

South East Europe's Consolidation in Light of the EU Crisis, Refugee Influx and Religious Extremism

Policy Recommendations ¹ Study Group Regional Stability in South East Europe



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Executive Summary of Recommendations:

- Develop plans for further sudden flows of migrants and enlarge financial and technical assistance for the Western Balkan countries.
- Provide the Western Balkan countries access to relevant EU data bases as maintained by FRONTEX and EUROPOL.
- Motivate neighboring countries to abstain from misusing open bilateral issues to block the EU integration of any country in the Western Balkans.
- Focus more distinctly on democratic values, rights of freedom of opinion and the role of the civil society when negotiating with the Western Balkan countries on EU integration.
- Act as a Western Balkans “Six Pack” when addressing the EU to enhance the visibility in the enlargement process, since all countries share the common goal of EU membership.
- Maintain the enlargement process through concrete political initiatives of influential EU countries.
- Encourage and support organizations which promulgate the traditions and practices of an autochthonous and tolerant Balkan Islam.
- Improve regional coordination of migration policies through better use of regional platforms like “The Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative” (MARRI) and the “Southeast European Law Enforcement Center” (SELEC).
- Adopt strategies for the re-socialisation of former foreign fighters and for de-radicalization of Islamists in co-operation with the official Islamic communities.
- Eliminate in-transparent financing of religious communities, in particular from foreign countries.

Situation Analysis

Hundred thousands of **migrants**² used the “Balkan route” from spring 2015 to spring 2016 as a transit route to reach their final destinations. In view of lacking resources and facilities for supplying the migrants, the region, which still has been passing through a process of conflict transition, coped quite well with this heavy challenge. Bearing in mind that Macedonia, Serbia and Croatia were “just” transit countries for the migrants, the predominantly good cooperation between state agencies and NGOs as well as neighbouring countries (not ignoring the tensions that occurred at the first peak of the crisis between Croatia and Serbia) were decisive for an effective crisis management.



However, this prevalent positive assessment should not hide some relevant critical issues that came to light during the crisis. Some of them could hamper crisis management in case of a new migrant influx. For instance, EU's difficulties to agree on a common policy regarding the migration crisis has brought in particular Macedonia into an unpleasant situation towards its southern neighbour Greece, as some of the EU countries have perceived

Macedonia's border management as a de facto replacement of Greece's Schengen regime.

The EU-Turkey deal, which has been achieved in March this year, is regarded as an agreement that stands on rather shaky legs. This raises the question whether the EU and the Western Balkan countries are prepared for a new wave of refugees, if this agreement fails. Hundred thousands of new migrants (including Kurds from Turkey) could then enter the Western Balkans and destabilize the region. In the light of such a possible scenario the establishment of a close coordination mechanism between the EU and the Western Balkans seems to be of urgent need, as well as adequate financial support from Brussels to build facilities for migrants that allow a decent transit period.

Even if a second heavy inflow of migrants is not likely in the foreseeable future, some humanitarian and security problems will further affect the Western Balkan region. On the ground, the circumstances that several hundred migrants with unclear legal status face – among them unaccompanied minors – are terrible. After the closing of the Balkan route between the Slovenian-Croatian and Macedonian-Greek border many families were separated. The closing of the route hasn't stopped smuggling in human beings but has rather created new smuggling routes (e.g. between Bulgaria and Serbia).



Religious extremism in South East Europe is not solely connected to Islam. Radical representatives can also be identified within other religious groups like the Catholic Church or the Orthodox Churches. However, in recent times, security related problems occur in connection to Muslim Salafi activities. The traditionally liberal-minded and tolerant interpretation of Islam in the Balkans – especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia and in the Sandžak region – is challenged by followers of rigid interpretations. Unfinished processes of state-building (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo), the maintenance of nationalistic policy agendas, the general lack of citizens' confidence in state institutions and their capacities, the lack of life perspectives for young people and power struggles inside some of the Islamic communities are internal factors that favour the rise of religious extremism.

