



Armament Trends of the Western Balkan Countries for the Period 2016–2021

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Abstract

The period 2016–2021 marked an important phase in the modernization of the armed and security forces of the Western Balkans. Although the region did not experience a return to large-scale conventional conflict, defense procurement accelerated in several countries, while military modernization increasingly reflected NATO integration, unresolved regional security issues, ageing Soviet/Yugoslav-era equipment, and the emergence of new technologies. This paper examines armament trends in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia between 2016 and 2021. It focuses on defense expenditure, acquisition and modernization of major weapons systems, foreign suppliers, domestic defense-industrial capacity, and the changing balance between legacy equipment and newer Western, Russian and Chinese systems. The analysis shows that the six countries followed different modernization paths. NATO members Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia increasingly oriented procurement toward interoperability with NATO forces and Western suppliers. Bosnia and Herzegovina pursued relatively modest modernization, constrained by political and financial limitations. Kosovo's transformation from a lightly armed security force toward a military-oriented organization after 2018 represented a significant institutional change, although its heavy-weapons inventory remained limited during the period. Serbia pursued the most comprehensive modernization programme in the region, combining domestic production and modernization of inherited Yugoslav systems with acquisitions from Russia, Belarus, China and Western suppliers. Overall, the period was characterized less by a uniform regional arms race than by diverging national modernization strategies within a changing Euro-Atlantic security environment.

Keywords: *Western Balkans; Armaments; Military Modernization; Defense Expenditure; Arms Transfers; Albania; Bosnia And Herzegovina; Kosovo; Montenegro; North Macedonia; Serbia; NATO; SIPRI; 2016–2021.*

I. Introduction

The Western Balkans occupy a strategically important position between Central Europe, the Adriatic, the Eastern Mediterranean and the wider Black Sea region. The region's contemporary security environment remains shaped by the legacy of the wars of the 1990s, unresolved political disputes, different foreign-policy orientations and the gradual integration of several states into Euro-Atlantic institutions.

For the purposes of this paper, the Western Balkans are defined as **Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia**. This corresponds broadly to the European Union's contemporary use of the term "Western Balkans." Croatia and Slovenia are excluded because, during the period under examination, they were already EU and NATO members and followed substantially different defense-modernization trajectories.

The situation began to change during the second half of the 2010s. NATO enlargement, the deterioration of relations between Russia and Western countries, the migration crisis, unresolved disputes and renewed attention to conventional military capabilities encouraged governments to reconsider the condition of their armed forces. At the same time, the military inventories inherited from the Yugoslav period were becoming increasingly obsolete.

The period 2016–2021 is particularly useful for examining regional armament trends. Montenegro joined NATO in 2017, North Macedonia joined in 2020, while Albania had already been a NATO member since 2009.

Serbia remained militarily neutral but maintained defense relationships with Russia, China, NATO members and other partners. Bosnia and Herzegovina continued its complex defense-reform process, while Kosovo formally changed the mandate of its security force in 2018.

The analysis uses the term **armament trends** broadly. It therefore considers not only deliveries of major conventional weapons but also military expenditure, procurement programmes, modernization of existing systems, and force restructuring. Using data and analytical material primarily from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), official statements and governmental documents, this paper compares the trajectories of the six states and evaluates the broader implications for international security and strategic stability. SIPRI itself notes that its figures measure the volume of deliveries rather than the financial value of contracts.

The objective of this paper is to identify the principal armament trends of the Western Balkan countries between 2016 and 2021 and to determine whether these developments represented a regional arms race or primarily a process of military modernization.

II. Methodology

The study uses a comparative qualitative and quantitative approach. It relies principally on data and assessments published by the **Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and the International Institute for Security Studies (IISS)**, supplemented by established research sources.

Three indicators are used:

1. **Military expenditure** – used as an indicator of the resources devoted to defense;
2. **Procurement programmes;**
3. **Armament trend by type of weaponry;**
4. **Modernization of existing systems.**

SIPRI cautions that military expenditure is an input measure rather than a direct measure of military capability; therefore, expenditure figures should not automatically be interpreted as equivalent to military effectiveness. Similarly, SIPRI's arms-transfer indicator measures the volume of transfers of major conventional weapons rather than their financial value. Consequently, arms-transfer rankings should be interpreted as measures of the international flow of major weapons rather than direct measures of the economic value of arms exports. The IISS Military Balance measures the armament trends of the countries by type and quantity, and thus, allowing to measure whether countries increase or decrease the production and acquisition of their weaponry.

III. Armament Trends

III.1 Armament trends of Albania for the period 2016–2021

During **2016–2021, Albania pursued a gradual modernization of its armed forces rather than a large-scale rearmament programme.** As a NATO member since 2009, the main objective was to replace or upgrade legacy equipment, improve interoperability with NATO forces, and strengthen deployable capabilities.¹ Albania's Ministry of Defense identifies modernization, interoperability, communications, surveillance, troop protection, mobility and armaments as core modernization areas.

1. Defense spending increased

Albania's defense expenditure rose substantially over the period. According to SIPRI's Military Expenditure data, Albania marks an increase from approximately **\$130.9 million in 2016 to an estimated \$222.9 million in 2021 which is an increase of 70.3%.**² The increase in the budget of defense at 2 % GDP has created the possibilities of investment in the field of modernization in three types of Forces.³ This created greater scope for procurement and modernization, although Albania remained a relatively small military spender compared with larger NATO members.

¹ Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Albania, What is the Modernization of Armed Forces (means, techniques and infrastructure), <https://www.mod.gov.al/eng/index.php/security-policies/others-from-mod/modernization/67-what-is-the-modernization-of-armed-forces-means-techniques-and-infrastructure>

² SIPRI, (n.d), SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>

³ Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Albania, Modernization of the Armed Forces, <https://www.mod.gov.al/eng/security-policies/others-from-mod/modernization/68-modernization-of-the-armed-force>

2. Land forces: modernization and NATO-standard equipment

The **Land Force** remained the principal component of Albania's military modernization. The trend was away from older equipment inherited from the communist period and toward equipment compatible with NATO standards.

Important areas included:⁴

- modernization of infantry equipment and small arms;
- procurement of modern ammunition;
- improved tactical communications;
- engineering and EOD equipment;
- improved mobility and protected vehicles;
- modernization of command-and-control systems.

The Albanian Ministry of Defense specifically lists tactical radios, EOD equipment, light weapons and ammunition, operational centres and troop-support equipment among its modernization projects.⁵

A notable development was the introduction of **MRAP protected vehicles**, including American MaxxPro vehicles, which improved the protection and mobility of Albanian troops deployed on international missions. Open-source reporting indicates that the first three MaxxPro vehicles from a larger planned batch were delivered in 2017.⁶

3. Mortar and infantry-firepower modernization

Albania also began replacing some older Soviet/Chinese-origin systems with Western equipment.

For example, in 2017 the **Albanian Armed Forces acquired Hirtenberger M6 60-mm and M8 81-mm mortars from Austria**, replacing older Chinese-produced mortars. This illustrates an important characteristic of the period: **selective replacement of legacy equipment rather than wholesale procurement of major heavy weapons systems.**⁷

4. Air Force: helicopters rather than fighter aircraft

Unlike Serbia, Albania did **not** pursue a major fighter-aircraft modernization programme during 2016–2021. Its air capability was concentrated primarily on **helicopters, transport, search-and-rescue and surveillance**. This reflected Albania's defense requirements and NATO role. The Ministry of Defense identifies multi-role helicopters and air-surveillance systems among its modernization priorities. Consequently, the trend was toward maintaining a relatively small aviation component capable of:⁸

- troop transport;
- search and rescue;
- medical evacuation;
- disaster response;
- support to ground forces;
- participation in NATO missions.

5. Maritime capability focused on surveillance and coast guard functions

Albania's maritime modernization was similarly oriented toward **coastal security, surveillance and law enforcement rather than conventional naval warfare**.

The Ministry of Defense identifies construction of vessels for the Coastal Guard, maritime surveillance systems and operational centres as key modernization projects. Thus, Albania's maritime armament trend was primarily associated with:⁹

- maritime surveillance;

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Center for Geostrategic Research and Terrorism, Modernization of the Serbian Armed Forces and International Military Cooperation 2016–2021, page.220, <https://www.scribd.com/document/525421855/Modernizacija-Vojske-Srbije-i-me%C4%91unarodna-vojna-saradnja-2016-2021>

⁷ Ibid, page.219

⁸ Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Albania, Modernization of the Armed Forces, <https://www.mod.gov.al/eng/security-policies/others-from-mod/modernization/68-modernization-of-the-armed-force>

⁹ Ibid.

- search and rescue;
- border/coastal security;
- law enforcement;
- support to NATO and other international operations.

6. Communications, surveillance and interoperability

One of the most important—and sometimes overlooked—trends was the modernization of **C4ISR-type capabilities**, particularly communications and surveillance. Albania sought to make its forces interoperable with NATO systems. Its modernization policy explicitly emphasizes standardized equipment, interoperability with NATO forces and improved operational capabilities for international deployments.¹⁰

This means that Albania's modernization during 2016–2021 should not be measured only by the number of tanks, aircraft or artillery pieces acquired. **Communications, command-and-control, surveillance and force protection were important components of the modernization process.**

Overall trend, 2016–2021

Period	Main Developments
2016–2017	Replacement of selected legacy equipment and improvement of NATO-standard infantry, communications and protected-mobility capabilities.
2018–2019	Increasing defense expenditure and broader modernization, particularly in mobility, communications, surveillance and force protection.
2020	Modernization continued despite the pandemic, with emphasis on maintaining operational and NATO commitments.
2021	A noticeable increase in defense expenditure provided additional resources for modernization and investment.

Main characteristics

1. Gradual rather than large-scale rearmament;
2. Strong NATO interoperability orientation;
3. Replacement of Soviet/Chinese legacy equipment;
4. Modernization of infantry and protected mobility;
5. Improved communications and surveillance;
6. Helicopter and search-and-rescue capability rather than fighter aviation;
7. Coastal surveillance and Coast Guard modernization;
8. Increasing defense expenditure, especially toward 2021.

