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SECURITY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Report

by [Raynell ANDREYCHUK](#) (Canada)
Rapporteur

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I. INTRODUCTION – THE WESTERN BALKANS AND EURO-ATLANTIC SECURITY

1. Few regions in the world can claim a cultural, religious and demographic diversity richer than the Western Balkans. One of the most famous quotes from Josip Broz Tito, former President of Yugoslavia, states it quite clearly: “I am the leader of one country which has two alphabets, three languages, four religions, five nationalities, six republics, surrounded by seven neighbours, a country in which live eight ethnic minorities” (Hunter, 2017). As NATO focused on Afghanistan, the fight against extremist groups and the challenges from the South, and an increasingly assertive Russia, the Western Balkans region has somehow fallen off the radar screen.

2. This dearth of attention to the Balkans may also be attributed to the prolonged period of relative stability that the region has enjoyed. After the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s and early 2000s, NATO and the EU increased their presence in the region providing peacekeeping and state-building capabilities to the war-ridden countries. This increased involvement and the accession to either organisation by some of the newly independent states fostered a widespread assumption that democratic reform in the region had now become irreversible. However, this was overly optimistic, as developments in recent years have shown.

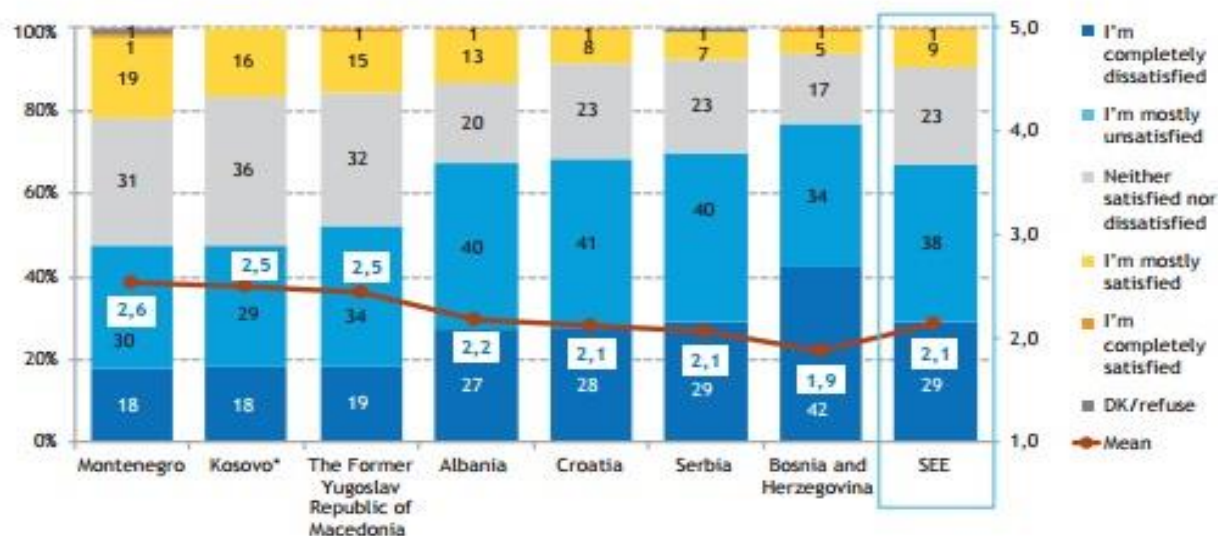
3. This short paper provides a general overview of the security situation in the Western Balkans. It discusses the legacies of the Yugoslav era and its violent conclusion, the emerging security challenges in the region, as well as the region’s Euro-Atlantic integration. Finally, the report recommends that NATO and the European Union become more engaged and encourage the countries of the region to continue their reforms with tangible and achievable goals, which will benefit both the Western Balkans and the Euro-Atlantic area.

II. REGIONAL DYNAMICS – THE LEGACIES OF THE PAST AND CURRENT CHALLENGES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

A. ECONOMY: THE STATE OF PLAY

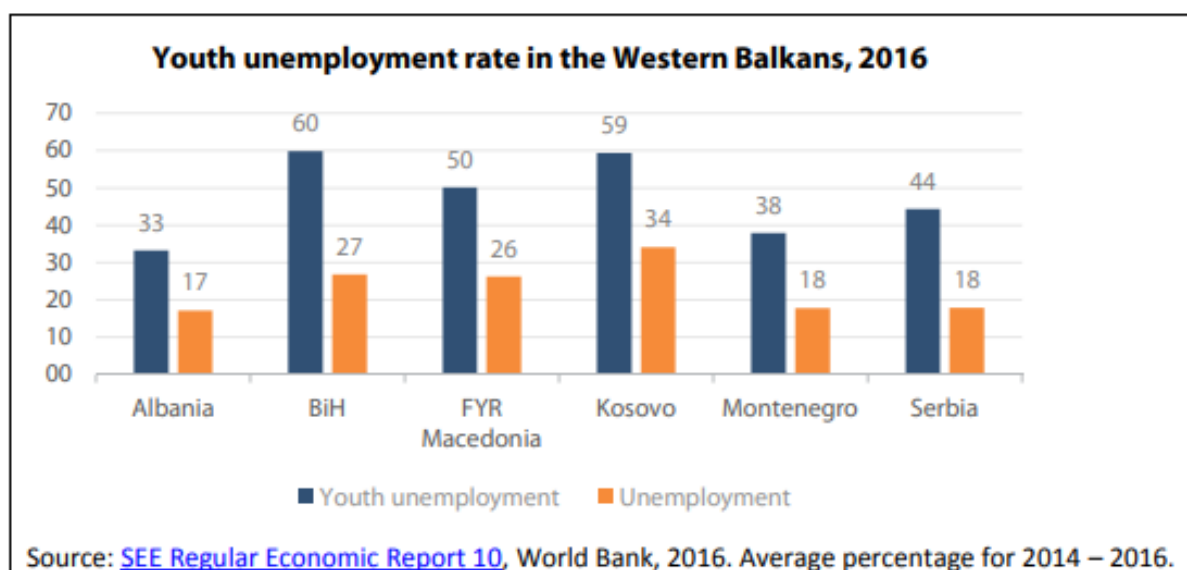
Figure 5: How satisfied are you with the economic situation in your society?