Additionally, the partly intransparent financial support coming from various Arabic countries to South East Europe has remained a major source for the spreading of radical Islamist ideology. However, the most disturbing factor so far has been the participation of foreign fighters from the Western Balkans (mostly from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo) in the wars in Syria and Iraq. Between 2012 and 2015, 600-800 foreign fighters have joined the "Islamic State" and "Al-Nusra". Their number has significantly decreased over the past months, due to deaths, returns, criminal legislation reforms and pro-active policies of the law enforcement institutions against recruitment. Nevertheless, Islamist networks have been established all over the region and represent a potential security threat.

Unfortunately, punitive measures that have been taken by the state agencies are not sufficient to serve as a comprehensive preventive strategy against radicalization. They are not targeted enough to respond efficiently to the complex nature of religious extremism. Well-functioning official Islamic communities which are highly respected by the Muslim believers and are well integrated into a multi-religious society play a crucial role. In Croatia for example, where no Salafi groups have been reported so far, the Islamic community represents more than 60.000 Muslims and is perceived as a positive role model for the rest of the region.

In view of the multiple **EU integration crises** – fuelled by the "Brexit" referendum of late June – and the present migration movement towards Europe, the EU membership for the six Western Balkan countries has become a very long-term and insecure perspective. Due to their individual reform processes, the "Six" have to struggle with difficulties in fully implementing the *acquis communautaire* and other EU conditions.

In the years to come, the EU will have to consolidate thoroughly, reform its internal structures and keep the present member states together. This will consume most if not all of the EU's political attention and energy. There will be only limited time to negotiate a further enlargement – not to mention the present enlargement fatigue of most member states.

However, the bureaucratic processes for preparing the Western Balkan countries for a possible EU integration will be postponed until decided otherwise. Regional perceptions of the EU have changed partially in recent years. Still, a considerable majority of citizens in the Western Balkan countries supports a future membership in the EU, but are fairly reserved. The long-term charm to join the Union has lost some of its former appeal. Nevertheless, EU's political influence in regard to the complex post war reconciliation will remain a key factor for this part of South East Europe. For more credibility, the EU needs to renew its policies to foster democratic values and the rule of law in this region.

According to the perceptions of civil society representatives from the Western Balkans, the EU has placed too much emphasis on political stability (e.g. in Macedonia) in recent times. A further decline of EU's credibility as a promoter of democratic transition could increase bilateral tensions and intra-state conflicts. Furthermore, it could impair the Union's geopolitical position in this part of South East Europe that has been challenged in particular by Russia.



Summary of the Recommendations Addressing the Migration Crisis

- A unified common EU policy towards the migration crisis would provide strong policy guidance for the Western Balkan countries, give incentives to foster regional cooperation in regard to migration management and contribute towards stability in the region.
- In case of a failing EU-Turkey deal, all involved actors must be prepared for a second migration influx. This would require good coordination of legal, security, and humanitarian factors.
- The Western Balkan countries and the EU should jointly develop contingency plans for addressing all possible scenarios in case of further sudden flows of migrants from Turkey, the Middle East and Africa. These plans should include various models of assistance such as financial support for strengthening border control mechanisms as well as access to relevant databases.
- The EU should, through its "Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund" (AMIF), support Western Balkan countries' endeavours in developing and implementing migration and asylum policies, including the system of integration, especially paying attention to the protection of vulnerable groups such as unaccompanied and separated children, women, people with disabilities, elderly people etc.
- For preventing illegal migration alternative measures should be considered. By providing the border police in Macedonia with adequate equipment and reasonable salaries corruption could be reduced. Currently, police officers are paid by smugglers for illegal border crossings.
- All Western Balkan countries, both those who were on the migratory route and those who were not (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Montenegro), should commit themselves to a "Western Balkan Action Plan", which could be part of the EU migration strategy. The plan should rely on financial and technical support from the EU and use present regional platforms such as "The Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative" (MARRI) and the "Southeast European Law Enforcement Center" (SELEC) in order to share information, resources, man power and to establish different emergency teams.
- The Western Balkan countries need to have access to different databases to avoid multiple registrations and make processes easier (EURODAC, FRONTEX, EUROPOL).
- The information of migrants is essential to avoid chaos.
- No policy should be applied to deny the individual right to claim asylum. The principle of non-discrimination and family reunification should stay upright.
- In addition to governments, civil society organizations from the Western Balkans should be continuously involved in the EU debates on migration crisis.
- Use local Muslim organizations to enable and support the integration of the newcomers.