In comparison with **Serbia**, Albania's 2016–2021 modernization was considerably less focused on acquiring high-end combat platforms such as fighter aircraft, long-range air defense or heavy armored formations. Albania instead concentrated on **NATO interoperability, deployability, protected mobility, communications, surveillance, helicopters and relatively modest replacement of legacy weapons**. This distinction is important when comparing the two countries' armament trajectories.

According to the Military Balance's data of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, for the period from 2016 to 2021, **Albania** possessed the following weaponry in their inventory:

¹⁰ Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Albania, What is the Modernization of Armed Forces (means, techniques and infrastructure), <https://www.mod.gov.al/eng/index.php/security-policies/others-from-mod/modernization/67-what-is-the-modernization-of-armed-forces-means-techniques-and-infrastructure>

Country: Albania	2016	2021	Increase/decrease in percentage
Total active personnel	8000	8000	same
Total reserve personnel			
Armored fighting vehicles	/	40	(+400%)
Artillery	93	93	same
Patrol and coastal combatants	40	27	(-32.5%)
Amphibious landing craft	/	/	/
Fighter and ground attack aircrafts	/	/	/
Attack helicopters	/	/	/
Heavy/medium transport helicopters	27	27	same
Heavy/medium transport aircraft	/	/	/

III.2 Armament trends of Bosnia and Herzegovina for the period 2016–2021

Bosnia and Herzegovina's armament trend during 2016–2021 was characterized by **gradual modernization of the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina (AFBiH), strong dependence on foreign assistance, and an emphasis on mobility, helicopters, protected vehicles, interoperability, and replacement of ageing legacy equipment**. It was not a period of large-scale rearmament or acquisition of major offensive weapon systems. According to SIPRI's Military Expenditure database, the military expenditure of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2016 were \$157.9 million compared with \$209.7 million in 2021, which is an increase of 32.8%. A key framework was the **Development and Modernization Plan of the Armed Forces 2017–2027**. The plan identified transport assets—particularly helicopters, motor vehicles and light wheeled armored vehicles—as priorities up to 2021, followed by anti-armor systems, air-surveillance capabilities and engineering equipment in the 2021–2027 period.¹¹

1. Modernization rather than rearmament

According to the SIPRI's Military Expenditure database, in 2016 Bosnia and Herzegovina allocated a total of \$157.9 million, compared with \$209.7 million in 2021, which is an increase of 32.8%.¹² The AFBiH inherited a large amount of equipment originating from the former Yugoslav and Soviet military systems. During 2016–2021,

¹¹ Ministry of Defense of Bosnia and Herzegovina, (2021), Smjernica za odbranbeno Planiranje, <https://www.mod.gov.ba/afoto2016/100221Smjerniceza%20odbrambenoplaniranjeBSH.pdf>

¹² SIPRI, (n.d), SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>

the emphasis was therefore on **maintaining and selectively replacing existing capabilities**, rather than establishing new high-end capabilities such as fighter aircraft, main battle tanks or long-range air-defense systems.

The modernization priorities included:¹³

- helicopters and other transport;
- light armored vehicles;
- tactical vehicles;
- communications and command systems;
- equipment for NATO-compatible units;
- counter-terrorism equipment;
- engineering equipment;
- equipment for assistance to civilian authorities.

2. Major expansion of the Humvee fleet

One of the clearest trends was the introduction of **US-supplied HMMWV/Humvee vehicles**.

The United States delivered an initial **24 Humvees in March 2017**. A further **20 vehicles were delivered in July 2019**, with additional vehicles subsequently supplied. The 2019 delivery was valued at approximately **\$2.85 million**.¹⁴

These vehicles improved:

- tactical mobility;
- protected mobility;
- logistics;
- transport of personnel;
- support for units deployed on international missions;
- assistance during natural disasters and emergencies.

By the end of the period, the US assistance programme had become a significant component of the AFBiH's vehicle modernization. A subsequent US-supported delivery brought the planned total to **86 Humvees**, with an overall reported value of approximately \$14.3 million.¹⁵

3. Helicopter modernization was the most important aviation trend

The **Air Force and Air Defense Brigade** was an especially important modernization priority. The AFBiH continued operating older **Mi-8 and UH-1H** helicopters during the period, while improving their maintenance and operational availability. Official reports from 2017 show continuing technical inspections and repairs of Mi-8T/MTV and UH-1H aircraft.¹⁶

A major modernization step came with the procurement of **four Bell UH-1H-II Huey II helicopters**. In December 2019, Bosnia and Herzegovina signed a contract worth **\$38.54 million**.¹⁷ Bosnia and Herzegovina contributed approximately **\$4.36 million**, while the remainder was financed through US Foreign Military Sales/Foreign Military Financing programmes.¹⁸ The helicopters were delivered in December **2021**. Their intended roles included:

- air transport;
- medical evacuation;

¹³ Ministry of Defense of Bosnia and Herzegovina, (2021), Smjernica za odbranbeno Planiranje, <https://www.mod.gov.ba/afoto2016/100221Smjerniceza%20odbrambenplaniranjeBSH.pdf>.

¹⁴ Ministry of Defense of Bosnia and Herzegovina, (2019), Vlada SAD donirala Ministarstvu odbrane i Oružanim snagama BiH još 20 motornih vozila Humvee, <https://www.mod.gov.ba/aktuelnosti/vijesti/default.aspx?id=73036>

¹⁵ Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina, (2021), Vlada SAD donirala još 21 terensko vozilo Humvee za OS BiH, <https://os.mod.gov.ba/vijesti/default.aspx?id=37219&langTag=en-US&pageIndex=1>

¹⁶ Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina, (2017), Angažiranje helikoptera OS BiH u 2017. Godini, <https://os.mod.gov.ba/operativna-komanda/brigada-zracnih-snaga-i-protivzracne-odbrane/vijesti/default.aspx?id=10993&langTag=hr-HR>

¹⁷ Ministry of Defense of Bosnia and Herzegovina, (2019), Ministarstvo odbrane BiH potpisalo ugovor o nabavci novih helikoptera, <https://mod.gov.ba/aktuelnosti/vijesti/default.aspx?id=76826>

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Textron, (2021), BELL DELIVERS HUEY II TO BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA, <https://investor.textron.com/news-releases/news-details/2021/BELL-DELIVERS-HUEY-II-TO-BOSNIA-AND-HERZEGOVINA-12-21-2021/default.aspx>

- firefighting;
- search and rescue;
- support to civilian authorities;
- other general-purpose military missions.

This acquisition illustrates that Bosnia and Herzegovina's aviation modernization was primarily **transport and utility oriented**, rather than focused on combat aviation.

4. Increasing Western/US orientation

An important trend during 2016–2021 was the increasing importance of **US defence assistance**.

The Humvee programme and Huey II acquisition both strengthened the connection between AFBiH modernization and US equipment and training programmes. The US Army described the Huey II transfer as part of the **European Recapitalization Incentive Program (ERIP)**, which was intended to assist European partners in moving away from Soviet/Russian legacy equipment.²⁰ This does not mean that Bosnia and Herzegovina completely abandoned its legacy equipment. Rather, the trend was toward **incremental Westernization of selected capabilities while retaining much of the existing inventory**.

5. NATO interoperability

Although **Bosnia and Herzegovina was not a NATO member during 2016–2021**, interoperability with NATO forces became an important modernization objective.

The AFBiH participated in international operations and NATO-related programmes, while modernization increasingly sought compatibility with NATO procedures and equipment. In 2021, the Ministry of Defense explicitly described interoperability with NATO forces as a modernization objective.²¹ This affected procurement priorities: communications, vehicles, individual equipment and deployable units were particularly important because they directly supported participation in multinational operations.

6. Limited development of heavy combat capabilities

A defining characteristic of the period was the **absence of major purchases of heavy combat platforms**.

Unlike Serbia, which during the same period acquired or modernized fighter aircraft, attack helicopters and air-defense systems, Bosnia and Herzegovina concentrated on more basic capability gaps.

The 2017–2027 modernization plan indicates that **anti-armor systems and air-surveillance capabilities were planned for the 2021–2027 period**, rather than being major procurement achievements during 2016–2021.²² Therefore, the period should be viewed primarily as a **force-sustainment and capability-replacement phase**.

7. Dual-use and disaster-response capabilities

Another notable characteristic was the emphasis on equipment that could support **civilian authorities and disaster response**.

The AFBiH developed helicopter capabilities for firefighting, search and rescue and emergency assistance. For example, in 2019 UH-1H crews developed a dedicated firefighting capability using a Bambi Bucket system.²³ Consequently, some modernization programmes served both military and civilian-security purposes.

²⁰ U.S Army, (2022), MASPO Delivers Capability Around the World,

https://www.army.mil/article/253232/maspo_delivers_capability_around_the_world

²¹ Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina, (2021), Vlada SAD donirala još 21 terensko vozilo Humvee za OS BiH,

<https://os.mod.gov.ba/vijesti/default.aspx?id=37219&langTag=en-US&pageIndex=1>

²² Ministry of Defense of Bosnia and Herzegovina, (2021), Smjernica za odbranbeno Planiranje,

<https://www.mod.gov.ba/afoto2016/100221Smjerniceza%20odbrambenoplaniranjeBSH.pdf>

²³ Ministry of Defense of Bosnia and Herzegovina, (2019), Helikopteri UH-1H po prvi put u misiji gašenja požara,

<https://mod.gov.ba/aktuelnosti/vijesti/default.aspx?id=71238>

Main trends, 2016–2021

Area	Trend
Ground forces	Replacement of ageing vehicles and introduction of Humvees
Protected mobility	Increasing use of modern light tactical/protected vehicles
Air Force	Modernization of utility/transport helicopters
Helicopters	Four Bell Huey II helicopters contracted in 2019 and delivered in 2021
Heavy weapons	Limited modernization; no major new fighter/tank/long-range air-defense programme
Communications & interoperability	Increasing orientation toward NATO-compatible systems
Foreign assistance	Strong role of US military assistance and financing
Domestic production	Less important than foreign assistance for major modernization
Civil-support capabilities	Strong emphasis on firefighting, SAR, medical evacuation and disaster response

Overall assessment

The 2016–2021 armament trend in Bosnia and Herzegovina was one of selective modernization rather than rearmament. The central objective was to make the relatively small AFBiH more mobile, sustainable and interoperable while gradually replacing obsolete equipment. The most significant developments were **US-supplied Humvees and the four Bell Huey II helicopters**, together with improvements to existing helicopter fleets and other transport and support capabilities. The modernization programme also increasingly oriented the AFBiH toward **Western/NATO-compatible equipment**, while retaining a substantial legacy inventory. In comparative terms, **Bosnia and Herzegovina's modernization was considerably more limited than Serbia's during the same period**. Serbia invested heavily in combat aviation, air defense and other major weapon systems, whereas Bosnia and Herzegovina concentrated primarily on **mobility, transport aviation, protected vehicles, interoperability and support capabilities**.²⁴ This difference reflects both the smaller scale of the AFBiH and its distinct defense-planning priorities.