(All respondents - N=7026, share of total, %)



4. Despite predicted improvements, many Western Balkan countries continued to struggle in 2018. At the end of 2017, the World Bank anticipated economic growth to stay above 3% for 2018 and 2019, due to rising consumption, low inflation rates and the improvement of the economic situation worldwide. However, even if this growth figure could be achieved, it would take the Western Balkans 60 years to reach income levels on par with the EU average. Furthermore, several countries have still not overcome the 2008 financial crisis. Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Montenegro have not yet returned to a GDP level on par with what it was prior to the break-up of Yugoslavia. Unsurprisingly, there is significant discontent with the economic situation among the populations of the Western Balkans.

5. Unemployment remains the main economic concern throughout the Western Balkans. According to the World Bank, it is one of the main factors hindering the development of the region; the situation is particularly worrisome for younger generations, with youth unemployment rates surpassing 50% in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*, BiH and Kosovo. While highly educated youth are able to find a job more easily, the non-competitiveness of salaries encourages them to migrate, causing a brain drain which puts an additional burden on an already aging and shrinking population. This phenomenon is particularly harmful for the less populous countries of the region. High unemployment rates and massive migration make Western Balkans households heavily reliant on remittances. The World Bank estimated that levels of remittance in the Western Balkans are on average around 10% of GDP, with the peak being at 17% in Kosovo. While remittances are believed to be helpful in the short run, they damage national competitiveness and increase the risk of government corruption.



B. NATIONALISM AND BILATERAL DISPUTES

6. The Yugoslav wars remain in the memories of many people in the newly formed Western Balkan countries. Coming to grips with the past has only been partially achieved and reconciliation among the peoples of the Western Balkans is still a work in progress. In a region where historic conflicts, ethnicity and religion are still entrenched, nationalism can all-too-easily be exploited by populists. In this political climate, underlying tensions can resurface and be manipulated at any time. The assassination in January 2018 of Oliver Ivanovic, a controversial Kosovo Serb politician who supported the integration of the Serbians living in Northern Kosovo is a reminder of the enduring tensions and risks caused by nationalism and border disputes in the region (Gallucci, 2018). Even more telling of the depth of issues surrounding these disputes is that following the murder of Ivanovic

* Turkey recognises the Republic of Macedonia with its constitutional name.

the Belgrade and Pristina governments recognised the need to cooperate on the investigation, yet months later had failed to do so.

7. Building trust among the countries of the Western Balkans has been a cumbersome process. A climate of general mistrust among Western Balkan countries has created an environment where countries tend to shun cooperation with each other. This is an obvious obstacle to Euro-Atlantic integration, as cooperation would facilitate and speed up necessary reforms. As a matter of fact, all the Western Balkan countries still have at least one territorial controversy with one of their neighbours. This is a serious issue and the EU Enlargement Strategy of February 2018, in a clear change of policy, stresses that no country will be allowed to join if it still has pending bilateral disputes.

8. While most of these territorial disputes appear manageable in the short- or medium term, two major issues have prevented closer cooperation between the countries of the region.

- Serbia, taking into account UNSCR 1244, still regards Kosovo as an integral part of its territory. The two parties have failed to make any step forward since the EU-brokered 2013 Brussels Agreement, which has faced serious implementation issues (Phillips, 2017).
- The name dispute with Greece has blocked the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia's bids to both the EU and NATO for many years. However, in mid-June 2018, following a new round of negotiations Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and Zoran Zaev, Prime Minister of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, announced a historic agreement on the name issue. However, given the nationalistic protests in both countries, it remains to be seen if the population will accept the agreement (Casule, 2018).

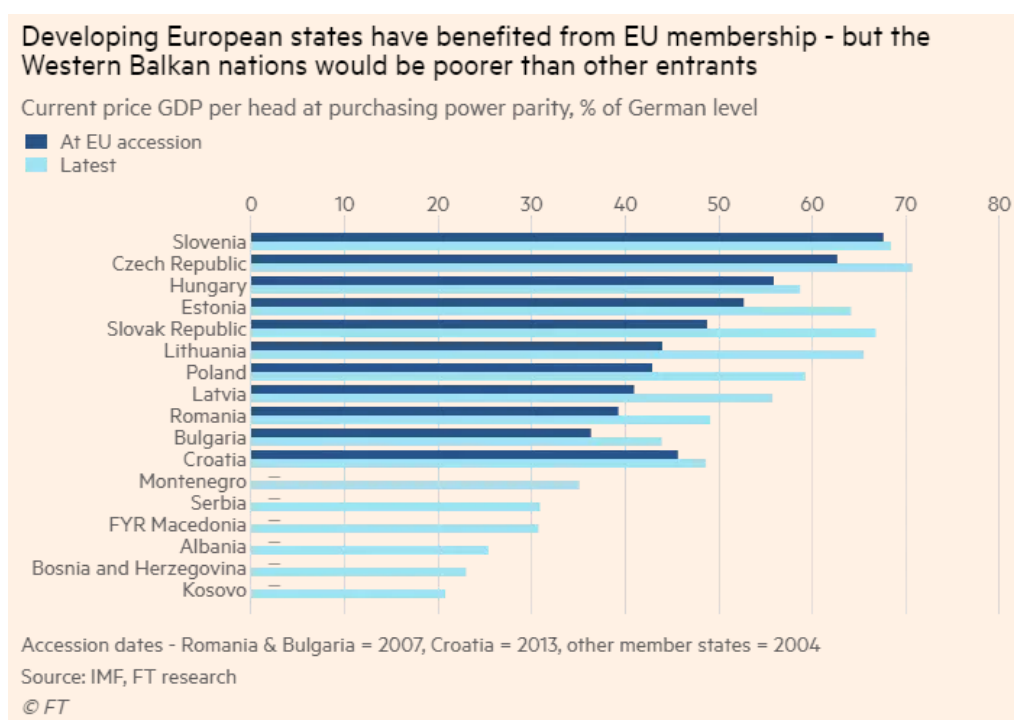
At the time of writing, the first hurdle to be cleared is a referendum set for 30 September in Macedonia where the public will be asked "Are you for EU and NATO membership by accepting the agreement between the Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Greece?" Recent polls in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia suggest that there is no consensus on the name question. Meanwhile in Greece, a recent opinion poll by the Proto Thema newspaper showed that "up to 70 percent of Greeks object to the name compromise".