Addressing Religious Extremism

- Religious extremism needs to be addressed and discussed in all faith communities.
- Comprehensive strategies for countering religious violent extremism should include non-state actors, religious communities, civil society organizations, academia and educational institutions, media outlets and other relevant stakeholders. A set of measures for prevention and countering radicalization needs to be established at different stages.
- Without concrete measures for de-radicalizing and re-socializing returning foreign fighters will remain an incalculable risk to the societies in the Western Balkans and the whole European continent.
- More transparency should be provided concerning financing of religious communities in particular in regard to foreign financing as well as the contents of religious education.

- The assessment of the current efforts of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina would be helpful to reintegrate the so called “Paradžemati” (Salafi associations outside the recognized institutions) as a possible model for preventing further radicalization of young Muslims in and out of the Western Balkans.
- The encouragement of organizations like the Sarajevo based “Institute for Islamic Tradition of Bosniaks”, which promulgate the traditions and practices of an autochthonous and tolerant European Islam.
- The establishment of a widely acknowledged Islamic Community (in contrast to various factions) in every Western Balkan country that is respected as a partner by the state institutions and by the other relevant religious communities would reduce the risk of Islamic radicalization.
- In the scope of anti-terrorist activities state institutions should cooperate better with representatives of the media. They should establish journalistic ethic standards to avoid that the media is misused by extremists as a propaganda tool.

Addressing the EU as an (Un) disputed Role Model

For the Western Balkan countries:

- The negotiations with the EU should not be additionally burdened or even blocked by “fellow” countries in particular from the Western Balkans (e.g. Croatia) or from the wider Southeast European region (e.g. Greece). These states should assist and support their “fellow” neighbors in their struggle for full membership.
- Taking the present “enlargement stop” into account, the remaining six Western Balkans states should jointly form a “Union of the Western Balkans” for membership negotiations.³
- The EU should be convinced to eventually integrate the remaining six as a “Six Pack”, latest by 2025. The initiative must come from the “Six Pack” itself. This demands that they negotiate as an entity and less as an individual state. “United we are strong(er)” could be a possible slogan. One meeting per EU Presidency between the “Six Pack” and the member states could speed up the process.
- There is a need to operationalize rule of law reforms by forming “special prosecutors’ offices”. These policy innovations have led to significant improvements in strengthening rule of law in Croatia and Romania, and

are making progress in Macedonia. However, the situation in Macedonia also shows that rule of law reforms need to be complemented with further policy innovations in the judiciary in order to work.

For the EU:

- Despite all the challenges that are currently identifiable in Europe, such as the migration crisis, the rise of populist philosophy and ideologies, or EU’s institutional crisis – among others evoked by UK’s “Brexit” vote –, the EU administration should maintain the idea of enlargement to the Western Balkans and try to provide a long term European perspective to the countries of the region.
- Big member states like Germany and France should continue to support the European membership perspective of the Western Balkans through concrete political initiatives at the EU level.
- Brussels should strongly appeal to its members to rather act as facilitators than blockaders concerning Western Balkans integration into the EU.
- The countries in South East Europe, which are already members of the EU, should insist towards remaining candidates on meeting the Copenhagen criteria. Without meeting these criteria, membership in the Union would be impossible.
- When reporting on developments and progress of the countries concerned, the EU should focus more distinctly on functioning of democracy, rights of freedom of opinion and the role of the civil society.

¹ These policy recommendations reflect the discussions of the 32nd RSSEE workshop on “South East Europe’s Consolidation in Light of the EU Crisis, Refugee Influx and Religious Extremism” from 19 to 21 May 2016 in Reichenau/Austria. They were prepared by Predrag Jureković; valuable support came from Adriana Dubo (staff of the Austrian National Defence Academy).

² This paper follows the terminology of the International Organization for Migration (see: <http://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms>) that defines a migrant “as any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of (1) the person’s legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is.” According to this definition also refugees are migrants. The author therefore waives to use the term “refugee” additionally to the term “migrant”, which by no means should be misinterpreted as ignorance towards the specific status of this vulnerable group of people.

³ This paper was written prior to the “Brexit” vote in the United Kingdom.