According to the Military Balance's data of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, for the period from 2016 to 2021, **Bosnia and Herzegovina** possessed the following weaponry in their inventory:

²⁴ Ministry of Defense of Bosnia and Herzegovina, (2021), Smjernica za odbranbeno Planiranje, <https://www.mod.gov.ba/afoto2016/100221Smjerniceza%20odbrambenoplaniranjeBSH.pdf>

Country: Bosnia and Herzegovina	2016	2021	Increase/decrease in percentage
Total active personnel	10500	10500	same
Total reserve personnel	/	/	/
Armored fighting vehicles	45	45	same
Artillery	224	224	same
Patrol and coastal combatants	/	/	/
Amphibious landing craft	/	/	/
Fighter and ground attack aircrafts	/	/	/
Attack helicopters	/	/	/
Heavy/medi um transport helicopters	47	47	same
Heavy/medi um transport aircraft	/	/	/

III.3 Armament trends of Montenegro for the period 2016–2021

Montenegro's armament trend during **2016–2021** was primarily a **NATO-oriented modernization of a small force**, rather than a broad rearmament programme. Montenegro joined NATO in **2017**, and modernization increasingly focused on interoperability, mobility, protected vehicles, helicopters, maritime surveillance/patrol capabilities, communications, and replacement of older Yugoslav-era equipment.

1. Defense expenditure and modernization

According to SIPRI's Military Expenditure database, the military expenditure of Montenegro in 2016 were \$61.7 million compared with \$91.9 million in 2021, which is an increase of 48.95%,²⁵ providing greater resources for modernization. NATO's defense-expenditure data show a general upward trajectory, although annual figures vary and the 2021 figure is an estimate. ²⁶ NATO also notes that its figures can differ from national budget figures because of differences in definitions and methodology. ²⁷

A particularly important development was the increasing share devoted to **equipment investment**. By 2021, Montenegro was allocating substantially more attention to modernization and infrastructure than in the earlier years of the period.²⁸

²⁵ SIPRI, (n.d), SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>

²⁶ NATO, (2022), Defense Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2021), <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/articles/news/2022/03/31/defence-expenditure-of-nato-countries-2014-2021>

²⁷ NATO, (2026), Defense investment and NATO's 5% commitment, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/introduction-to-nato/defence-expenditures-and-natos-5-commitment>

²⁸ Ibid.

2. Air Force: major shift toward modern helicopters

The most visible acquisition was the purchase of **three Bell 412 helicopters** in 2018.

Montenegro signed the approximately **€30 million contract in January 2018** for two Bell 412EPI and one Bell 412EP helicopters.²⁹ They were delivered later that year.

These helicopters were intended for multiple missions, including:³⁰

- troop and passenger transport;
- medical evacuation;
- search and rescue;
- cargo transport;
- firefighting;
- border control.

Thus, Montenegro's aviation modernization was **not oriented toward fighter aircraft or offensive air power**, but toward versatile helicopters capable of supporting both military and civil-security missions.³¹ This was especially significant because Montenegro's airspace protection after NATO accession relied on **NATO Air Policing**, rather than Montenegro maintaining a fighter fleet of its own. Montenegro's government specifically identified the establishment of the NATO Air Policing mission as an important part of its 2018 NATO integration.³²

3. Land forces: introduction of light armored vehicles

Another major trend was the modernization of Montenegro's ground forces through **light armored vehicles**.

In 2018, the Ministry of Defense stated that it was accelerating the acquisition of **67 light armored vehicles** for its ground units.³³ Germany was also providing light armored vehicles for military-police units.³⁴

The emphasis therefore shifted toward:

- protected mobility;
- troop survivability;
- tactical mobility;
- support for deployed units;
- NATO-compatible equipment.

This was a different modernization model from Serbia's, which during the same period placed greater emphasis on fighter aircraft, air defense and heavy combat systems.

4. Navy: conversion toward patrol and maritime-security functions

Montenegro also modernized its small naval force. Rather than building a conventional combat fleet, it focused increasingly on **patrol and maritime-security capabilities**.

²⁹ Government of Montenegro, (2018), New multi-purpose helicopters arrive in Montenegro, PM Marković: We invest money in safety of our citizens, <https://www.gov.me/en/article/190416--new-multi-purpose-helicopters-arrive-in-montenegro-pm-markovic-we-invest-money-in-safety-of-our-citizens>

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Government of Montenegro, (2018), Potpukovnik Pantović: Ovu godinu obilježio napredak u svim aktivnostima iz Plana vojne integracije Crne Gore u NATO, <https://www.gov.me/clanak/194729--potpukovnik-pantovic-ovu-godinu-obiljezio-napredak-u-svim-aktivnostima-iz-plana-vojne-integracije-crne-gore-u-nato>

³³ U.S Army, (2020), Montenegro purchases U.S tactical vehicles, https://www.army.mil/article/240862/montenegro_purchases_u_s_tactical_vehicles

³⁴ Defense Mirror, (2018), Mercedes Armored Vehicles for Montenegro, https://defensemirror.com/news/23509/Mercedes_Armored_Vehicles_for_Montenegro

One important project was the planned conversion of the **RTOP-405 missile gunboat into a patrol vessel**.³⁵ The government described this as a measure intended to improve the Navy's capabilities. The emphasis was consequently on:³⁶

- maritime surveillance;
- coastal security;
- patrol operations;
- border protection;
- search and rescue;
- NATO maritime responsibilities.

This reflects Montenegro's geographic position and the relatively small size of its armed forces.

5. Modernization of personnel equipment and individual systems

Modernization was also directed at the individual soldier. Government reporting from 2018 mentions procurement of **new uniforms for the Armed Forces**³⁷, light armored vehicles and equipment for declared NATO forces.³⁸

Consequently, modernization during this period was not limited to major platforms. It also included:

- uniforms and personal equipment;
- communications;
- transport;
- protective equipment;
- equipment for NATO-declared forces.

6. NATO interoperability became a central driver

The most important structural change in 2016–2021 was Montenegro's transition into NATO.

The country became a NATO member in **June 2017**, and subsequent modernization was closely linked to the requirements of NATO integration. The Montenegrin government described 2018 as a year of continued implementation of its NATO military-integration plan, including defense standards, modernization and Air Policing.³⁹

This affected procurement priorities: Montenegro increasingly sought equipment that could be integrated with NATO procedures and forces rather than attempting to recreate a traditional full-spectrum national military.

7. Modernization accelerated after NATO accession

By 2020, Montenegro's defense minister stated that **more than €120 million had been allocated to modernization over the preceding four years**. Of this, more than €30 million had gone to the three Bell 412 helicopters, approximately €6 million to two Bell 505 helicopters, and around €70 million to armored vehicles, according to the minister.⁴⁰

This illustrates the concentration of modernization spending on a relatively small number of high-impact capabilities.

³⁵ CDM, (2019), Montenegrin Navy converted a gunboat into a patrol boat, <https://www.cdm.me/english/montenegrin-navy-converted-a-gunboat-into-a-patrol-boat/>

³⁶ Government of Montenegro, (2018), U CG stigli novi višenamjenski helikopteri, premijer Marković: Uložili smo novac u sigurnost naših građana, <https://www.gov.me/clanak/190412--u-cg-stigli-novi-visenamjenski-helikopteri-premijer-markovic-ulozili-smo-novac-u-sigurnost-nasih-gradana>

³⁷ Vijesti, (2024), The Army of Montenegro presented a new uniform, <https://en.vijesti.me/news-b/society/726734/the-army-of-montenegro-presented-a-new-uniform>

³⁸ CDM, (2020), Montenegrin armed forces are equipped with the most advanced light-armored vehicles, <https://www.cdm.me/english/montenegrin-armed-forces-are-equipped-with-the-most-advanced-light-armored-vehicles/>

³⁹ Government of Montenegro, (2018), Potpukovnik Pantović: Ovu godinu obilježio napredak u svim aktivnostima iz Plana vojne integracije Crne Gore u NATO, <https://www.gov.me/clanak/194729--potpukovnik-pantovic-ovu-godinu-obiljezio-napredak-u-svim-aktivnostima-iz-plana-vojne-integracije-crne-gore-u-nato>

⁴⁰ Government of Montenegro, (2020), Air Force of Armed Forces of Montenegro is stronger for another helicopter, <https://www.gov.me/en/article/232955--air-force-of-armed-forces-of-montenegro-is-stronger-for-another-helicopter>

Overall trend, 2016–2021

Capability	Main trend
Air Force	Modernization through helicopters rather than fighter aircraft
Land Forces	Major move toward light armored/protected mobility
Navy	Shift toward patrol, surveillance and maritime-security capabilities
Air defense	Increasing reliance on NATO Air Policing rather than national fighter capability
Individual equipment	Replacement and modernization of uniforms, equipment and communications
Command/interoperability	Strong movement toward NATO standards
Defense spending	General increase, supporting modernization
Overall character	Selective modernization rather than large-scale rearmament

In overall, the 2016–2021 armament trend in Montenegro can be described as a transition from legacy post-Yugoslav equipment toward a smaller, more mobile and NATO-interoperable force. The most significant acquisitions were the **Bell 412 helicopters and light armored vehicles**, while naval modernization concentrated on patrol capabilities.