9. The territorial disputes in the Western Balkans are based on ethnic or religious divisions. This is, in effect, both the cause and the result of the split-up of Yugoslavia. Some observers suggested that one of the possible agreements between Serbia and Kosovo would envisage the province of Northern Kosovo, populated by ethnic Serbs, being conceded in exchange for the recognition of independence. While some locals have sought this resolution, it has until recently not been viewed favourably by the NATO Allies and the EU, who now seem more open to the idea. The EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, has indicated she wants an agreement between Belgrade and Pristina to be reached by the end of her term, and the US National Security advisor John Bolton has stated that he no longer opposes the idea (The Economist, 2018). Reasoning along those lines, however, would open a Pandora's box of territorial claims - the most concerning being the Serb-majority Bosnian constituency of *Republika Srpska* - which would risk altering the current precarious stability of the region (The Economist, 2018).

C. TOWARDS MORE REGIONAL COOPERATION

10. For too long, the countries of the Western Balkans have regarded their relations with their neighbours as a zero-sum game, which has prevented them from addressing the underlying issues, such as the dire economic situation which continues to hamper progress. At this point in time, all the Western Balkan countries have a lower GDP than any other successful applicant to the EU at the time of entry (Peel and Buckley, 2018).

11. It is therefore necessary to encourage countries to start to pursue mutual, overarching goals and overcome parochial interests. Valuable time has been lost, but there is hope in sight. For example, the EU Western Balkans Summit of May 2018 emphasised increasing connectivity in areas from infrastructure creation, notably highways and rail links, to expanding the EU's Energy Union into the Western Balkans through the completion of a Regional Electricity Market and the creation of a single regulatory space under the Energy Community Treaty. These commitments follow last year's EU Western Balkans Summit of July 2017 which laid out a roadmap to improve regional integration. At the Summit, the Western Balkan countries signed the Transport Community Treaty, with the objective of building new infrastructure projects and improving existing ones. The EU will provide part of the funds, with the goal of attracting new investors in the medium term. The Western Balkan countries also agreed to form a Regional Economic Area (REA) to facilitate the flow of goods, services, capital and highly-skilled labour. The project will not be EU-led, implementation will depend on the goodwill of the parties. The creation of the REA is an important step forward. It is not an alternative to EU membership, but it can help advance necessary reforms in the economic realm, thus facilitating accession to the EU.



12. It is especially regrettable that the declaration to establish the Regional Commission for the Establishment of Facts on War Crimes and Other Serious Violations of Human Rights on the Territory of Yugoslavia (RECOM), was not signed at the Summit in London in July 2018. Prevailing issues of competing narratives of the 1990s wars and frequent political tensions that these narratives facilitate were to be addressed by a common fact-finding mission which would be a major step toward regional reconciliation. It is hoped that RECOM, an initiative born out of regional civil society cooperation, will be established in the future.

D. GOVERNANCE AND RULE OF LAW

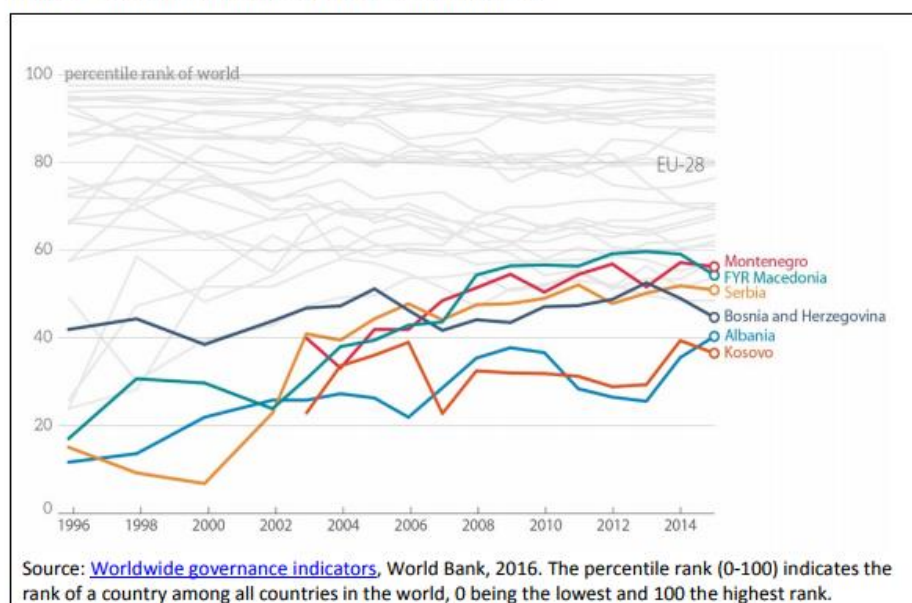
13. Ever since the break-up of Yugoslavia, the dynamics between the newly formed states in the region have been characterised by regional and intra-national tensions. Differences of language, religion and ethnicity were exploited by populist and national leaders, who have all-too-often fuelled them for political and personal gain. Magnifying and distorting populist and nationalistic themes, such as playing up quarrels with bordering countries and ethnic minorities, has led to a marginalisation of economic reform in public discourse in the countries of the region. In the past, the political elites in the Western Balkans have focused more on maintaining the status quo that has kept them in power than on pushing for necessary reforms (Less, 2016; Mujanovic, 2017).

14. As a result, the countries of the Western Balkans are still grappling with longstanding structural deficiencies of the socialist era. There has been some process in introducing Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)-friendly policies, with FYR Macedonia rising to 11th in the World Bank's Doing Business Rankings, and Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo all being top 50. However, the industrial sector remains uncompetitive and needs urgent modernisation, the banking system is weak, and the poor regional economic integration is further impaired by underdeveloped infrastructure. Corruption even at the highest institutional level remains widespread, to the point that analysts have observed symptoms of state capture (Fouéré and Blockmans, 2017). In Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index Western Balkan countries continue to trail behind their European neighbours, with transparency rankings ranging between 64th (Montenegro) and 107th (the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia).

