO and other international organizations intervening (Đoković, 2017). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Dayton Agreement ensured peace but left a fragile structure (Đoković, 2017): "The Dayton Agreement is weaker than the Ohrid Agreement. In the Western Balkans, territory is always at stake. The Albanians in Macedonia did not gain territory, but rights, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina, an entity was formed, which means the chances for monopoly and control over the territory have increased" (Đoković, 2017). In Kosovo, Serbian-Albanian tensions, fueled by historical myths such as the battle of 1389, escalated and resulted in NATO's intervention in 1999 (Vladisavljević, 2004). The conflict in the province of Kosovo was a turning point in the restructuring of Southeast Europe's security architecture in the late 1990s. The suppression of the province's autonomy in 1989, followed by repressive policies against the Albanian population, created a climate of insecurity and marginalization that facilitated the emergence of the Kosovo Liberation Army (UÇK). It quickly transformed from a clandestine armed movement into a recognized political actor, playing a decisive role in escalating the conflict and attracting the intervention of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) 1999.

Thus, the province of Kosovo was not only a site of local conflicts but also a catalyst for redefining principles of international intervention and reevaluating the security architecture in Southeast Europe. The transformation of the UÇK and its gradual international legitimation are crucial for understanding the relationships between international organizations and local armed groups, as well as for evaluating the impacts of regional cooperation. The activity of the Kosovo Liberation Army (UÇK), which evolved from an insurgent force into an informal partner in NATO's intervention, sparked both internal political changes in the former Yugoslavia and significant international repercussions. In this context, Romania, amid its efforts to integrate into the Euro-Atlantic sphere,

faced its own strategic and security challenges. From the symbolic risks tied to the Kosovar precedent to cross-border criminal threats, the conflict's impacts extended beyond local borders. Therefore, analyzing the evolution of the UÇK, international perceptions of it, and its effects on regional stability offers a crucial framework for understanding Romania's position in a geopolitical environment marked by profound instability.

According to the study *The Kosovo Conflict. Consequences for the Regional Security Environment*, the radicalization of the UÇK was an effect of the failure of Ibrahim Rugova's peace strategy, supported by Ibrahim Rugova, combined with the increase in repressive measures. In January 1998, open fighting between Serbian security forces and the UÇK resulted in over 1,500 deaths and approximately 400,000 refugees. Events such as those in Račak generated strong reactions from the international community and helped the UÇK gain recognition in the eyes of some Western states. Following this episode, the organization gained visibility in the international media, benefiting from growing support from members of the Euro-Atlantic framework (Dăncău, 2014), which transformed this change in its global image into encouragement for NATO intervention. In 1998, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1199, which stated that the humanitarian crisis in the Kosovo region, caused by the Belgrade authorities, represented a clear threat to peace and security in the area. A year later, NATO launched an air campaign against Serbia without the explicit approval of the UN Security Council, justifying the action by invoking international humanitarian law and the precedent set by the severity of the crisis. Resolution 1244 of the same council officially ended the conflict, ordering the transition of the province to international administration and calling for the rapid disarmament of the UÇK and the cessation of attacks (Gamurari & Osmochescu, 2008).

The transformation of the UÇK into official structures did not suppress the previous networks and leaders. Approximately 5,000 former members were integrated into the Kosovo Protection Corps (in Albanian Trupate Mbrojtjessë Kosovës, TMK), thus retaining the political and military power of the former guerrilla group. The emergence of the Kosovo Liberation Army in the 1990s was not a singular phenomenon, but the result of a cumulative historical process, marked by the gradual exclusion of the Albanian population from the political, institutional, and social life of the province of Kosovo. The key moment in this development was the authorities in Belgrade's revocation of the province's constitutional autonomy in 1989. This decision was followed by a series of repressive measures directed

against the Albanian majority population, manifested in particular by their exclusion from public institutions and "the introduction of emergency measures in Kosovo, including the mass dismissal of Kosovar Albanians from their jobs and the blocking of Albanian-language media institutions" (Youngs, 1998). These policies created a climate of insecurity, marginalization, and discontent among Kosovar Albanians. In response, the province's moderate political elite, particularly Ibrahim Rugova and the Democratic League of Kosovo (in Albanian, Partia Demokratike e Kosovës), advocated a strategy of peaceful resistance through the establishment of alternative institutions. These operated outside the legal framework imposed by Serbia and included their own networks of education, health, administration, and symbolic political representation: "In response, the Albanians of Kosovo detached themselves from state institutions, established a parallel system of education and health care, and continued to hold elections for a shadow government" (Youngs, 1998). However, this non-violent strategy was perceived by a significant portion of young Albanians as ineffective. As repression continued to escalate and the international community maintained an uncertain attitude toward the situation in the province, feelings of insecurity about peaceful methods quickly escalated. Initially, "Kosovars generally supported a policy of non-violent action in an attempt to gain greater recognition of their rights. With their campaign ignored by the international community, they now consider this policy a failure. Kosovo Albanians have found that only the use of weapons attracts attention" (Youngs, 1998). In this context, starting in the mid-1990s, the UÇK emerged and grew, an underground military movement that promoted armed resistance against the Serbian authorities, with the stated goal of achieving independence for the province of Kosovo.