Unlike Serbia during the same period, Montenegro did **not** pursue a major fighter-aircraft, heavy armor or long-range air-defense acquisition programme. Its modernization model was instead built around **mobility, protected forces, helicopters, maritime security, NATO interoperability and relatively specialized capabilities appropriate to the country's small size and strategic role**.

According to the Military Balance's data of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, for the period from 2016 to 2021, **Montenegro** possessed the following weaponry in their inventory:

Country: Montenegro	2016	2021	Increase/decrease in percentage
Total active personnel	2080	2350	same
Total reserve personnel	/	/	/
Armored fighting vehicles	8	28	(+250%)
Artillery	149	135	(-9.4%)
Patrol and coastal combatants	5	4	(- 20%)
Amphibious landing craft	5	/	(-500%)
Fighter and ground attack aircrafts	/	/	/
Attack helicopters	/	/	/
Heavy/medium transport helicopters	8	17	(+112.5%)
Heavy/medium transport aircraft	/	/	/

III.4 Armament trends of North Macedonia for the period 2016–2021

The period 2016–2021 represents an important transition in the development of the Armed Forces of North Macedonia. At the beginning of the period, the Army continued to rely substantially on legacy equipment originating from the former Yugoslav and Soviet military systems. By 2021, however, the country had embarked on a structured modernization programme centred on NATO interoperability, the modernization of the Light Infantry Battle Group, replacement of ageing vehicles and equipment, and increasing reliance on Western suppliers.

The transformation was closely connected to North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration. NATO accession negotiations formally began after the 2018 Brussels Summit, the Accession Protocol was signed in February 2019, and North Macedonia became NATO's 30th member on **27 March 2020**.⁴¹

The armament trend during 2016–2021 can therefore be characterized less as a numerical expansion of the armed forces and more as a **qualitative modernization and standardization process**. The most significant developments were the initiation of a multi-year light-armored-vehicle programme, acquisition of NATO-standard infantry weapons, increased investment in communications and information systems, and preparation for new artillery and air-defense capabilities.

A methodological distinction is important. SIPRI's Arms Transfers Database records transfers of **major conventional weapons** and expresses their volume through Trend-Indicator Values (TIV). TIVs are not financial prices and should not be interpreted as the monetary value of procurement. SIPRI itself states that TIV is intended to measure the volume of military resources transferred and facilitate comparisons over time. ⁴²

1. Development of defense expenditure and modernization policy

A major prerequisite for rearmament was the gradual increase in defense expenditure after several years of comparatively low spending.

SIPRI data show that North Macedonia's military expenditure in constant prices increased during the latter part of the period. In 2016, SIPRI recorded approximately **\$103 million** in constant 2019 US dollars, compared with approximately **\$154 million in 2019** and **\$102 million in 2020**; the pandemic contributed to the temporary reduction in 2020.⁴³

The national defense-budget trajectory was particularly important:

Year	Key budget/modernization development
2016	Defense spending remained comparatively low; modernization was constrained and the Army remained heavily dependent on legacy systems.
2017	The government began reversing the long-term decline in defense funding.
2018	Defense budget increased to approximately 6.4 billion MKD denars , about 15% higher than the previous year. Modernization and NATO-related preparations became explicit priorities.
2019	Defense budget reached approximately €135 million ; capital expenditure for equipment and modernization rose to about 15% , or more than €20 million.
2020	Planned defense budget exceeded 10 billion MKD denars , approximately 1.4% of GDP, with 20% allocated to modernization/capital expenditure.
2021	Defense spending rose to approximately 1.57% of GDP , exceeding 11 billion MKD denars; 2.8 billion MKD denars, or 25% of the defense budget , was allocated to equipment and modernization. ⁴⁴

This represents a substantial change in procurement policy. In 2019 the Ministry described the modernization effort

⁴¹ NATO, (2020), North Macedonia joins NATO as 30th Ally, <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/articles/news/2020/03/27/north-macedonia-joins-nato-as-30th-ally>

⁴² SIPRI, (n.d.), Sources and methods, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers/sources-and-methods>

⁴³ SIPRI, (2021), Military expenditure by country, in constant (2019) US\$ m., 1988–2020, <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Data%20for%20all%20countries%20from%201988%E2%80%932020in%20constant%20%282019%29%20USD%20%28pdf%29.pdf>

⁴⁴ Shekerinska, R. (2021), Shekerinska: the defence budget for 2021 continues to grow, we have shown that our word can be trusted, <https://arhiva.mod.gov.mk/%D1%88%D0%B5%D0%BA%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0-%D0%B1%D1%83%D1%9F%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%82-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B1%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%B7%D0%B0-2021-%D0%BF/>

as beginning with the declared units⁴⁵, while by 2021 multi-year contracts covered armored vehicles, logistics, infantry equipment, artillery, IT and cyber-security equipment.⁴⁶

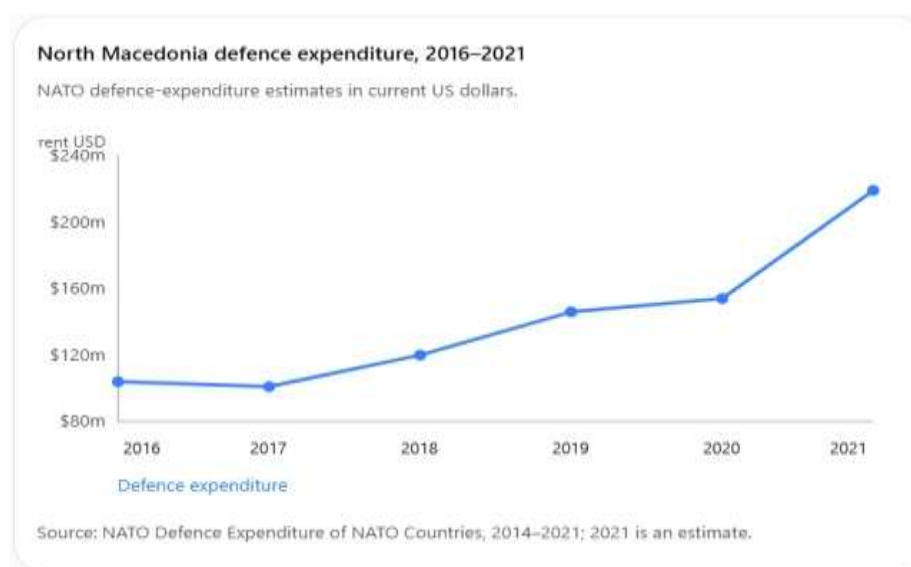
1.2 Annual Defense Expenditure of North Macedonia, 2016–2021

For consistency, the table below uses NATO's **defense-expenditure series** for the main annual comparison. NATO's definition can differ from the national budget definition, and NATO notes that the figures are reported by member governments according to an agreed methodology; **2021 was an estimate in the 2022 NATO publication**.⁴⁷

Year	Defense expenditure, current USD	Defense expenditure as % GDP	Equipment expenditure as % of defense expenditure	Approx. equipment spending, current USD
2016	\$104m	~0.9%	~5.8%	~\$6m
2017	\$101m	~0.9%	~6%	~\$6m
2018	\$120m	~1.0%	~8–9%	~\$10m
2019	\$146m	~1.2%	~15%	~\$22m
2020	\$154m	~1.3%	~20%	~\$31m
2021	\$219m*	~1.6%	25.6%	~\$56m

*2021 is an estimate in the NATO 2014–2021 series. The NATO series reports North Macedonia at **\$124m, \$105m, \$104m, \$101m, \$120m, \$146m, \$154m and \$219m** for 2014–2021 respectively.⁴⁸

Trend



Source: NATO Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries, 2014–2021; 2021 is an estimate.

The quantitative pattern supports three observations:

- **2016–2017:** expenditure was broadly stagnant at around **\$100–104 million**.
- **2018–2020:** expenditure increased steadily, reaching approximately **\$154 million** in 2020.

⁴⁵ Shekerinska, R. (2018), Shekerinska for the defense budget 2019: The defense budget is growing for a second year in a row – higher wages, more money for maintenance, equipment and modernization,

<https://arhiva.mod.gov.mk/%d1%88%d0%b5%d0%ba%d0%b5%d1%80%d0%b8%d0%bd%d1%81%d0%ba%d0%b0-%d0%b7%d0%b0-%d0%be%d0%b4%d0%b1%d1%80%d0%b0%d0%bd%d0%b1%d0%b5%d0%bd%d0%b8%d0%be%d1%82-%d0%b1%d1%83%d1%9f%d0%b5%d1%82-2019-%d0%b3%d0%be/>

⁴⁶ Shekerinska, R. (2021), Shekerinska: the defence budget for 2021 continues to grow, we have shown that our word can be trusted, <https://arhiva.mod.gov.mk/%D1%88%D0%B5%D0%BA%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0-%D0%B1%D1%83%D1%9F%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%82-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B1%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%B7%D0%B0-2021-%D0%BF/>

⁴⁷ NATO, Defense Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2021), <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/articles/news/2022/03/31/defence-expenditure-of-nato-countries-2014-2021>

⁴⁸ NATO, (2021), Defense Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2021), https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/20210611_natopub_defence_expenditure_of_nato_countries_2014-2021.pdf

- **2021:** NATO recorded a much larger estimated figure of **\$219 million**, while equipment expenditure reached approximately **25.6% of defense expenditure**, above NATO's 20% guideline.⁴⁹

This corresponds closely with the Ministry of Defense's modernization policy: the national budget allocated progressively more resources to equipment, rising from roughly **15% in 2019 to 20% in 2020 and 25% in 2021**. The Ministry reported approximately **2.8 billion MKD denars** for equipment and modernization in the 2021 budget.

2. Chronology of armament development, 2016–2021

2016: Legacy-force baseline

In 2016 the Army's inventory was still dominated by older platforms. There was no major publicly documented acquisition programme comparable with the large-scale armored-vehicle projects launched later in the period.

SIPRI's transfer data are consistent with this picture: North Macedonia recorded essentially **zero SIPRI TIV of major-arms imports in 2016**, meaning that deliveries of major conventional weapons were below SIPRI's reporting threshold for that year.⁵⁰ This does not mean that the country acquired no military equipment at all, since SIPRI excludes many categories such as small arms, ammunition, trucks and support equipment.⁵¹

The principal characteristic of 2016 was consequently **maintenance rather than large-scale re-equipment**.

