

South East Europe

Facing Western Upheavals and Regional Backslide

Policy Recommendations¹

Study Group Regional Stability in South East Europe (SG RSSEE)



PFP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes

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Executive Summary of Recommendations:

- *Western Balkan Six*: act as a group in the EU enlargement process in order to achieve more political weight and bargaining power.
- *Government of Bosnia and Herzegovina*: disapprove of Ankara's attempts to exert one-sided political influence on the educational system.
- *Institutions of Macedonia*: enable an impartial investigation on the violent acts of April 2017 to facilitate a democratic re-launch.
- *EU*: determine the "red line" and the consequences for nationalistic and obstructive politicians in the Western Balkans.
- *EU*: open membership negotiations with all Western Balkan countries on chapters 14, 15, 23 and 24.
- *EU*: include the Western Balkan countries in all strategic considerations on future scenarios of the EU integration process.
- *EU*: include confidence-building measures in the dialogue between Belgrade and Prishtina/Priština.
- *EU and Western Balkan Six*: work on the concept of a "South East European Industrial Trust".
- *EU and US*: be inclusive towards Russia in regard to regional consolidation issues, while demanding respect for the West's legitimate interests in South East Europe.
- *EUFOR*: increase involvement concerning the problem of Small Arms and Light Weapons.



tive model for the benefit of more authoritarian and isolationist ideas. Among other things, this trend is at the expense of strategic thinking. Therefore, the EU needs a powerful re-launch as a cooperative organization in the light of the Brexit negotiations. Otherwise, previous successes of this organization could be seriously shaken. In case of the US, fears that its foreign policy towards Europe will change drastically after the appointment of the new president have fortunately not come true yet. However, serious doubts about the future political course remain.

Clarity for the WB6 on Integration Perspectives

It is not expected that further enlargement of the EU in the form of the Western Balkans Six (WB6: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia) will take place in the next five years. While the technical-legal negotiation process with the candidate states among the six, will proceed, chapter by chapter, repair and reform work within the EU will have priority and consume most of its political will and energy. Unlike the last accession case of Croatia, the positive finalization of technical negotiations of candidate countries with the EU Commission – according to current EU trends – in the future will be no guarantor for entering the EU as a new member state. Compared

Situation Analysis

EU and US

Uncertainty and unpredictability characterize the current international order. For Western actors like the European Union (EU) member states and the United States (US) this is reflected in the loss of substance of the hitherto prevailing liberal democratic and coopera-

with earlier enlargement rounds, vetoes coming from national parliaments will become more probable.

Despite this rather negative outlook in regard to enlargement, the WB6, given their European heritage, their geopolitical localization, their trust in EU's Thessaloniki promises from June 2003 and finally, their vulnerability in regard to post-war reconstruction, deserve clarity on their enlargement chances and the EU's eventual alternative considerations. Due to this, a necessary reform of the EU should be accompanied by a clear strategic approach towards the WB6 and further integration steps. This has to include the development of concrete ideas on an "advanced pre-accession agreement" for the WB6 and on gradual/associated memberships, if the EU will follow a model of different speeds according to one of the "Juncker scenarios" in the future.



Critical Regional Trends and Heterogeneous Geopolitical Influences

If the EU fails to implement these policies, some of the negative trends currently appearing in the WB could become more prominent. These include: enhanced autocratic behavior of political leaders and impeded democratic processes; the widening of political gaps in unconsolidated states; the worsening of bilateral conflicts; the rise of political and religious extremism and finally, the complete transformation of the – still principally EU orientated – Western Balkans into a region of different geopolitical zones of interest. As a consequence of the prevailing "enlargement fatigue" in the West the citizens of some Western Balkan countries may increasingly react with "integration fatigue". Although a future membership in the EU is still supported by a majority of the populations, in particular among the Serbian population the number of supporters of a closer political and economic cooperation with Russia has increased.

At the same time conservative Muslim politicians and believers in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BaH) and Kosovo give increasing importance to the controversial Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Regional critics of Russia's and Turkey's policy towards the Western Balkans blame the Russian leadership for acting as a spoiler in internal conflicts in BaH, Macedonia and Montenegro, while President Erdoğan is accused

of promoting a "Neo Ottoman Restoration" in the Muslim dominated areas, in particular through cultural and religious influence.