15. In the countries aspiring to NATO and/or EU membership the adoption of anti-corruption measures encouraged and promoted by the EU – such as the implementation of preventive anti-corruption bodies, of national anti-corruption strategies, and of the Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative (RAI) – were often not implemented and had little effect. Yet, addressing rule of law on a regional basis has left reforms vague and does not allow for targeted improvements from the different sets of problems that individual nations within the Western Balkans are facing. Moreover, within each individual country, improvements by law enforcement agencies and the judiciary in applying the law still do not root out low-level corruption, resulting in low levels of trust in the judiciary (Marovic, 2017). According to the latest Balkan Barometer, 64% of people in the Western Balkans do not trust their courts and judiciary, 71% perceive it as not independent, and 75% agree that the judiciary is affected by corruption (RCC, 2018).

16. In 2016, according to the EU Communication on the status of enlargement, Western Balkan countries had made little to no progress on the status of corruption since their applications, with one country even sliding back. The Commission reported that the main obstacle towards reform is the lack of political will to implement the legislation in practice, while existing anti-corruption bodies are systematically and intentionally hampered by limited human and financial resources. The 2017 Freedom House's Nations in Transit report highlights that civil society in the Western Balkans is under constant threat, while elections are constantly plagued by visible irregularities. While the EU Enlargement Strategy of 2018 does not provide an assessment of the current status of the fight against corruption, its stark and frank language leaves no doubt that prosperity and a better quality of life in the region can be reached only through serious measures against corruption for it to be "rooted out without compromise".

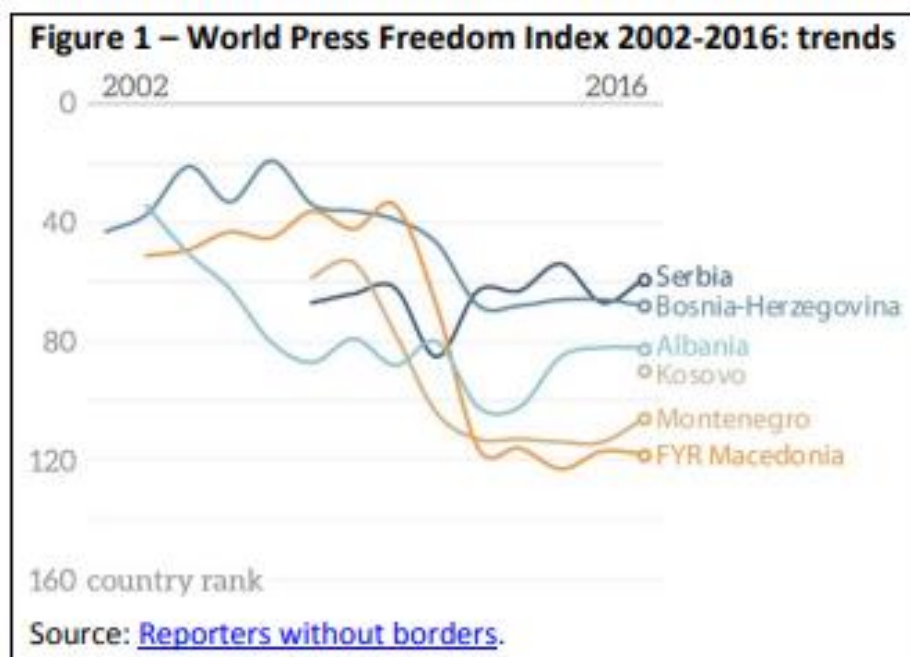
Figure 1 – Control of corruption in the Western Balkans



17. The problems of poor governance and corruption have been facilitated by Western tolerance of these practices, participants of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly's 96th Rose-Roth seminar that took place on 7-9 November 2017 in Ljubljana, Slovenia, learned. As the EU attempts to temper "enlargement fatigue" it has rewarded pro-EU individuals or parties despite shortcomings vis-à-vis the rule of law. This is also made worse by fears of regional instability present since the 1990s, leading to what experts call a 'retreat into stabilocracy' – "the search for stability in Europe's periphery has motivated EU leaders to turn a blind eye to the intimidation of opposition and creeping authoritarianism" (Tcherneva, 2017; Marovic, 2018). The region would be well served by a far higher degree of transparency and accountability. All too often, cronyism and corruption are at the foundation of wealth distribution, as political elites are motivated by a fear of losing access to public monies, while voters are driven by the potential for patronage awards. Avenues must therefore be opened up for new political actors.

18. The current state of freedom of the media across all countries of the region is also alarming. The Media Clientelism Index of 2017 indicated that the situation for media freedoms in the Western Balkans countries has gradually gotten worse during the 2016/2017 period. The report noted such problems as "non-transparent political and financial influence" i.e. "stagnation of media reforms, dubious transfer of ownership... and penetration of organized crime in media ownership". Additionally, the issue of "attacks on journalists and editors as well as on independent media outlets" was observed in all countries across the Western Balkans. As the existing legislation to protect media freedom largely goes ignored, media bias is a serious issue due to clientelism, politicisation, corruption and insufficient political will to promote pluralism. Public service broadcasters have structural flaws, making the news they produce unreliable: the broken and non-transparent funding model causes their editorial policies to be very vulnerable to external pressure. Furthermore, countries are not inclined to share precise information about the ownership of media outlets, nor about the level of public financing towards private media, raising reasonable doubts about their impartiality (Lilyanova, 2017b).

19. Independent reporters are often victims of physical and verbal intimidations, according to the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), which monitors threats and attacks against freedom of speech across south-east Europe. The World Press Freedom Index by Reporters without Borders shows that freedom of the media in the region has consistently declined in the last decade.



III. THE IMPACT OF A CHANGING SECURITY ENVIRONMENT ON THE WESTERN BALKANS

20. The complex situation in the Western Balkans is further compounded by external factors and external actors.

A. CHINA AND THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

21. Although a relatively new player in the Western Balkans, China's economic and financial clout in the region has increased significantly in recent years. Since 2012, China's 16 + 1 model has focused on Chinese engagement with 16 European countries – 11 EU Member States plus 5 nations in the Western Balkans. Despite the model being set up as 16 + 1 in reality most of the deals struck are bilateral between China and one of the 16 European nations rather than deals comprising many nations. Of the \$9.4bn worth of investment deals the 16 + 1 has brought to Europe, around \$4.9bn is concentrated in the 5 Balkans nations – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. This comes even though the 5 non-EU states have a GDP roughly one-sixteenth the size of the 11 EU Member States (Hillman, 2018). Chinese investment in the region has begun to fill a void for the Western Balkans as many western nations and firms have financially ignored infrastructure improvements in these nations.