2017: Beginning of increased defense investment

A policy shift became visible in 2017. The new government announced a larger defense budget and a more systematic approach to Army modernization.

The 2018 defense budget, presented in December 2017, amounted to **6.4 billion MKD denars**, an increase of approximately 15%. The Ministry emphasized new equipment, repair and maintenance, uniforms, spare parts and measures supporting NATO integration.⁵²

Although this was not yet associated with a single major weapons contract, it was an important enabling stage: the government began increasing resources available for future procurement.

2018: Strategic modernization planning

2018 was a turning point in defense planning. The government increased spending and began translating NATO-integration objectives into concrete modernization requirements.

The 2019 defense budget was subsequently designed around an annual increase in defense expenditure and a greater proportion of resources for equipment. The Ministry reported that capital expenditure for modernization would rise to more than **€20 million**, representing approximately 15% of the defense budget.⁵³

The focus increasingly shifted toward the **declared forces**, particularly the future NATO-compatible Light Infantry Battle Group. This was significant because it established a capability-based rather than purely inventory-based approach to modernization.

⁴⁹ NATO, (2021), Defense Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2021), https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/20210611_natopub_defence_expenditure_of_nato_countries_2014-2021.pdf

⁵⁰ SIPRI, (n.d.), Sources and methods, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers/sources-and-methods>

⁵¹ Index mundi, (n.d.), North Macedonia - Arms imports

Arms imports (SIPRI trend indicator values), <https://www.indexmundi.com/facts/north-macedonia/arms-imports>

⁵² Shekerinska, R. (2017), Minister Shekerinska presented the defense budget – the funds for the ARM are on the rise while non-productive costs do down, <https://arhiva.mod.gov.mk/%d0%bc%d0%b8%d0%bd%d0%b8%d1%81%d1%82%d0%b5%d1%80%d0%ba%d0%b0%d1%82%d0%b0-%d1%88%d0%b5%d0%ba%d0%b5%d1%80%d0%b8%d0%bd%d1%81%d0%ba%d0%b0-%d0%b3%d0%be-%d0%bf%d1%80%d0%b5%d0%b7%d0%b5%d0%bd%d1%82%d0%b8/>

⁵³ Shekerinska, R. (2018), Shekerinska for the defense budget 2019: The defense budget is growing for a second year in a row – higher wages, more money for maintenance, equipment and modernization, <https://arhiva.mod.gov.mk/%d1%88%d0%b5%d0%ba%d0%b5%d1%80%d0%b8%d0%bd%d1%81%d0%ba%d0%b0-%d0%b7%d0%b0-%d0%be%d0%b4%d0%b1%d1%80%d0%b0%d0%bd%d0%b1%d0%b5%d0%bd%d0%b8%d0%be%d1%82-%d0%b1%d1%83%d1%9f%d0%b5%d1%82-2019-%d0%b3%d0%be/>

2019: Launch of the light-armored-vehicle programme

The most important procurement development of the period began in **2019**, when North Macedonia and the United States concluded government-to-government agreements for the acquisition of new wheeled light armored vehicles.

The Ministry of Defense identifies 2019 as the starting point of the **Light Armored Vehicles (LAV) project**, implemented as a multi-year programme under the country's long-term defense-capability development plan.⁵⁴

The project subsequently became associated with the **Oshkosh JLTV** and **Stryker** families.

The JLTV programme ultimately involved **88 vehicles**, although deliveries extended beyond the 2016–2021 period. The first vehicles did not enter service until later; consequently, the 88-vehicle figure should be treated as the procurement programme's planned/contracted quantity rather than the number operational in 2021.⁵⁵ The Ministry later confirmed that the project had started in 2019 and that 32 vehicles had subsequently arrived.⁵⁶

2020: NATO accession and acceleration of modernization

North Macedonia formally joined NATO on **27 March 2020**. NATO accession did not itself create a new arsenal, but it strengthened the institutional requirement for interoperability and reinforced the direction of ongoing procurement. The 2020 defense budget exceeded **10 billion MKD denars**, representing a 22% increase over the previous year. For the first time, approximately **20% of the defense budget** was allocated to capital expenditure/modernization.⁵⁷

The Ministry reported that modernization focused on combat vehicles, engineering equipment, communications and cyber capabilities. By the end of 2020, the Army had received three additional engineering machines, bringing the number of newly acquired machines to **13**, while procurement of light armored vehicles for the NATO-declared Light Infantry Battle Group was underway.⁵⁸

Thus, 2020 can be understood as the year in which NATO membership and the modernization programme became institutionally linked.

2021: Major procurement decisions become visible

The most significant armament announcements occurred in 2021.

Stryker armored vehicles

On 16 March 2021, the US State Department approved a possible Foreign Military Sale to North Macedonia involving **54 Stryker vehicles** and associated equipment, with an estimated value of **\$210 million**. The proposed fleet included:⁵⁹

- M1126 Infantry Carrier Vehicles;
- M1130 Command Vehicles;

⁵⁴ Ministry of Defense of North Macedonia, (2021), US State Department approves the procurement of light armored vehicles – STRYKER for the Army of North Macedonia,

<https://arhiva.mod.gov.mk/%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%BE%D1%82-%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%98%D1%82-%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%BF%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%82%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%82-%D1%98%D0%B0-%D0%BE%D0%B4>

⁵⁵ Petrovska, S. (2023), Petrovska: 26 new JLTV Oshkosh armored vehicles arrived, <https://arhiva.mod.gov.mk/petrovska-26-new-jltv-oshkosh-armored-vehicles-arrived/>

⁵⁶ Ministry of Defense of North Macedonia, (2023), A military convoy has arrived with the new JLTV light armored vehicles intended for the Macedonian Army, <https://arhiva.mod.gov.mk/a-military-convoy-has-arrived-with-the-new-jltv-light-armored-vehicles-intended-for-the-macedonian-army/>

⁵⁷ Shekerinska, R. (2019), Shekerinska: The defense budget for 2020 is a budget of a NATO member country, more money for equipment, more money for each Army member,

<https://arhiva.mod.gov.mk/%d1%88%d0%b5%d0%ba%d0%b5%d1%80%d0%b8%d0%bd%d1%81%d0%ba%d0%b0-%d0%be%d0%b4%d0%b1%d1%80%d0%b0%d0%bd%d0%b1%d0%b5%d0%bd%d0%b8%d0%be%d1%82-%d0%b1%d1%83%d1%9f%d0%b5%d1%82-%d0%b7%d0%b0-2020-%d0%b3%d0%be/>

⁵⁸ Shekerinska, R. (2020), The 2020, year of the biggest successes in the defense, a year of NATO membership, <https://arhiva.mod.gov.mk/2020-ta-godina-na-naigolemite-uspesi-vo-odbranata-godina-na-nato-clenstvo>

⁵⁹ U.S Defense Security Cooperation Agency, (2021), NEWS RELEASE: North Macedonia – Stryker Vehicles, https://media.defense.gov/2024/Dec/09/2003604174/-1/-1/0/NORTH_MACEDONIA_21-22.PDF

- M1129 Mortar Carrier Vehicles;
- associated machine guns and other equipment.

The US Defense Security Cooperation Agency described the estimated value of the possible sale as **\$210 million**.⁶⁰

The North Macedonian Ministry of Defense described the Stryker purchase as a continuation of the **2019–2024 light-armored-vehicle modernization programme**. It also stated that US assistance through programmes including ERIP, CRIFF and the 333 programme was expected to cover approximately **20–25% of the total project value**.⁶¹

An important qualification is that a DSCA notification is an **approval of a possible sale**, not equivalent to proof that every item in the notification had been delivered by the end of 2021. Therefore, the 54 vehicles and \$210 million should be recorded as an approved procurement package/estimated case value rather than as 2021 deliveries or final expenditure.

M4 rifles

In March 2021, the Army received more than **1,200 M4 rifles** supplied by the United States. The Ministry stated that the rifles were intended to equip the light infantry and were chambered in **5.56 mm**, described by the Ministry as a NATO-standard caliber.⁶²

Unlike the Stryker programme, this was a documented **delivery**, rather than merely an authorization. The rifles therefore represent one of the clearest examples of a tangible change in individual weapons during the period.

JLTV

The JLTV programme was another central element of the modernization strategy. The eventual programme covered **88 Oshkosh JLTVs**, although only part of this quantity had entered service by the end of the period under examination. The Ministry's later reporting confirms that the first deliveries occurred after the project was initiated in 2019.⁶³

The JLTV project is significant because it represents a shift from legacy armored and utility vehicles toward modern, networkable, NATO-compatible tactical mobility.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ministry of Defense of North Macedonia, (2021), US State Department approves the procurement of light armored vehicles – STRYKER for the Army of North Macedonia, <https://arhiva.mod.gov.mk/%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%BE%D1%82-%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%98%D1%82-%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%BF%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%82%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%82-%D1%98%D0%B0-%D0%BE%D0%B4>

⁶² Ministry of Defense of North Macedonia, (2021), The Army received new American rifles, <https://arhiva.mod.gov.mk/%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%BE%D1%82-%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%98%D1%82-%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%BF%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%82%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%82-%D1%98%D0%B0-%D0%BE%D0%B4>

⁶³ Ministry of Defense of North Macedonia, (2023), A military convoy has arrived with the new JLTV light armored vehicles intended for the Macedonian Army, <https://arhiva.mod.gov.mk/a-military-convoy-has-arrived-with-the-new-jltv-light-armored-vehicles-intended-for-the-macedonian-army/>

3. Major weapon systems and procurement projects

System/project	Supplier	Quantity relevant to programme	Status by/around 2021	Reported/estimated cost
Stryker	United States	54	US approval in March 2021; multi-year programme	\$210 million estimated value FMS
JLTV Oshkosh	United States	88 programme quantity	Procurement initiated in 2019; deliveries continued after 2021	Publicly reported programme cost not established in the sources used here
M4 rifles	United States	1,200+ delivered	Delivered March 2021	US-funded assistance/donation; no purchase price reported by MoD
Engineering machinery	Various/Western cooperation	13 new machines by 2020	At least 13 acquired by end-2020	Not consolidated in the cited sources
Communications/IT/cyber equipment	Primarily Western/NATO-oriented	Not publicly consolidated	Multi-year modernization	Not publicly consolidated
Artillery modernization	Procurement programme	Quantity not established for 2021	Contract/procurement process underway; deliveries later	Not established in cited 2021 sources
Air-defense modernization	France	System procurement initiated	Agreement/contract process associated with French Mistral system	Cost not established in cited 2021 sources

The table illustrates an important characteristic of the period: **the most financially visible programmes were multi-year projects**, while several other modernization activities involved equipment whose quantities and costs were not publicly consolidated.