The Situation in Individual Countries

A re-enforcement of democratic and co-operative standards – encouraged by an enhanced role of the EU and US – is necessary to diminish the gaps that still characterize intra-state and inter-state processes of consolidation: Thus, **BaH**, a country that faces a demanding screening process for becoming an EU candidate country, is still hampered by the absence of a constructive internal political dialogue and secessionist threats launched by some leading Serbian politicians in this country. For **Serbia**, which among all the WB6 has most noticeably fallen into integration fatigue, it will be a balancing act to advance in the EU membership negotiations led by the semi-authoritarian reformer Alexander Vučić and impeded by the Gordian Knot of the Belgrade-Prishtina/Priština dialogue. This "dialogue without confidence" between the "two partners" and mediated by the EU has not delivered effective and sustainable results for quite some time. One main reason for this lies in the absence of a tangible perspective for **Kosovo** to be integrated into the EU in the near future. Without strong political and economic incentives that have to come from the EU, Belgrade and Prishtina/Priština will not be ready to end their long-term political conflict.

The EU candidate country **Albania**, in turn, after having passed through a serious parliamentary crisis in the first half of 2017, has had to demonstrate its democratic maturity at parliamentary elections that were planned for the end of June. **Macedonia** has narrowly managed to avoid a scenario of political destabilisation as a consequence of the violent developments in their Parliament at the end of April. The formation of the new centre-left government that seems to be more committed to the European path than the previous more nationalistic one, could increase the opportunities to improve interethnic relations in this country again, to push democratic processes forward and to find solutions for long-standing conflicts with the neighbours, above all with Greece. For this positive scenario, however, a national political consensus is necessary among all the relevant political parties to fully respect democratic principles. Otherwise, Macedonia could very easily slip into a tremendous crisis again. Overcoming dangerous situations of internal political polarization will also remain one of the key challenges for the new NATO member **Montenegro**. One part of the political opposition which is under political influence of Moscow still vehemently opposes this new security-political reality.

Intra-Regional Relations

Internal relations influence bilateral and regional relations in this part of South East Europe. These relations are not generally bad, but some bilateral and trilateral relations have faced setbacks as far as normalization or

reconciliation processes are concerned. Above all this applies to the before mentioned Belgrade-Prishtina/Priština dialogue, to the relations between Belgrade, Sarajevo and Zagreb that are still burdened by the legacy of the former wars and national(istic) issues, as well as to the relations between Podgorica and Prishtina/Priština. The latter were actually satisfying but have deteriorated since an agreed border arrangement has not been ratified in the Kosovo parliament yet.

Security Aspects

Although the general security situation is stable, the still critical political and socio-economic indicators present a potential threat for security. Therefore, the time to end the mandate of the European Union Force (EUFOR) in BaH and in particular the presence of the Kosovo Force (KFOR) in Kosovo has not come yet. Both missions are still needed as a security net. Apart from this preventive function, the presence of the peace support operations is also linked to the management of the de-mining process (BaH), the support for the training of armed and security forces (BaH, Kosovo) as well as the adequate storage and destruction of surplus ammunition (BaH).

The terrorist attacks that happened in cities of Western Europe were in many cases linked with the region as the origin (or transit) for the weapons used. This circumstance was recognized by the EU in December 2014 when the Action Plan against Illicit Trafficking of Firearms between the EU and South East Europe was passed (for the period from 2015 to 2019).

Economic Trends

Economic parameters in the Western Balkans are improving slightly. This is reflected in the average GDP growth rates of 3% and decreasing rates of unemployment. Compared with the EU, unemployment in the region (13-25%) remains rather high. In addition, long-term structural problems remain. Thus, the overall weak state of infrastructure is a major obstacle for economic development in the Western Balkans. A major problem for Western Balkan infrastructure investments is the highly fragmented character of the region. There is a lack of coordination and efficient implementation of cross-border infrastructure projects, despite existing support by institutions such as the Western Balkan Investment Framework (WBIF).

Summary of Recommendations

For the Western Balkan Countries

- Focus on improving regional relations and uphold the declaration signed at the Vienna summit of the “Berlin Process” (August 2015) to refrain from “misusing outstanding issues in the EU accession process”.
- Taking this present “expansion freeze” into account and in parallel to ongoing individual “bureaucratic” enlargement negotiations, act as a group in the en-

largement process in order to achieve more political weight and bargaining power.

- The 27 member states should be convinced to eventually integrate the remaining six as a “Six Pack” all together, by 2025 at the latest. The initiative must come from the side of the WB6. “United we are stronger” should be the core message of their group strategy.
- The “WB6 Alliance” should meet in turn monthly, in the form of retreats, with “advisors” from the outside and EU representatives as guest participants. There should be at least one meeting between the WB6 and the EU 27 per chairmanship of the EU Council.
- The government of BaH should disapprove of Ankara’s attempts to exert one-sided political influence on the educational system in BaH, as it has been the case by pressuring to close educational institutions that allegedly belonged to the Gülen movement.
- Political violence has to be severely condemned by all political actors in Macedonia. An impartial investigation has to be conducted to identify all attackers and organizers of the acts of violence in the Macedonian parliament, in order to deter the use of violence in the future. All political parties in Macedonia must show their commitment to restore democracy, uphold the rule of law and reinforce political accountability.