A turning point in the consolidation of the UÇK was the 1997 crisis in Albania, which led to the collapse of state authority and the massive theft of weapons depots. This situation allowed easy access to weapons and ammunition for paramilitary movements in the province of Kosovo, including the UÇK, which began to launch direct attacks on Yugoslav forces. Later, these weapons were used by the UÇK to inspire its insurgency (Alpaslan, 2008), which was concentrated in the regions of Drenica, Dukagjin, and around the Albanian-Kosovar border. The strategy was guerrilla-style, targeting police stations, Yugoslav army convoys, and checkpoints. Against this backdrop, the UÇK was seen by a significant part of the Albanian population as a defender of their rights. The use of national symbols and anti-colonial rhetoric intensified this popular support. In areas where Yugoslav authority

was weak, the UÇK even began to establish informal local administrations (Alpaslan, 2008).

Despite the widespread perception that the UÇK represented a force for liberation, its actions were not without controversy. Reports by international organizations and journalistic investigations, such as the PRIF REPORT (Peace Research Institute Frankfurt), have documented cases of violence committed by UÇK fighters against the Serbian minority, but also against Albanians considered collaborators of the Serbian regime or political opponents of the group. There have even been accusations of coercive methods being used to secure support among the population, including the forced recruitment of young people and threats against political opponents (Gromes, 2019). Forced recruitment, especially of young men, created a climate of pressure in areas under UÇK control. At the same time, moderate political leaders who refused to collaborate with the UÇK were threatened or excluded from local public life.

The evolution of the UÇK from an emerging armed group, in the context of systematic repression of the Albanian population, had significant consequences not only locally but also internationally. As the conflict intensified and popular support for the UÇK grew, international actors' views changed significantly, directly influencing NATO's and the UN's diplomatic and strategic decisions. In the early stages of the conflict in the Kosovo province, many international actors, especially NATO, saw the UÇK as an unstable group. At the same time, numerous Western governments labeled it as a terrorist organization. However, as the humanitarian crisis in this small region worsened, particularly after the Račak massacre in January 1999, NATO's view of the UÇK changed significantly. Although initially considered a radical group and marginalized by international actors, the UÇK began to be seen by NATO as an operational partner on the ground: "NATO gradually moved from distancing itself from the UÇK to operational cooperation with it, especially during the air campaign" (Alpaslan, 2008). This change in attitude is also confirmed by the evolution of the UÇK's political status, reflected in its inclusion at the Rambouillet negotiating table (Perritt, 2005), as well as by PRIF documents noting that, despite its insurgent past, the UÇK was treated as a de facto ally in the air intervention (Gromes, 2019). This change was determined not only by strategic considerations on the ground, but also by pressure from Western public opinion, which demanded intervention in response to the systematic violence committed against the Albanian population. As the UÇK intensified its military operations, NATO began a tacit operational collaboration that significantly changed its official position towards



this non-state actor (Alpaslan, 2008).

Concerning the legal framework of NATO's intervention, an analysis of international law reveals a significant tension between the principles of state sovereignty and the justification for humanitarian intervention. According to the UN Charter, any military intervention must be authorized by the Security Council. However, in the case of the province of Kosovo, this condition was not met, citing the urgent need to protect the civilian population: "The violation of the Charter was clear and obvious. NATO did not request or receive authorization from the Security Council and did not act in self-defense" (Wippman, 2001). Thus, the legality of the intervention was called into question. Still, the moral legitimacy invoked was supported, including through the media coverage of atrocities on the ground, in a climate in which the UÇK had become a *de facto ally*.

In terms of the negotiation process, the inclusion of the UÇK in the Rambouillet format was a key moment in the process of international recognition. Initially marginalized from diplomatic initiatives, the UÇK was later admitted to the negotiating table, marking a transition from an insurgent group to a viable political actor. This legitimization was made possible mainly by the reality on the ground, where UÇK-NATO cooperation was decisive in advancing the intervention's strategic objectives. Even if this collaboration was not formally recognized at all stages of the conflict, its effects on the negotiations and the post-conflict political architecture are undeniable (Perritt, 2005).