4. Supplier trends

The supplier structure changed substantially during the period.

The United States became the most visible external partner for major modernization projects. US involvement included:

- Stryker armoured vehicles;
- Oshkosh JLTVs;
- M4 rifles;
- associated training, support and modernization assistance.

This represented a shift toward Western/NATO equipment and away from reliance on the Army's older Soviet/Yugoslav equipment base.

The United States' importance also reflected the wider international arms-transfer environment. SIPRI identifies the United States as the world's largest supplier of major arms in both the 2016–2020 and 2017–2021 periods.⁶⁴

France also became relevant to North Macedonia's modernization, particularly through the procurement of a modern short-range air-defense capability. The Ministry subsequently identified the French **Mistral** system as part of the modernization programme.⁶⁵

The supplier trend therefore moved toward **NATO allies and NATO-compatible systems**, reflecting the strategic requirement for interoperability rather than simply the replacement of individual obsolete items.

⁶⁴ SIPRI, (2022), SIPRI YEARBOOK 2022, <https://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2022/09>

⁶⁵ Petrovska, S. (2023), Petrovska at a media briefing: I am proud of the army members, with the modernization we are changing the face of the Army with each passing day, https://arhiva.mod.gov.mk/petrovska-at-a-media-briefing-i-am-proud-of-the-army-members-with-the-modernization-we-are-changing-the-face-of-the-army-with-each-passing-day/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

5. Quantitative interpretation of the 2016–2021 trend

The development can be summarized through three indicators.

First, **defense expenditure increased**. The national defense budget rose from the low levels prevailing during the earlier part of the decade to more than 11 billion MKD denars in 2021. The 2021 allocation of 2.8 billion MKD denars for equipment and modernization represented 25% of the defense budget.⁶⁶

Second, **equipment became a larger share of expenditure**. In 2019 the Ministry planned approximately 15% for modernization, increasing to 20% in 2020 and 25% in 2021.⁶⁷

Third, the nature of procurement changed. Instead of primarily sustaining an existing legacy fleet, the Army began acquiring:

- modern wheeled armored vehicles;
- NATO-standard assault rifles;
- modern communications equipment;
- cyber-security equipment;
- new logistics and engineering equipment;
- modern artillery;
- modern air-defense equipment.

The Ministry explicitly described the modernization focus as the **Light Infantry Battle Group**, with procurement organized through multi-year projects.

6. Assessment of the 2016–2021 armament trend

The period can be divided into three broad stages:

2016–2017 — Low-intensity modernization.

The Army remained dependent on legacy equipment and there was little evidence of major conventional-weapons procurement. Defense expenditure remained relatively constrained.

2018–2019 — Strategic reorientation.

Defense expenditure increased substantially and modernization was incorporated into a longer-term capability-development framework. NATO accession became the principal strategic driver, and the light-armored-vehicle programme was initiated in 2019.

2020–2021 — NATO-oriented re-equipment.

NATO membership was achieved in March 2020, while the proportion of the defense budget dedicated to modernization increased. In 2021 the process became visible through the delivery of more than 1,200 M4 rifles and the US approval of the \$210 million Stryker package.

The most important conclusion is therefore that **North Macedonia's armament trend from 2016 to 2021 was predominantly qualitative**. The objective was not a major expansion in the size of the Army but the transformation of selected capabilities into a more mobile, modern and NATO-interoperable force.

The armored-vehicle programme is particularly illustrative. The JLTV and Stryker projects introduced a fundamentally different vehicle architecture from the older legacy fleet and were designed around the requirements of the Light Infantry Battle Group. Similarly, the M4 acquisition demonstrated a move toward NATO-standard individual weapons. At the same time, the modernization process remained incomplete by the end of 2021. Several major programmes were multi-year projects, and areas such as artillery, air defense, aviation and broader communications modernization were still undergoing procurement or implementation. Consequently, **2021 should be viewed as a transition point rather than the completion of the modernization cycle**.

According to the Military Balance's data of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, for the period from 2016 to 2021, **North Macedonia** possessed the following weaponry in their inventory:

⁶⁶ Shekerinska, R. (2020), Shekerinska: the defence budget for 2021 continues to grow, we have shown that our word can be trusted, <https://arhiva.mod.gov.mk/%D1%88%D0%B5%D0%BA%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0-%D0%B1%D1%83%D1%9F%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%82-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B1%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%B7%D0%B0-2021-%D0%BF>

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Country: North Macedonia	2016	2021	Increase/decrease in percentage
Total active personnel	8000	8000	same
Total reserve personnel	4850	4850	same
Armored fighting vehicles	252	242	(-3.97%)
Artillery	126	131	(+3.97%)
Patrol and coastal combatants	2	2	same
Amphibious landing craft	/	/	/
Fighter and ground attack aircrafts	/	/	/
Attack helicopters	4	2	(-50%)
Heavy/medium transport helicopters	8	16	(+100%)
Heavy/medium transport aircraft	6	6	same

III.5 Armament trends of Serbia for the period 2016–2021

Major trends

1. Renewal of the Air Force

The most visible trend was the effort to restore Serbia's fighter and helicopter capabilities. The arrival of six donated Russian **MiG-29s** in 2017, combined with Serbia's existing aircraft and subsequent modernization, increased the number of operational combat aircraft. Serbia simultaneously purchased Western helicopters, notably the **Airbus H145M**, demonstrating that its procurement policy was not exclusively oriented toward Russian equipment.⁶⁸

2. Strong development of air defense

Air defense became another central component of modernization. Serbia acquired the **Pantsir-S1** system from Russia and modernized existing missile systems.⁶⁹ By 2020, the Serbian Ministry of Defense described air-defense modernization as a major improvement in operational capability.

⁶⁸ Center for Geostrategic Research and Terrorism, Modernization of the Serbian Armed Forces and International Military Cooperation 2016-2021, page.23, <https://www.scribd.com/document/525421855/Modernizacija-Vojske-Srbije-i-me%C4%91unarodna-vojna-saradnja-2016-2021>

⁶⁹ Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Serbia, Air Force and Air Defense stronger than ever, <https://www.mod.gov.rs/eng/16300/ratno-vazduhoplovstvo-i-pvo-snaznije-nego-ikada-16300>

3. Diversification of suppliers

Serbia's procurement pattern during 2016–2021 was notable for its **multi-vector character**. Russian equipment remained important—particularly MiG-29s, Mi-17/Mi-35 helicopters and Pantsir-S1—but Serbia also acquired equipment from Western manufacturers and increasingly from **China**. This was consistent with Serbia's broader policy of maintaining military cooperation with multiple partners.

4. Increasing use of unmanned systems

UAVs became increasingly important. Serbia acquired the Chinese **CH-92A** remotely piloted aircraft and subsequently placed greater emphasis on unmanned reconnaissance and strike capabilities. The UAV trend represented a shift toward relatively inexpensive systems capable of providing surveillance and precision-strike functions.⁷⁰

5. Greater emphasis on domestic defense production

Modernization was not limited to imports. Serbia increasingly invested in its domestic defense industry, including the development and production of artillery, armored vehicles, missiles, ammunition and other systems.

This approach allowed Serbia to combine imported high-end platforms with locally produced or upgraded equipment Serbia retained significant production capabilities in:

- artillery;
- armored vehicles;
- ammunition;
- small arms;
- missiles;
- UAVs;
- electronic systems.

Domestic production allowed the country to modernize some systems without importing complete weapon systems from abroad. This means that international arms-import statistics do not fully capture the scale of Serbia's military modernization.

6. Higher defense expenditure and modernization funding

The modernization drive was supported by increased military expenditure. SIPRI maintains a consistent military-expenditure series for Serbia and other countries, while noting that historical figures can be revised as new information becomes available. According to SIPRI, in 2016 the military expenditure of Serbia was \$784.3 million, while in 2021 was 1.8 billion,⁷¹ or an increase of 129.5%.

Overall assessment of 2016–2021

The 2016–2021 period represented a transition from predominantly maintaining legacy Yugoslav-era/Soviet-designed equipment toward a more diversified and modern force structure. The principal characteristics were:

- **fighter-force renewal**, especially through MiG-29 acquisitions and modernization;
- **rapid expansion of helicopter capabilities**;
- **strengthening of ground-based air defense**, including Pantsir-S1;
- **introduction of armed/reconnaissance UAV capability**;
- **modernization of armored and artillery systems**;
- **greater reliance on domestic defense production**;
- **diversification of foreign suppliers**, involving Russia, China and Western countries.

It is important to distinguish **arms transfers** from **overall military modernization**: SIPRI's Arms Transfers Database measures transfers of major conventional weapons using its own methodology and TIV indicator; it does not capture every domestic production, upgrade, donation or smaller procurement.⁷²

⁷⁰ Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Serbia, Air Force and Air Defense stronger than ever, <https://www.mod.gov.rs/eng/16300/ratno-vazduhoplovstvo-i-pvo-snazniije-nego-ikada-16300>

⁷¹ SIPRI, (n.d), SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>

⁷² SIPRI, (n.d), Arms transfers database, <https://armstransfers.sipri.org/ArmsTransfer/>

For a research paper, the period can therefore be summarized as **Serbia's post-2016 military rearmament and modernization phase**, characterized less by a single large-scale rearmament programme than by simultaneous modernization of several branches and diversification of procurement sources.