For the European Union & Single Member States

- Given the increasing uncertainty, migration crisis, and extremism, enhancing the political dialogue with the candidate countries and encouraging them to remain in the EU’s political sphere would be imperative for stability and security.
- In the context of arising autocratic behavior, populist parties and weakened systems of checks and balances in the Western Balkan countries, democratic reforms and fight against corruption should be some of the core objectives for the EU assistance programs to the region.
- Determine the “red line” for nationalistic and obstructive politicians in the Western Balkans that seriously impede the relaxation of regional relations. Define what kind of behavior will not be tolerated by the EU and what measures will be taken against politicians that “cross the line”.
- European political party families such as the European People’s Party and the Party of European Socialists should demonstrate more seriousness and responsibility in their conduct towards member parties from the region: firmly denounce and condemn authoritarian and undemocratic practices and rhetoric of these parties as well as providing positive guidance to them.
- Support a process of real confidence-building measures between Belgrade and Prishtina/Priština.
- Become more honest and transparent with your WB6 partners. Seriously attempt to untie the Gordian knot right now, for example by going for a po-

litically motivated admission of all of the WB6 at once (jointly and as a group).

- Open accession negotiations with all Western Balkan countries in particular on chapters 23 and 24 and chapters 14 and 15 of the EU acquis. The opening of negotiations on chapters 23 and 24 would support rule of law reforms and the strengthening of independent judiciary which is of utmost importance for all Western Balkan countries. Furthermore, the opening of negotiations on chapters 14 and 15 (Transport and Energy) would be complementary with efforts within the “Berlin Process” that is focused on a connectivity agenda and on improving the transport and energy infrastructure in the Western Balkans.
- Develop a “Plan B” (“membership light”) and even a “Plan C” for a transitional period (anything possible beneath full membership) if necessary, which should offer the strongest partnership between the EU and the WB6 possible, partnerships at least as close as those with Switzerland, Norway and Iceland. Furthermore, the ongoing debate on a multispeed EU (Commission President Juncker’s “White Paper on the Future of Europe”, March 2017) should be taken into account. Some of the initiatives of the so-called “Berlin Process”, though denied by the Commission, seem to proceed in this direction.
- Germany, which has always been among the most engaged regarding Western Balkans enlargement – e. g. by initiating the “Berlin Process” in 2014 – will have to, at least for some time, take an even stronger leadership.
- The European Union and the more specific proponents of the “Berlin Process” should make it clear if and how the “Berlin Process” will proceed beyond 2018. The Berlin process might turn into a plan B in case enlargement continues to be frozen, hence it should be strengthened and equipped with the right tools to make a substantial difference.
- Include the WB6 in consultative discussions on relevant future EU policies.
- A central authority responsible for infrastructure planning, coordination, implementation and financing in the Western Balkans could be more potent and may also reduce widespread corruption related to infrastructure projects. A possible concept would be a “Southeast European Industrial Trust”.
- EU “creditor” and Western Balkan “debtor” countries could acquire e.g. each 50% shares of a Trust formed of all the infrastructure to be created in the region. Large scale investments in basic infrastructure should then have the potential to make industrialisation of broad sectors more likely. This might also give fresh hope to the people in the region, for whom otherwise (better organised circular) migration is the most effective way to improve living conditions in a reasonable time.



For the US Officials

- With regard to some present uncertainties concerning the US’ foreign policy, clarify the areas of priority and how they may influence the Balkans.

For the EU and US

- Cooperate closely in the Western Balkans in order to achieve the common goals in regard to regional consolidation.
- Attempts should be made to be as inclusive as possible as far as cooperation with Russia in regard to regional consolidation issues is concerned, while strongly demanding respect from Russia for the West’s legitimate interests in South East Europe.
- Continue playing an active role to support the positive momentum in Macedonia, to restore democracy and the functioning of all relevant institutions, and use all existing instruments to avoid the prolongation of instability and new escalation of violence.
- Include Kosovo in more cooperative networks such as the Pfp Consortium.

For EUFOR

- Increase your public involvement with the problem of Small Arms and Light Weapons in BaH (linked to organized crime, illegal weapon trafficking, terrorism). It is estimated that in BaH alone, between 750 and 800 thousand illegal weapons are being held. The 2014 floods that hit BaH brought to light many hidden weapons (e.g. pistols, rifles, hand grenades, mines and even anti-armor weapons).

1 These policy recommendations reflect the findings of the 34th RSSEE workshop on “South East Europe: Facing Western Upheavals and Regional Backslide”, convened by the Pfp Consortium Study Group “Regional Stability in South East Europe” in Reichenau, Austria, 4-7 May 2017. They were prepared by Predrag Jureković; valuable support came from Lorena Mikl and Benedikt Hensellek (all from the Austrian National Defence Academy).