EUROPE 23.06.2017 | Filip Milačić

Divide and rule

Ethnic tensions in the Western Balkans are on the rise as the prospect of EU membership fades

The last few months have seen political conflicts intensify in the Western Balkans, with politicians warning of ethno-nationalist tensions and even armed conflict. In Serbia, former President Tomislav Nikolić has threatened to send the army into Kosovo, whilst the opposition in Montenegro is claiming the country is on the brink of civil war. In Kosovo, Albin Kurti, the favourite for the post of Prime Minister, believes a border dispute with Montenegro will escalate into war within two or three years. In Macedonia, Albanian minority parties fear the country could be ripped apart, Ukraine-style. Elsewhere, Milorad Dodik, the President of Republika Srpska – one of the two 'entities' that make up Bosnia-Herzegovina – believes it is only a matter of time before Bosnia-Herzegovina collapses. Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, supported by Kosovan President Hashim Thaçi, has threatened to unify Albania and Kosovo, a move which would doubtless lead to war. There are two factors behind these disconcerting developments: one internal and one external.

Across the Balkans, politicians are using "us against them" identity politics to mobilise their supporters and divert attention away from pressing economic problems affecting the entire region. In Serbia, two extremist nationalist groups now sit in Parliament. The Serbian Radical Party is the third largest group in the chamber. In the capital Belgrade the current President Aleksandar Vučić likes to remind his electorate that some of Serbia's neighbours are pushing for 'Greater Albania'– a project that would see foreign territories that are home to ethnic Albanians tagged onto the motherland.

The fight against Serbian nationalism was a significant factor in legitimising the regime of Franjo Tuđmans in Croatia in the 1990's and Albanian nationalism is now serving the same purpose for former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski in Macedonia who is exploiting tensions between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians. Macedonian president Gjorge Ivanov called an agreement on identity issues by social democrats and Albanian minority unconstitutional.

The situation is no better in Montenegro, Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Eleven years after the independence referendum, Montenegro's entire political system is polarised along ethnic lines. Current disagreements over NATO membership likewise reflect internal disputes over identity. Broadly speaking, being pro-Montenegrin overlaps with being pro-NATO, whilst being pro-Serbian equates to being pro-Russia. In Kosovo, the erstwhile opposition sought to instrumentalise two issues which are directly linked to nation-building: the border dispute with Montenegro and the Brussels Agreement with that normalised relations between Kosovo and Serbia. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik is portraying himself as the true defender of Serbia's interests. For him, the region's endemic poverty, corruption and political mismanagement are the result of Republika Srpska's status of belonging to a dysfunctional hybrid state – and not a sign of his government's failings.

External political factors influencing the Western Balkans include the rise of right-wing populism in the USA and some EU countries, the uncertainty surrounding EU accession and increasing Russian interference. In spite of the horrendous wars of the 1990s, the ideology of nationalism is still alive and kicking in the Western Balkans, both in Serbia which emerged from the wars as the clear loser, and in Kosovo, where nationalist parties have made huge gains.

The fact that nationalism is no longer a taboo in some EU countries – Marine Le Pen received a third of votes in France's presidential run-off – means xenophobia is seen as a legitimate basis for policy. As the EU takes a back-seat in Balkan affairs, Russia is filling the void. It actively supports nationalist movements in Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia and Republika Srpska. The most striking example of Russian interference is in Montenegro, where the Russian secret service, together with Serbian extremists and pro-Russia politicians, were allegedly involved in a botched attempt to kill the former Prime Minister of Montenegro.

The wars of the 1990s revealed all too clearly how one form of nationalism can breed another, leading to armed conflict. So what can be done to prevent a further escalation of tensions in the Western Balkans? Thorny questions of nationality and ethnicity will not be solved overnight. Each Balkan nation, and each ethnic group within it, has its own interpretation of history. Society is deeply polarised. For many political parties in the West Balkans, nationalistic aspirations form their raison d'être. An end to ethnic tensions would clearly hurt their interests.

Nationalism can only be kept in check if these countries are part of the European Union. A clear and realistic path to membership is essential for

stability, effective democracy and to avoid further attempts by West Balkan countries to expand their boundaries.

The latest visit by EU High Representative Federica Mogherini shows just how much influence the EU has lost. The opposition boycotted her speech at the Montenegrin Parliament, the President of Macedonia rejected her requests and she was even heckled during her speech at the Serbian Parliament. Not too long ago, anyone sent from Brussels was considered to be the utmost authority figure.



Filip Milačić
Vienna

Filip Milačić is a senior researcher at Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Vienna. He is visiting professor at the Central European University. He also held visiting scholar positions at Yale University and the Institute for Human Sciences.

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