22. Chinese projects in the Western Balkans are an aspect of its growing global interests and activities, known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI is an ambitious project proposed by the Chinese President Xi Jinping, to create new sea and land routes that resemble the old silk road, connecting east and west. It has brought much investment to south-eastern Europe where projects focus on transportation infrastructure. China is particularly engaged in Serbia; Beijing and Belgrade have also taken steps to improve relations by establishing visa free travel which began in 2017. They are aligned on several foreign policy dossiers, including the non-recognition of Kosovo – due to China's own separatist regions of Tibet and Xinjiang. Increasing Chinese activities in the Western Balkans highlight the need for the EU to remain engaged in the Western Balkans, also because the sustainability of some of the infrastructure projects and their compliance with EU laws are in question.

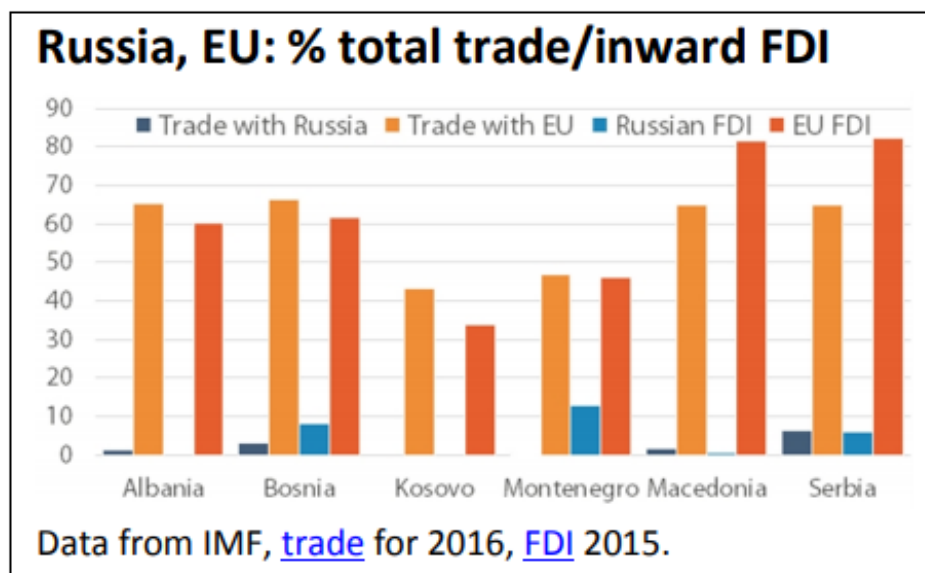
23. China has also invested in Albania, Bosnia, and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Recipient countries in the region see Chinese investments, which often come in the form of a loan, as good, and perhaps also sometimes as a preferable alternative to the loans of the EU because the former are generally not linked to conditions relating to reforms. This is also combined with the fact that many Western nations remain wary of investing in the region.

B. RUSSIA: HISTORICAL INFLUENCE, COMPETING PRESENCE

24. In contrast to China, Russia has strong historical connections to the Western Balkans. Moscow's engagement in the region is also due to the close cultural, linguistic and religious similarities between Russians and Orthodox Slavs. In particular, the connection with Serbia is quite strong at a political level, as Russia firmly opposes Kosovo's independence and vetoed a UNSC resolution which would have qualified the massacre of Srebrenica a genocide. While Russia's engagement with the Western Balkans receded in the early 2000s, Moscow asserted its presence again in the past decade under President Vladimir Putin. By offering incentives, e.g., via loans, energy projects, trade and other investments, Russia has increased its engagement with the region, thereby trying to delay the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU. Moreover, Moscow is using every opportunity, including corruption and bribes, and at times the Russian Orthodox Church, to advance its interests and to bolster anti-Western sentiment, in particular among Serbs, and to undermine Western influence throughout the region. Russia's efforts in the region are facilitated by entrenched authoritarian elites, who are frustrated that the EU accession process is not proceeding fast enough, and have stalled reform processes. At the same time, the economic situation in Russia and the weak rouble limit Moscow's ability to compete with the EU at a regional level.

25. Russia's dominance, as the main gas exporter to Serbia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, allows for it to utilise one of its primary geopolitical

leverage points - energy politics - across the region. Russia is actively exploiting the dependency of the countries of the region on energy deliveries. Russia is not only trying to maintain its dominant energy position, but even to expand it. However, it is unclear whether Russia will be able to succeed, as some of the announced projects, such as the Druzhba-Adria pipelines or the South Stream pipeline, are either delayed or put on ice. On any other economic issue, ranging from external aid to FDI, the EU's presence greatly outmatches Russia's.