The transformation of the UÇK into both a military and political actor during the Kosovo conflict did not eliminate the threats its structure posed to regional stability. Though officially dissolved after the signing of the Demilitarization Agreement in June 1999, the UÇK was reformed into the Kosovo Protection Corps (KPC). On the ground, informal networks continued to influence the regional security environment. A report by the House of Commons in 1999 noted that the withdrawal of Serbian security forces and the Yugoslav army from Kosovo created a power vacuum, which allowed international KFOR forces to intervene and a provisional administration to be set up under the UN. In many areas, the UÇK seemed to assume local administrative and security roles, leading to the development of parallel structures alongside international and regional institutions, especially in rural areas with limited KFOR (NATO Kosovo Force) and UNMIK (United Nations Mission in Kosovo) presence (Youngs, 1998).

An academic analysis published in Military Operations in Kosovo and the Danger of Mission Creep clearly shows that "the UÇK and its successor

organizations continued to exert influence beyond their official demobilization, maintaining control over local security in certain areas and being connected to organized crime networks" (Robinson, 2014). This informal influence has led to the emergence of trafficking networks with cross-border ramifications, particularly in relation to weapons and drugs.

Due to its strategic position and poorly monitored borders, the province of Kosovo has been a hub for the trafficking of weapons, people, and narcotics in the post-conflict period (Kemp, 2017). These activities have had an impact not only on Kosovar territory but also on neighboring states, including Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and, indirectly, Romania. In the context of NATO's intervention, Romania's airspace was authorized for overflight, which drew Belgrade's attention and sparked public and diplomatic debate (Perritt, 2005).

The recognition and activities of the UÇK also raised concerns about regional security and potential unconventional threats, including uncontrolled migration, radicalization, and the infiltration of organized crime networks. The trafficking routes developed in the border areas of the province of Kosovo with Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro could be extended to Central and Eastern Europe (Avădănei, 2023). Thus, the UÇK's activities posed multilateral risks to regional security, and the states in the area, including Romania, had to manage these challenges in a tense geopolitical context, balancing international cooperation with the management of their own strategic interests (Avădănei, 2023).

The logistical support provided by Romania strengthened its profile as a stable and reliable state committed to Euro-Atlantic collective security, facilitating its integration into NATO and establishing it as a dependable partner in the Western Balkans. The experience of the conflict highlighted the interdependence between national, regional, and European security, emphasizing the importance of cooperation and solidarity in crisis management. Although not directly involved in the fighting, Romania made significant contributions to international efforts, thereby consolidating its role as an active player in promoting stability in the Western Balkans.

## Conclusions

The study argues that the UÇK's transformation from an insurgent group into a political actor illustrated the complex interactions between local dynamics and international intervention in Southeast Europe. While the movement's influence

on Western security strategies was limited, its evolution offers insight into the challenges global organizations face in engaging with non-state actors during humanitarian crises. The Kosovo Specialist Chambers proceedings against former KLA leaders (including the 2025 stage of the Hashim Thaçi et al. trial) underscore that accountability for wartime abuses remains central to Kosovo's rule-of-law agenda and to international perceptions of the conflict's legacy.

Regionally, security dynamics since 2023 have been driven less by the UÇK as an organization and more by tensions in northern Kosovo, notably the Banjska/Banjskë attack and subsequent unrest—events that prompted NATO (KFOR) reinforcements and a more robust posture to preserve a safe and secure environment under UNSCR 1244.

Politically, the EU-facilitated normalization process—the 2023 Agreement and its Implementation Annex—provides a framework for de-escalation, minority protections, and pragmatic coordination between Pristina and Belgrade. Implementation, however, remains

uneven, limiting the agreement's stabilizing potential and keeping the risk of renewed crises elevated.

For Romania, the consequences of the Kosovo conflict and the activities of the UÇK were mainly indirect, including increased regional instability, the emergence of cross-border threats, and the need to adapt foreign policy positions amid its Euro-Atlantic commitments. Romania's logistical and political support for NATO operations during the crisis consolidated its image as a reliable partner aligned with Western security objectives.

Taken together, these developments suggest three prudent takeaways for Euro-Atlantic actors: (1) accountability and minority-rights implementation are the most credible pathways to durable stability; (2) deterrence and crisis-management capacities (KFOR) will remain necessary as long as the political process stalls; and (3) normalization, not legacy insurgent politics, is now the primary variable shaping regional security—placing the burden on sustained EU and NATO engagement to translate frameworks into practice.

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