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The Balkan Blues

Why the EU should be working towards a new security architecture in south-eastern Europe

Read this article in German.

It has been more than twenty years since the Yugoslav Wars and the European Union has maintained a strong presence in the Balkans ever since. It has taken on direct military and political responsibility in Bosnia-Herzegovina (EUFOR terrestrial force) and Kosovo (EULEX rule of law mission) respectively. Then there are the accession assurances to all six West Balkan states and active negotiations with two of them – Serbia and Montenegro. Last but not least, the accession of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007 anchored the EU in the region. Yet the results of the last two decades are hardly encouraging: the Balkan remains the powder keg it has always been, and not even the two member states Romania and Bulgaria have been able to apply European standards and drive economic development forward.

By and large, this unsatisfactory state of affairs can be attributed to two factors. Firstly, the region is still riven by a range of ethnic and national divides. Secondly, other external powers such as Russia and Turkey, but also China and some Arab states, are increasing their presence in the Balkans, clashing with NATO expansion and the US role in the region which seeks to uphold stability at almost any cost.

Taken in the context of the stagnating or, in some cases, retrograde development of democratic structures and socio-economic conditions in the region, these factors represent a latent threat to the security of a Europe already facing enough crises on its eastern and southern flanks. A policy focussing on preventing and avoiding conflict in south-eastern Europe must therefore be a strategic priority for the EU.

The EU-US-Russia triangle

So how can conflicts in the region be diffused? To start with, Brussels would have to give some contours to its strategic interests in the area. The

Strategy for the Western Balkans of February 2018 focusses, as usual, on EU enlargement. However, the block needs to move away from its emphasis on integration in favour of transformation, as outlined in a study by the FES South-Eastern Europe Office in April 2018. Considering that the EU's prevailing wisdom of 'a credible accession perspective being key to transformation' is eminently dubitable, it's more important to create a sustainable framework for genuine political stability – rather than the superficial kind which currently passes muster.

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Moreover, there should be more clarity about the divergence in US and EU strategic interests vis-à-vis the Balkans. With the caveat that no-one can really know what interests Donald Trump is pursuing in the region, it's already obvious that strategic thought in the US State Department and the Pentagon is still very much dominated by the Cold War doctrine of containing Russia. As such, their goal is to keep up the pace of NATO expansion into south-eastern Europe with the aim of pushing Russia out. The integration of Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, and Montenegro into the North Atlantic alliance has already gone some way towards achieving this objective. Macedonia is next up.

It's also evident that Moscow will not simply sit back and watch this happen. Only recently, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov warned countries in the region of 'succumbing to the false dilemma' of feeling forced to opt for either Moscow on the one hand of Washington and Brussels on the other.

The Balkans are a geopolitical chessboard

These geopolitical considerations are nothing new in the Balkans. In 1904, British geographer Halford Mackinder, one of the fathers of political geography as a discipline, defined eastern Europe as a core region from which the Eurasian landmass could be dominated – and, by extension, the world.

In his book *The Grand Chessboard*, American political scientist and security advisor to President Jimmy Carter, Zbigniew Brzezinski, followed Mackinder's line of thought and argued that NATO's eastwards

expansion was essential to American dominance in Eurasia. Yet this strategy only worked for as long as Russia under Boris Yeltsin was bereft of power. Under Vladimir Putin, the state of play has changed markedly. Now, Moscow too is scrabbling to erect its own spheres of influence, having first and foremost beefed up its military capabilities quite substantially.

The primary interest of the EU in the Balkans, however, is stability. And indeed, it has already managed to at least achieve an appearance of it – at the price of subordinating its noble aims of establishing democracy, human rights, and pluralistic societies to the reality of the mostly corrupt and authoritarian elites of the region.

The most striking example of this process is Montenegro, where Milo Đukanović – who, in a variety of functions, has ruled the country for a quarter of a century now – has managed to morph from a pro-Russian satrap to the Darling of the West without losing his grip on power.

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Then there are the EU's quasi-protectorates Bosnia and Kosovo, where problems are simply piling up: without the protection of the US, for instance, the Kosovan leadership would be up before the International Court of Justice in Den Haag. According to Europol, the country has become the continent's hub for Afghan heroin as the international (primarily European) administration looks on.

Meanwhile, by virtue of its extensive cannabis plantations, neighbouring Albania (now a NATO country) has come to be considered 'Europe's Colombia.' In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the international administration has not yet been able to resolve the institutional logjam and the proportional ethnic representation at the heart of the Dayton agreement. Only Macedonia, with its democratic handover of power, offers a glimmer of hope in the region.

The EU needs to act as a mediator

Genuine stability in the region would mean taking a preventative approach towards solving its problems. This would mean resolving the open border issue between Albania and Serbia through a peace accord which brings together both local entities and external protagonists on the regional scene (i.e. Turkey on the Albanian and Russia on the Serbian side).
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to erect a regional security architecture which includes Turkey and Russia – and doesn't side-line Moscow. Doing so would put pressure on the region's autocrats, but would be predicated on a moratorium on further NATO expansion and a more closely integrated European foreign and defence policy of the kind envisioned by Emmanuel Macron.

All of this would, all things told, be the only way to stop EU aid from trickling away into obscure channels, as it currently does, and ensure that it actually reaches the populations it's intended to help. This kind of security architecture would provide resolution to the Serbian/Albanian conflict and also allow the EU to surmount the current enlargement dilemma between stabilisation and democratisation.

After all, it cannot be in the interests of the citizens of the six west Balkan states to become official EU members on the back of administrative reforms without being really equipped to benefit from accession: the example of the current Romanian Presidency of the European Council, marred by the country's endemic corruption and the anaemic rule of law, should serve as a salutary lesson here.



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