Martin Russell, "Russia in the Western Balkans", EPRS, July 2017

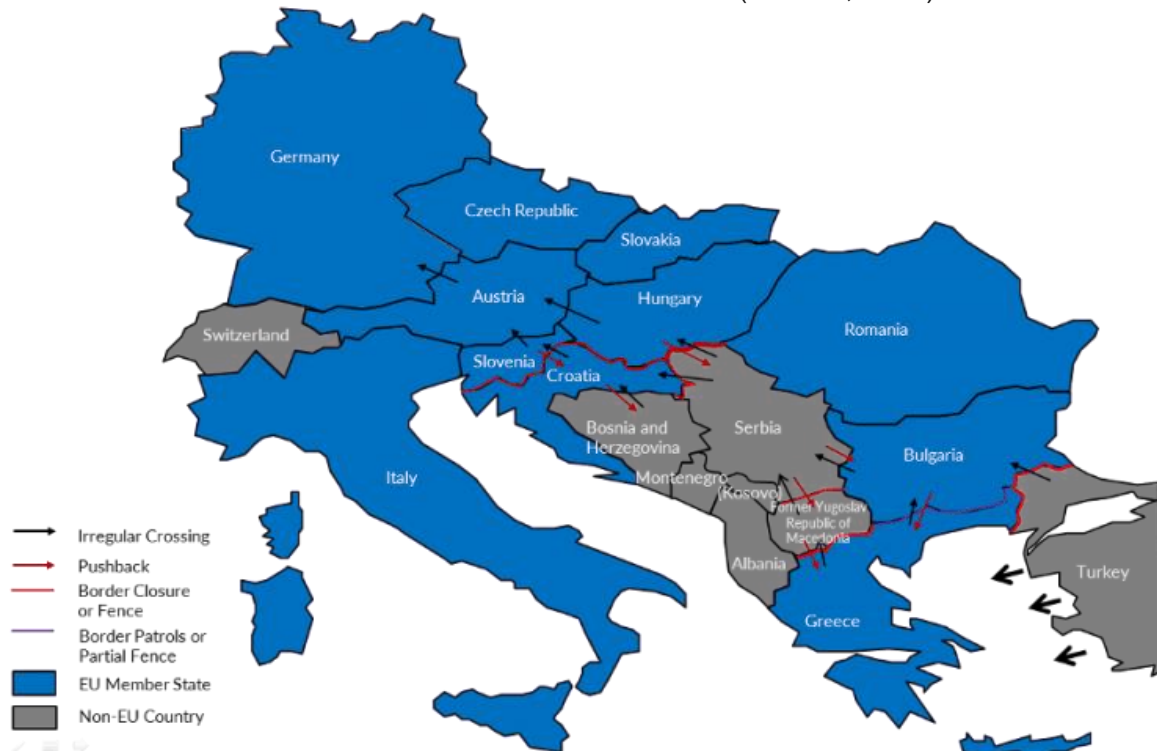
26. As a result, Russia is far from being capable of significantly moulding the future of the region. For the Western Balkans, the strategy envisaged is subtler, related to the already mentioned Russian cultural and historical 'soft power'. In this sense, Russia is trying to establish itself as a key player in the information sector: the infamous Sputnik news agency opened in Belgrade in 2014 and is providing its typically serviceable anti-Western narrative. Sputnik contributes to polarising public opinion, presenting distorted and biased versions of the EU and NATO's contributions to the region (Byrne, 2017). Moreover, Russia provides support for civil society organisations and political parties which are aligned with its political agenda. These policies can best be summed up as "crude opportunism" as in the Balkans "[Russia's] goal is to undercut and upset the existing institutions and rules set by the West" (Bechev, 2017).

27. While current Russian engagement with the region can certainly be seen as an interference in Euro-Atlantic integration, it is an indirect admission that the Kremlin's influence in the Western Balkans cannot go past "spoiler tactics". The most recent example of such tactics has been noted by the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia PM Zoran Zaev's allegations that attempts to disrupt FYR Macedonia's name referendum in September can be traced to Russia. As a result, in July Greece expelled two Russian diplomats for trying to undermine the recent name deal with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Moreover, unlike NATO and the EU, Russia has no boots on the ground, economic relations with the region are decreasing and there are no plans to enlarge either the Eurasian Economic Union or the Collective Security Treaty Organisation to include the Western Balkans, providing for few tangible Russian avenues in the region (Bechev, 2017).

C. WESTERN BALKANS: A TRANSIT REGION

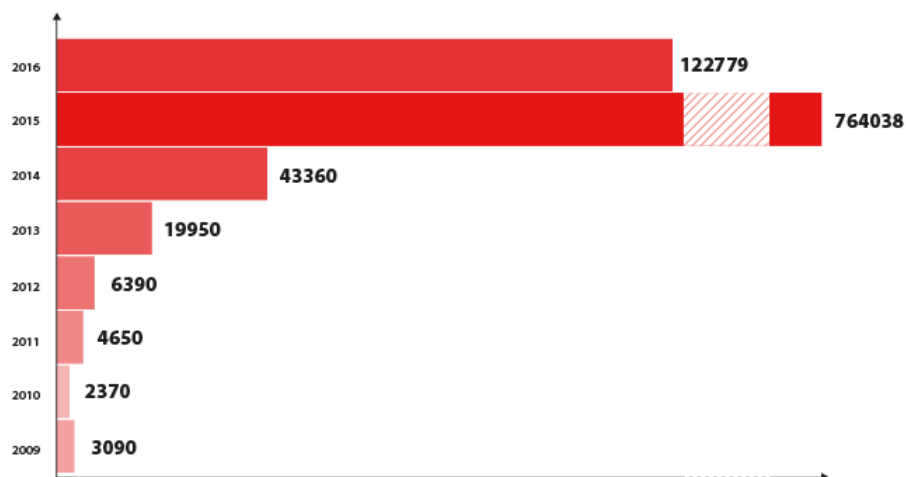
28. The geostrategic positioning of the Western Balkans between Europe's West, East, and the Mediterranean Sea has since the end of the Cold War turned it into a transit region. In the midst of liberalisation and privatisation, a series of wars, and political transition away from communism, the Balkans became an area for the illicit trade of goods from Asia and Africa into Western Europe, and more recently a corridor in the refugee crisis.

29. The European refugee crisis started in 2015 and affected, if indirectly, the Western Balkans. At first, countries opted to facilitate the movement of asylum seekers; then, pressure from bordering EU member states led to a domino effect of border closures (Greider, 2017).



Alice Greider, "Outsourcing Migration Management: The Role of the Western Balkans in the European Refugee Crisis", Migration Policy Institute, 17 August 2017

30. Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard agency, estimates that there were more than 760,000 illegal border crossings on the Western Balkans route in 2015, a dramatic increase from the 40,000 of the previous year (Frontex). The Western Balkans, themselves countries of origin of migration towards the EU, were both unequipped and unprepared to handle a crisis of such proportions. As such, they only tried to speed up the passage of people towards the countries of destination (Greider, 2017).