Period	Main developments
2016	Serbia began accelerating military modernization after years of relatively limited investment. A major focus was the renewal of the Air Force and Air Defense , including arrangements for Russian MiG-29 aircraft and Western-produced H145M helicopters.
2017	Six MiG-29s donated by Russia were delivered and incorporated into the Serbian Air Force. ⁷³ This was one of the most important developments of the period because it substantially improved Serbia's fighter inventory. Serbia also continued preparations for H145M helicopter deliveries.
2018	Modernization broadened beyond fighters. Serbia pursued Mi-17 transport helicopters, Mi-35 attack helicopters and H145M helicopters , while continuing modernization of existing equipment. ⁷⁴ The government publicly emphasized increased defense investment.
2019	Serbia continued acquiring and modernizing air-defense and aviation systems. Procurement became increasingly diversified, involving Russia, China and Western suppliers , while domestic production and modernization also became more important.
2020	The Air Force and Air Defense had become a major modernization priority. Serbia reported the acquisition of MiG-29s, Mi-17s, H145Ms, Mi-35s and CH-92A UAVs , alongside the introduction of the Russian Pantsir-S1 short-range air-defense system. ⁷⁵
2021	The modernization cycle continued, with increasing attention to air defense, drones, precision-guided weapons, armored forces and indigenous weapons production . Serbia was also expanding the diversity of its suppliers rather than relying exclusively on a single source. SIPRI's 2021 data provide the end point for assessing the period's international arms-transfer trend. ⁷⁶

According to the Military Balance's data of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, for the period from 2016 to 2021, **Serbia** possessed the following weaponry in their inventory:

⁷³ Radio Free Europe, (2017), Russia Formally Hands Over MiG-29 Fighter Jets to Serbia, <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-russia-military/28806666.html>

⁷⁴ Vucic, A, (2018), President Vučić: We will continue investing in the Serbian Armed Forces, Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Serbia, <https://www.mod.gov.rs/eng/12859/predsednik-vucic-nastavicemo-sa-ulaganjem-u-vojsku-srbije-12859?>

⁷⁵ Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Serbia, Air Force and Air Defense stronger than ever, <https://www.mod.gov.rs/eng/16300/ratno-vazduhoplovstvo-i-pvo-snaznije-nego-ikada-16300>

⁷⁶ SIPRI, (2022), TRENDS IN INTERNATIONAL ARMS TRANSFERS, 2021, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/fs_2203_at_2021.pdf

Country: Serbia	2016	2021	Increase/decrease in percentage
Total active personnel	28150	28150	same
Total reserve personnel	50150	50150	same
Armored fighting vehicles	620	821	(+32.42%)
Artillery	515	449	(-12.82%)
Patrol and coastal combatants	5	5	same
Amphibious landing craft	5	1	(-80%)
Fighter and ground attack aircrafts	83	61	(-26.51%)
Attack helicopters	2	6	(+200%)
Heavy/medium transport helicopters	58	68	(+17.24%)
Heavy/medium transport aircraft	/	/	/

III.6 Armament trends of Kosovo for the period 2016-2021.

The **Kosovo Security Force (KSF)** is Kosovo's professional security and defense force. It was established in 2009 and is headquartered in Pristina. Kosovo Security Force 2,500; reserves 800 The Kosovo Security Force (KSF) was formed in January 2009 as a non-military organization with responsibility for crisis response, civil protection and EOD. In 2017, a proposal by Pristina to establish an army was opposed by Russia, Serbia, the US and NATO.⁷⁷ The military expenditure in 2016 were \$51.9 million, compared with \$79.6 million in 2021, which is an increase of 53.4%.

1. Size and organization

The KSF began as a lightly armed, civilian-controlled security organization after the Kosovo War. NATO supervised its creation, recruitment and training, and declared it fully operational in 2013.⁷⁸

Since then, Kosovo has been transforming the KSF toward a conventional defense force. Its capabilities have expanded substantially beyond the original civil-protection mission. The exact current personnel strength is less straightforward to establish from publicly available official sources than its **legal/planned structure**, so I would not treat unofficial figures as exact. NATO's description of the original KSF is now outdated in terms of its

⁷⁷ International Institute for Strategic Studies, (2021), Military Balance, page. 141, <https://www.iiss.org/publications/the-military-balance/the-military-balance-2021/>

⁷⁸ NATO, (2013), The Kosovo Security Force now self-sustainable, <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/articles/nato-stories/2013/07/09/the-kosovo-security-force-now-self-sustainable>

equipment and intended military role: it describes the original force as lightly armed and capped at 2,500 active personnel plus 800 reservists.⁷⁹

Major recent equipment

The KSF is increasingly equipped with Western and Turkish systems:

- **Bayraktar TB2 armed drones** — Kosovo acquired five Turkish TB2s.⁸⁰
- **Javelin anti-tank missiles** — the United States approved a sale worth about \$75 million, including 246 missiles and associated launch equipment according to publicly reported figures.⁸¹
- **M1117 Guardian armored vehicles** — additional U.S.-supplied vehicles arrived in 2025.⁸²
- **Humvees and other armored vehicles** — the fleet contains substantial numbers of U.S.- and Turkish-origin vehicles.⁸³
- **120-mm mortars** and other Turkish-origin indirect-fire systems.⁸⁴
- **Skydagger FPV/loitering attack drones** — Kosovo announced receipt of thousands in October 2025.⁸⁵
- **UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters** — Kosovo has been pursuing/acquiring six U.S. helicopters as part of its longer-term aviation development.⁸⁶
- **Hawkeye 105-mm mobile howitzers** — in December 2025 Kosovo announced a three-year agreement with AM General for these systems, including support and training intended to establish an artillery battery.⁸⁷

So the KSF is **no longer simply a lightly armed civil-protection force**. It is developing infantry, anti-armor, unmanned-aircraft, artillery, mobility and eventually helicopter capabilities.

2. NATO relationship

Kosovo **is not a NATO member**, but NATO has a very substantial security role in Kosovo.

There are actually **two separate relationships**:

KFOR

KFOR is the NATO-led international peace-support force. It has operated in Kosovo since June 1999 under **UN Security Council Resolution 1244**. As of 2026, it has roughly **4,600 troops from 31 Allied and partner countries**.⁸⁸

KFOR's job is fundamentally different from the KSF's. It maintains a safe and secure environment and freedom of movement, working alongside the Kosovo Police and EULEX.

⁷⁹ NATO, (2026), NATO's role in Kosovo, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/operations-and-missions/natos-role-in-kosovo>

⁸⁰ Office of the Prime Minister of Kosovo, Kosovo Security Force to be equipped with thousands of Skydagger suicide combat drones, <https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/news/forca-e-sigurise-se-kosoves-pajiset-me-mijera-drone-luftarake-kamikaze-skydagger>

⁸¹ Reuter, (2025), Kosovo to boost defense spending by 60%, plans drone, ammunition production, PM says, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/kosovo-boost-defence-spending-by-60-plans-drone-ammunition-production-pm-says-2025-03-26>

⁸² Office of the Prime Minister of Kosovo, (2025), Kosovo Security Force Receives Armored Vehicles Procured in the USA, <https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/en/news/forca-e-sigurise-se-kosoves-pranon-autoblindat-e-prokuruar-ne-shba>

⁸³ Rojoef, M. (2025), AM General to Supply Cannon-Armed HUMVEES to Kosovo, The Defense Post, <https://thedefensepost.com/2025/12/17/kosovo-cannon-humvees/>

⁸⁴ Vuksanovic, V. (2025), BUILDING LEVERAGE TÜRKIYE AS SECURITY PROVIDER IN THE WESTERN BALKANS, Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, page.5, <https://bezbednost.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/building-leverage-2024-eng-04.pdf>

⁸⁵ Office of the Prime Minister of Kosovo, (2025), Kosovo Security Force Equipped with Thousands of Skydagger Kamikaze Combat Drones, <https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/en/news/forca-e-sigurise-se-kosoves-pajiset-me-mijera-drone-luftarake-kamikaze-skydagger>

⁸⁶ Infosekolah, (n.d.), List of equipment of the Kosovo Security Force, <https://infosekolah.net/en/List of equipment of the Kosovo Security Force>

⁸⁷ Office of the Prime Minister, (2025), Prime Minister Kurti met the Executive Vice President of the U.S. defense industry manufacturer AM General, John Chadbourne, <https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/en/news/premier-kurti-sastao-se-sa-izvrsnim-potpredsednikom-americkog-proizvodaca-vojne-industrije-am-general-john-chadbourne>

⁸⁸ NATO, (2026), NATO's role in Kosovo, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/operations-and-missions/natos-role-in-kosovo>

NATO assistance to the KSF

NATO helped create the KSF and continues to advise it through the **NATO Advisory and Liaison Team (NALT)**. Assistance includes areas such as logistics, procurement, force development, planning and leadership development.⁸⁹

However, **NATO's Article 5 collective-defense guarantee does not automatically cover Kosovo**, because Kosovo is not a NATO member. That distinction is particularly important when comparing Kosovo and Serbia.

3. History

A simplified timeline:

- **1998–99:** Kosovo War.
- **June 1999:** Serbian/Yugoslav forces withdraw following the NATO air campaign and international intervention.
- **June 1999:** KFOR enters Kosovo.⁹⁰
- **2008:** Kosovo declares independence.
- **2009:** KSF is formally established, replacing the Kosovo Protection Corps.
- **2013:** NATO declares the KSF fully operational for its assigned missions.⁹¹
- **2018:** Kosovo's parliament passes legislation beginning the transformation of the KSF into a force with a national-defense role.
- **2020s:** rapid expansion of military capabilities, particularly drones, armored vehicles, anti-tank weapons and artillery.
- **2023 onward:** increased tensions in northern Kosovo lead NATO to reinforce KFOR temporarily.⁹²
- **2026:** NATO begins gradually adjusting KFOR's posture in response to an improved security situation, while retaining the ability to reverse the adjustment if conditions deteriorate.⁹³

Year	Situation	Approx. character
2016	KSF operating under its original mandate	Lightly armed, civil-protection/security force
2017	Debate intensifies over transforming KSF into an army	Still essentially the original KSF
2018	Kosovo parliament approves transformation legislation	Major turning point
2019	New laws take effect; Ministry of Defense established	Beginning of 10-year military transformation
2020	Reorganization and military training continue	Increasingly defense-oriented
2021	Transformation continues under the 10-year plan	Multiethnic territorial-defense force in development

4. KSF missions

The KSF's role has evolved considerably. Its original missions included:⁹⁴

- emergency response
- disaster relief
- firefighting
- explosive-ordnance disposal
- hazardous-material response
- search and rescue

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ NATO, (2013), The Kosovo Security Force now self-sustainable, <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/articles/nato-stories/2013/07/09/the-kosovo-security-force-now-self-sustainable>

⁹² NATO, (2026), NATO's role in Kosovo, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/operations-and-missions/natos-role-in-kosovo>

⁹³ NATO, (2026), Improved security situation in Kosovo allows for optimization of KFOR mission <https://nato.int/en/news-and-events/articles/news/2026/06/12/improved-security-situation-in-kosovo-allows-for-optimisation-of-kfor-mission>

⁹⁴ NATO, (2013), The Kosovo Security Force now self-sustainable, <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/articles/nato-stories/2013/07/09/the-kosovo-security-force-now-self-sustainable>

- civil protection
- humanitarian assistance

NATO specifically describes these as the missions for which the original KSF was created.

