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INTERNATIONAL FAULT LINES – A THREAT TO THE PEACE PROCESS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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Internal EU crises and a currently unpredictable US foreign policy are emboldening nationalist forces in the Western Balkans to go on the offensive. This development poses a potential risk to the regional peace process. Therefore, the continued presence of international peace-keeping forces in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo remains a significant factor of stability. A more active EU commitment is necessary.

Old certainties...

The war came to an end in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo almost 22 and 18 years ago, respectively. Nevertheless, it seems that the legacy of violent conflicts in the Western Balkans has not been fully overcome. This is hinted at by the continued presence of international peace-keeping forces in the two aforementioned states and by recurring nationalistic provocations in the relations between neighbours in this region. More recently, such provocations even featured occasional threats of war. Over many years, the complex process of normalisation in regional relations in the South Slavic-Albanian region relied on two political certainties: First, on the basic confidence that the solution of ongoing conflicts would be facilitated by the common convergence toward EU standards, the final objective being an EU membership. Second, on the strong political consensus between the EU and the USA regarding the consolidation of peace on the Western Balkans.

...are beginning to unravel

These two foreign policy pillars for the improvement of regional relations in the Western Balkans have been thoroughly shaken up by a deepening EU crisis and the unpredictability of US foreign policy in the wake of the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States. The decision of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union has further aggravated long-simmering crises in the Union. The EU's current fragility, caused by a necessary political process of self-discovery, is exploited by nationalistic forces in its Member States in an effort to inflict serious damage on the European unification project. Parliamentary and presidential elections in key EU states are

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thus assuming a supranational dimension by being declared a matter of survival for the continuation of the EU. Against the background of this crisis within the EU, its commitment to counteract critical developments in the Western Balkans through active integration policy and political support measures is visibly running out of steam. As a result, other international players are increasing their geostrategic clout in the Western Balkans, first and foremost Russia. The current problems within the EU are encouraging nationalistic politicians of various ethnicities to push through with their destructive political agenda.

Serb nationalists in particular have welcomed the Brexit and Trump's critical comments toward NATO and the EU. They see this as a new opportunity to end what they consider an unfair and unnatural peace order in the Western Balkans, which has been established at least since the end of the Kosovo War in 1999. They are hoping for support from nationalist politicians from the EU and for a close foreign policy alliance between Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin. Even if these policies appear very speculative - from today's perspective and especially with regard to a Trump-Putin alliance -, they are symptomatic for the underlying trend toward a more nationalistic tenor in the Western Balkans. It is driving even established and (still) outspoken pro-European politicians in the region to statements or actions that are detrimental to the normalisation of relations between neighbours or may even put peace at risk.

A dangerous game of political provocation

"If Serbs are killed, we will not just send the troops. All of us will go. I will be the first to go. It wouldn't be my first time." This answer given by Serbian President Tomislav Nikolić to a journalist's question

was the first time in 18 years since the end of the war in Kosovo that a high political representative from Serbia mentioned the possibility of a military operation in Kosovo. The interview, given in mid-January, disregarded the fact that meanwhile Kosovo is a state recognised by 113 UN Member States, in which some 4,300 troops of the international peace-keeping Kosovo Force (KFOR) are still stationed. This escalation of words was preceded by a political provocation that started in Belgrade. In mid-January, the Serbian Government sent a passenger train (a present from Russia) from Belgrade in the direction of Kosovska Mitrovica. The wagons were painted with the message "Kosovo is Serbia" written in 21 languages. Before being intercepted by the Kosovo's ROSU special police force at the Kosovar-Serbian border, the train was stopped by Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić while still on Serbian territory. The Prime Minister claimed that he had thus prevented an armed attack by ROSU on the train's passengers. For Kosovar President Hashim Thaçi, on the other hand, the failed train journey represented an attempt by the Serbian Government to annex a part of Kosovo to Serbia, "just like Russia in the Crimea".

Kosovo dialogue without trust

Although the tension between Belgrade and Prishtina/Priština abated relatively quickly - for the time being - under the influence of Brussels, this has raised justified doubts as to the stability of the Serbian-Albanian normalization dialogue. A number of agreements that have emerged from the normalisation talks between Belgrade and Prishtina/Priština under the auspices of EU High Representative Catherine Ashton and later Federica Mogherini have undoubtedly made everyday life easier for Kosovo Serbs and Kosovo Albanians. These include ease of travel and the issuing of land register records and other important documents.