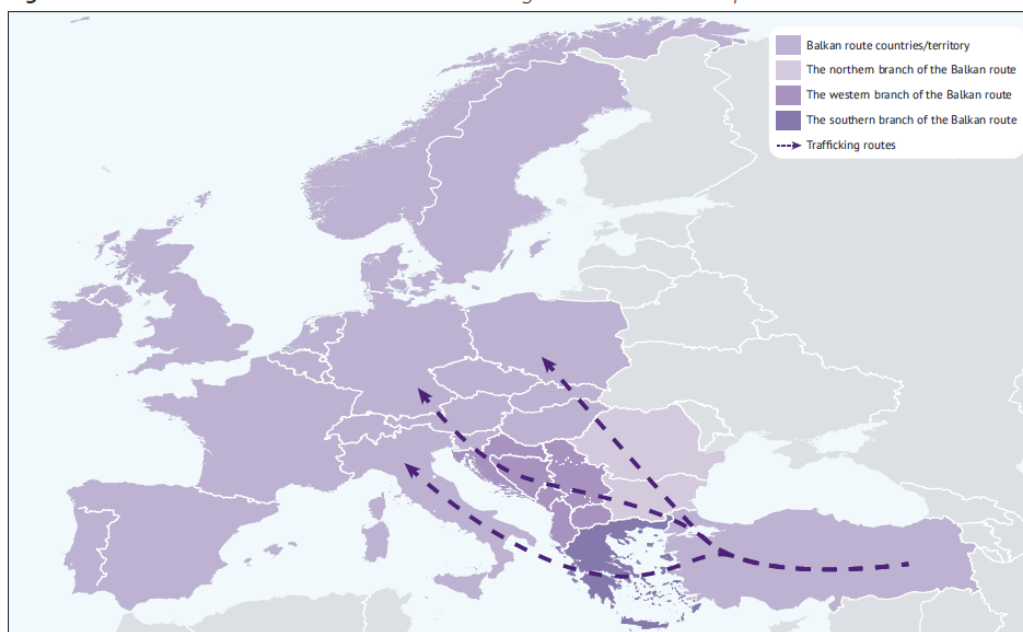
Frontex, Illegal border crossings on the Western Balkans route in numbers, 2017

31. As the crisis continued, EU countries started to limit the passage of refugees. In turn, Serbia and Croatia started to introduce quotas for the number of people allowed to cross per day, while the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia -Greek border became the theatre of violent incidents, with reported use of tear gas to control the flow of migrants. The EU's March 2016 agreement with Turkey

to curb illegal migration effectively closed down the migration route to the EU coming from Greece. In turn, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia closed its border with Greece, effectively trapping all the migrants left in the Western Balkans. Indeed, Western Balkan countries were encouraged by the example of EU countries such as Bulgaria and Hungary to adopt a hard-line approach, harshly repressing any attempt by refugees to proceed further North.

32. While the EU-Turkey deals certainly relieved some pressure on the region regarding the influx of migrants, it is only a temporary stopgap solution. In June 2018, it was reported that more than 5,500 refugees and migrants from Asia and North Africa entered Bosnia. Albania is also seeing a rise in migrants entering its borders. Between January and May, authorities caught 2,311 migrants - up from 162 during that same period of 2017 and more than double the number of around 1,000 for the whole of 2017. The route through Albania is thought to be a new route smugglers are using to move people into the EU. Bosnia reported an unusually high influx of migrants directed towards the EU coming from Pakistan, Algeria, Afghanistan and Turkey – signalling that the crisis is far from over. However, the recent reports from Frontex suggest that the increase in use of the so-called western Mediterranean route will shift the movement of people from the eastern route passing through Eastern Europe and the Balkans to Southern Europe, especially Spain and Portugal.

Figure 4. The three branches of the Balkan route through South-Eastern Europe



Note: The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Source: UNODC.

33. Meanwhile, irrespective of the refugee crisis, although definitely bolstered by it, organised crime and illicit trade have been an enduring issue in the Western Balkans since the breakup of the former Yugoslavia. The region sits on the western branch of the “Balkan route” which is primarily used to transfer drugs from Afghanistan (the world’s leading heroin producer) to Western Europe. Whilst South East European countries are first and foremost transit countries, some evidence of storage facilities suggests that heroin is being adulterated and repackaged in Albania, Kosovo and FYR Macedonia. In addition to this, there has also been a rise in cannabis production in Albania, which has easily entered Western European markets thanks to the transnational organised crime networks that operate in the Balkans.

34. The Western Balkans are not only a drug smuggling route, but a major transit region and - since the 1990s wars - a source of illegal arms into the EU. As such, the proliferation of organised crime and trafficking in the Western Balkans are a concern for not only regional but also more widely European security. Much like the illegal substance and arms smugglers, human traffickers also benefit from the organised crime networks and legacies of the 1990s Yugoslav wars. During the

wars, the spike in emigration, a lack of law enforcement, and political instability combined to create conditions in which human traffickers began operating. The refugee crisis in Europe has once again created similar conditions, sparking fears of increases in human trafficking as criminals go on to capitalise on the despair of refugees travelling to Western Europe.

35. Bilateral cooperation between Western European NATO member states and the Balkan governments has yielded significant results in terms of successful raids on trafficking rings (US Department of State, 2017). It is recommended that this cooperation continue as the effects of the refugee crisis continue to shake the region. One of the deepest concerns about organised crime in the Western Balkans is how intertwined it is with both high and low-level corruption. However, supporting the regional governments in their attempts to combat illicit trade is a crucial step in helping sever these links. It is therefore highly recommended that the recent cooperation between NATO and the UN Office for Drugs and Crime continue to develop. Thus far 450 counter narcotics officers from Central Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan have received training – these capacity building courses would also highly benefit the Western Balkans.

D. ISLAMISM, RADICALISATION AND FOREIGN FIGHTERS

36. The Western Balkans have a significant Muslim population: Islam is practiced by 28% of the population in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, by more than 50% in Albania and Bosnia, and by 95% in Kosovo. However, religious fundamentalism spread considerably during and after the Yugoslav wars, due to the influx of fundamentalist Salafist imams from abroad. Experts claim that the objective of these preachers is to hijack the ethnic identity of Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) and Albanians, who practice an essentially moderate interpretation of Islam, and replace it with a hard-line extremist one. The newly formed states did not have the capabilities or the expertise to tackle this phenomenon, leading to several terrorist attacks – albeit with a limited number of casualties – and a few Islamist enclaves, such as the Bosnian village of Gornja Maoca.

37. The emergence of Daesh had a double effect on the Western Balkans. On the one hand, the influx of refugees put pressure on already troubled economies; and on the other, Syria and Iraq became the ideal destination for the aspiring jihadists of the region.