The transformation has added a **defense-of-Kosovo mission**, including developing capabilities for:

- territorial defense
- combat and maneuver
- anti-armor operations
- indirect fire
- intelligence/surveillance through drones
- support to civilian authorities
- international peace-support operations

The recent acquisition of Javelins, TB2s and 105-mm artillery illustrates this transition.

In **2016**, the KSF was still fundamentally the force created with NATO assistance after the Kosovo War. NATO described it as a **lightly armed, volunteer force** without tanks, heavy artillery or offensive aircraft. Its principal responsibilities were emergency response, explosive-ordnance disposal, hazardous-material management, firefighting and civil protection. Its equipment was consequently dominated by things such as:

- light infantry weapons
- trucks and utility vehicles
- ambulances
- engineering equipment
- firefighting equipment
- EOD equipment
- light tactical vehicles
- communications equipment

It **did not have** the conventional heavy military capabilities that Serbia possessed, such as tanks, fighter aircraft and heavy artillery.

2017: Debate over an army

During 2017, Kosovo authorities increasingly pushed for transforming the KSF into a conventional armed force. NATO's position was that such a transformation was a matter for Kosovo but should follow Kosovo's constitutional procedures.⁹⁵

This was also a significant issue in Kosovo–Serbia relations.

At this stage, however, the KSF itself had **not suddenly become an army**. It remained subject to the existing legal framework.

2018: The turning point

December 2018 was the critical moment.

Kosovo's Assembly adopted legislation establishing the legal framework for transforming the KSF and creating a Ministry of Defense. The legislation was subsequently published in January 2019.⁹⁶

NATO publicly expressed concern about the timing, while emphasizing that it would continue its KFOR mission in Kosovo.⁹⁷

This is important because you'll sometimes see **2018** described as the year Kosovo "created an army." More precisely, **the legislation initiated the transformation of the KSF into a defense force; the transformation itself was planned to take years.**

⁹⁵ NATO, (2017), Press conference by NATO Deputy Secretary General Rose Gottemoeller at NATO HQ KFOR, <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/events/transcripts/2017/10/30/press-conference>

⁹⁶ Official Gazette of the Republic of Kosovo, (2008), LAW NO. 03/L-046 LAW ON THE KOSOVO SECURITY FORCE, <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=18375&langid=2>

⁹⁷ Global Security, (2018), Statement by the NATO Secretary General on the adoption of the laws on the transition of the Kosovo Security Force, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2018/12/mil-181214-nato01.htm>

2019–2021: Beginning of the military transformation

The new legal framework fundamentally changed the KSF's intended role.

Instead of being primarily a civil-protection force, it was to develop into a **professional military/territorial-defense force**.

The United States' 2021 human-rights report described Kosovo as continuing a **10-year process begun in 2019** to transform the KSF into a **multiethnic territorial-defense force**.⁹⁸

The transformation involved:

- expanding the force
- establishing a Ministry of Defense
- developing military command structures
- creating reserve capabilities
- increasing military training
- developing infantry and maneuver capabilities
- acquiring more military equipment
- improving NATO interoperability
- developing international deployment capabilities

Kosovo also adopted regulations covering weapons and ammunition for KSF personnel in 2019.⁹⁹

By **2021**, however, the transformation was still very much **in progress**. The KSF was not comparable to the Serbian Armed Forces in terms of conventional military capabilities.

2021 snapshot

A useful way to visualize the KSF at the end of 2021 is:

Personnel: expanding toward the new authorized structure

Organization: transitioning to military structures

Weapons: predominantly light weapons

Armored vehicles: present, but no tank force

Artillery: very limited compared with Serbia

Combat aircraft: none

Armed UAVs: not yet the major capability they became later

Air defense: very limited

Mission: increasingly territorial defense, while retaining civil-support responsibilities

NATO: close cooperation, but Kosovo was not a NATO member

KFOR: separate NATO-led force providing the broader international security presence

The key historical point is that **2016 and 2021 represent two different phases**. In 2016, NATO was still describing the KSF as a lightly armed force focused on civil protection; by 2021, Kosovo was implementing the legislation that transformed it into a future territorial-defense force.¹⁰⁰

IV. Conclusion

The period 2016–2021 was characterized by **selective military modernization rather than a generalized arms race in the Western Balkans, followed by increase in defense expenditures**. In particular, according to SIPRI's Military expenditure database, the Western Balkan countries marked the following increase:

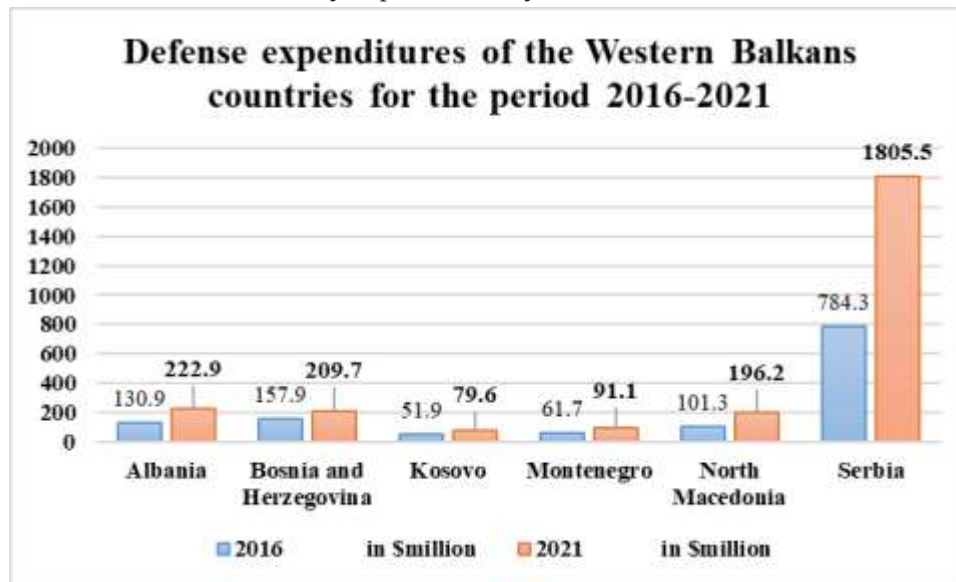
1. Albania increased the military expenditures by 70.3%;
2. Bosnia and Herzegovina increased its military expenditures by 32.8%;
3. Republic of Kosovo increased by 53.4%;

⁹⁸ U.S Department of State, (2021), 2021 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Kosovo, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/reports/2021-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/kosovo/?safe=1>

⁹⁹ Official Gazette of the Republic of Kosovo, (2019), REGULATION (MoD) NO.05/2019 FOR CARRYING AND USE OF WEAPONS BY KOSOVO SECURITY FORCE, <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDocumentDetail.aspx?ActID=20623>

¹⁰⁰ U.S Department of State, (2021), 2021 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Kosovo, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/reports/2021-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/kosovo/?safe=1>

4. Montenegro increased its military expenditures by 48.95%;
5. North Macedonia increased its military expenditures by 93.7%; and
6. Serbia increased its military expenditures by 129.5%.



The six countries followed distinct paths:

- **Albania** concentrated on NATO interoperability, mobility, communications, helicopters, surveillance and modernization of deployable formations;
- **Bosnia and Herzegovina** pursued gradual modernization constrained by limited resources and complex institutional arrangements;
- **Kosovo** focused on developing the Kosovo Security Force following the 2018–2019 legislative transformation, with emphasis on protected mobility, equipment and force development;
- **Montenegro** undertook significant but relatively small-scale modernization after joining NATO, particularly through Bell helicopters and Oshkosh JLTV vehicles;
- **North Macedonia** accelerated modernization in connection with NATO integration, with Stryker and other Western systems becoming central to the development of its land forces;
- **Serbia** pursued the broadest modernization programme, combining Russian, Belarusian, Chinese and Western sources with domestic defense production.

The most important regional trend was therefore not simply an increase in the number of weapons but a **qualitative transformation of military capabilities**. The countries increasingly sought modern communications, protected mobility, air surveillance, helicopters, UAVs, air defence and interoperable land-force capabilities.

The period also demonstrated that geopolitical alignment influenced procurement decisions. NATO members increasingly adopted Western systems, whereas Serbia maintained a diversified procurement model consistent with its policy of military neutrality. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo occupied intermediate positions shaped by their institutional circumstances and international partnerships.

Overall, the 2016–2021 period can be understood as a transition from the maintenance of ageing post-Cold War inventories toward **selective modernization and capability development**. The scale and direction of this modernization differed considerably between states, meaning that the Western Balkans should not be treated as a single homogeneous arms market or military system.

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SIPRI, (n.d), SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>

- Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Albania, Modernization of the Armed Forces, <https://www.mod.gov.al/eng/security-policies/others-from-mod/modernization/68-modernization-of-the-armed-force>
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- Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Albania, Modernization of the Armed Forces, <https://www.mod.gov.al/eng/security-policies/others-from-mod/modernization/68-modernization-of-the-armed-force>
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