As to the implementation of the central Brussels Agreement concluded in April 2013, however, the normalisation dialogue has been caught in an impasse for quite some time. In simple terms, the Agreement provides for the integration of the Kosovo Serbs into the Kosovo institutions. In return, the Serb-majority municipalities will be allowed to form an association. This association is to take over self-administration in the areas of education, health, urban and rural planning, and receive transparent support by the Serbian Government. Due to the lack of trust on both sides, almost no part of the agreement has been implemented to this day. The normalisation dialogue is met with increasing resistance from the growing radical nationalist opposition in both countries. They see this dialogue as a betrayal of the national interests of their respective country and are mobilising against it. Against this political background, reducing EU influence on both countries would present a threat to security. The risk of violent incidents - particularly in Northern Kosovo - may increase as a result. This situation also underlines the necessity for a continued presence of the KFOR peacekeeping troops in Kosovo.

Crossing "red lines" in Bosnia and Herzegovina

In the person of Denis Zvizdić, the national Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BaH) currently has a head of government who is credibly committed to implementing policies in the interest of all citizens, irrespective of their national affiliation. One of his main political objectives for 2017 is to positively complete the EU screening process, so that BaH can join the other EU membership candidates Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. As an EU candidate country, BaH would then have access to more EU funds. The President of the Council of Ministers expects these funds to deliver strong impulses for BaH's still faltering economy. The achieve-ment of this political objective, however, is being thwarted by the destabilizing policy pursued by nationalist political leaders in BaH.

For instance, the initiative of the Bosniak member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bakir Izetbegović, to bring a new case against Serbia before the International Court of Justice in The Hague for genocide during the last war (1992-95), was met with negative reactions not only in Belgrade, but also from Serbian politicians in BaH. The latter were threatening that, in such a case, they would withdraw from the state institutions. Finally, the International Court of Justice rejected the revision of the genocide trial for formal reasons in early March. The Croatian member in the Presidency, Dragan Čović, also the leader of the strongest Croatian party, the HDZ BiH, is in turn provoking the Bosniaks with his demand for a separate Croatian state entity. According to his proposal, this entity should be established exclusively on the territory of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, not on the territory of the entity Republika Srpska. The policy of the President of the entity Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, is seen both internally and externally as the main obstacle to the functioning of BaH as a state. In the last ten years of his rule, this policy was characterised by the disrespect for state institutions, its aim being the independence of Republika Srpska.

Sanctions and war threats

Most recently, however, Dodik's nationalist and separatist policy has provoked a stronger reaction on the international level and even within BaH itself: The solemn celebration of a national holiday of the Republika Srpska, which according to a ruling of the constitutional court of BaH discriminates against Bosniaks and Croats, led to US sanctions in January. One of the final official acts of the Obama Adminis-

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IFK Monitor International
March 2017

tration was to impose an entry ban and financial sanctions against the Serbian politician. Meanwhile, retired Bosnian generals even openly threatened Dodik with a new war if he were to carry out his threat of a secession of Republika Srpska.

Proactive involvement of EU is indispensable

In this context of growing international uncertainties, potential nationalist conflicts are on the rise not only in Kosovo and BaH, but also in the entire Western Balkans region. In Macedonia, for instance, the "Albanian issue" may resurface following a long period of political conflict between ethnic-Macedonian parties. During the difficult process of forming a government in the wake of the parliamentary elections in December 2016, ethnic-Albanian parties, with the power to tip the scales, demanded the creation of a binational Macedonian-Albanian state. In Montenegro, a future NATO member country, the courts are currently investigating the circumstances of a failed coup against the pro-Western government. The coup attempt was allegedly undertaken by Serbian nationalists from Montenegro and Serbia together with Russian nationalists in October 2016.

Certainly, a suitable response to these critical developments is not the dangerous notion of a territorial reorganisation of the entire Western Balkans with the creation of homogeneous ethnic and religious states, as recently proposed by a former British diplomat in an article published in "Foreign Affairs". In the case of BaH, for instance, this means that all that would be left of this state would be a Muslim-Bosniak "rump Bosnia" squeezed between its geographically enlarged neighbours, Croatia and Serbia. In such a case, one should certainly not expect that the Bosniaks would continue their commitment to predominantly "Western values", but that they would be more likely to strengthen their ties to Turkey and the Arab world and become more exposed to Salafist ideologies.

Even if the internal EU situation may seem difficult at the moment, there is no other acceptable alternative for the Western Balkans to a gradual approach to EU membership, hand in hand with an improvement of regional relations. This important consolidation task can also be used as an argument by those political forces in the EU which do not see the Union as an obsolete model, but as an important guarantor of the European peace order.

Recommendations

- Continuation of the presence of the international EUFOR and KFOR peacekeeping troops in BaH and Kosovo;

- Substantial EU support for the efforts made by Western Balkan countries toward integration;

- Stronger linking between progress in EU rapprochement and progress in the regional normalisation process;

- Close cooperation between the EU and pro-European politicians in the Western Balkans, and sanctions against nationalist players who pose a threat to peace.

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