38. Regarding internal security issues, Daesh's main online publication, Rumiya¹, explicitly threatened the Balkans in an article titled "The Balkans - Blood for Enemies, and Honey for Friends" in June 2017 (Trad, 2017). So far, the terror organisation has not claimed responsibility for any attack in the region. However, in November 2016, the group had planned simultaneous attacks in Albania, Kosovo and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, with the top target being the Israeli national football team, which was scheduled to play in Tirana, and its supporters. Twenty-five people were arrested by the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Albanian police forces, in what was a remarkable show of cooperation between the security services of the two countries.

39. It is estimated that between 900 and 1,000 fighters (often followed by their families) have travelled from the Balkans to Iraq and Syria; while some of them had criminal records or had fought in the Yugoslav wars, the majority of them did not have any previous fighting experience. As Daesh has lost the swathes of land it controlled in Iraq and Syria it appears likely that the Western Balkans will also be confronted with the problem of returning foreign fighters. This raises serious issues, ranging from the legal consequences of the actions committed in Syria to rehabilitation and the return to local civil society.

40. Kosovo has produced more foreign fighters per capita than any other Western nation since Daesh declared its caliphate in 2014. Around 400 Kosovo citizens have joined the group and other Islamist extremist groups since fighting in Syria began in 2012. With EU aspirations, Kosovo has been tough on solving its radicalization problem, indicting more than 120 terrorism suspects and arresting many more, including imams suspected of recruiting people to fight abroad. However, many

¹ Literally translatable as "Rome"

prison sentences are being shortened and some say that rehabilitation attempts are not always effective, leaving still radicalised individuals free. Many Western powers are now working with Kosovar authorities to aid in the attempts to rehabilitate, with fears that Kosovo may become a launching pad for more attacks across the EU.

Country	Total	Women	Children	Returned	Killed	Still in the conflict zone
Albania	136	13	31 ²	40	20	76
Bosnia and Herzegovina	260	56	at least 80	43 men 6 women	44 men 2 women	77 men, 48 women, 46 children
Kosovo	316 ³	38	28	118	59	139 (75 men, 38 women, 27 children)
Macedonia	135	-	-	80	27	35
Serbia	42	-	-	9	11	28
Montenegro	Up to 30	-	-	-	5	-

Asya Metodieva, "[Balkan Foreign Fighters Are Coming Back: What Should Be Done?](#)", STRATPOL, January 2018

41. Radicalisation will remain a problem even after the fall of Daesh. While Daesh did not claim any terrorist attacks, the region was already a hotbed for extremists, often affiliated to nationalist movements. Given the volatile situation in the region it is important that countries dealing with similar issues that have more expertise continue assisting the Western Balkans. This is in their common interest as some groups in the Western Balkans are connected with radicalised individuals in Western Europe.

IV. THE WESTERN BALKANS AND EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION

42. NATO and the European Union have played a prominent role in supporting post-conflict development and the economic transition and in facilitating Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans; while the latter objective has been achieved for some countries, other states still remain out of one or both of these organisations.

A. NATO'S ROLE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: PEACEBUILDING AND ENLARGEMENT

43. NATO's presence in the Western Balkans dates back to the early 90s. After the intervention in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo in 1995 and 1999, NATO remained in the region as a stabilising force, for example through Operation Allied Harmony in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. NATO's commitment to the region led to the accession of Slovenia, Albania, Croatia and, as recently as 2017, Montenegro. Following the naming agreement between the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Greece in June 2018, NATO during its July 2018 Summit formally invited the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to begin membership talks, saying the country could join the organisation following a full resolution of the name dispute. Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, while valuable partners for the Alliance, are currently not pursuing NATO membership.

44. Serbia, which pursues a policy of military neutrality, is a NATO partner country that participates actively in the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme, without aspiring to become a NATO member. BiH's NATO membership aspirations have been hampered by continuing differences between Sarajevo and *Republika Srpska*. NATO laid out a Membership Action Plan (MAP) for Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2010, implementable under the condition that the political constituencies of the

country transferred the control of their military facilities to the central government. This is fiercely opposed by the political elites in *Republika Srpska*. In October 2017, *Republika Srpska*'s parliament passed a resolution affirming the constituency's military neutrality: a symbolic move, but one that formally show protest against any further step towards NATO integration.

45. At the time of writing, the Kosovo Force (KFOR) is the only NATO military mission still active in the region: after having secured the area, it now helps in the development of an effective security sector in Kosovo, gradually transferring its competences to the Kosovo Police and other internal bodies. In addition to that, NATO has Headquarters in Sarajevo and Military Liaison Offices in Belgrade and Skopje to support defence reforms, foster dialogue and facilitate the participation in the PfP programmes.

46. NATO's activities in the former Yugoslavia were the catalyst that started the cooperation between the Atlantic Alliance and the European Union. NATO had been conducting peace-enforcing operations since 1992, after which both NATO and the EU supported the post-conflict peacebuilding and peacekeeping activities in the region. In March 2003, the EU formally started its first fully-fledged Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) mission, Operation EUFOR Concordia in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, taking over from NATO's Operation Allied Harmony. One year later, the EU launched Operation EUFOR Althea in BiH, after NATO formally ended its Operation Stabilisation Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina (SFOR).

47. The ongoing cooperation between the two organisations remains crucially important for both regional and Euro-Atlantic stability. In the Western Balkans, the EU began to develop its capacities in post-crisis stabilisation force, conducting both civilian and military operations, while NATO remained the ultimate security guarantor in case of any escalation of hostilities. Other than the missions already mentioned, the EU is still present in the Western Balkans, conducting missions with a more civilian focus, such as EUPOL Proxima, which replaced EUFOR Concordia and aims to develop the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia's police system, and EULEX Kosovo. In June 2018, the EU announced it was refocusing its mandate for the rule of law mission to end the judicial executive part of the mandate – which supported the adjudication of constitutional and civil justice and prosecuting and adjudicating selected criminal cases - to exclusively focus on the monitoring, mentoring, and advising objectives that provide support to the Kosovo rule of law initiatives and to the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue.

B. EU: THE BUMPY ROAD TOWARDS MEMBERSHIP

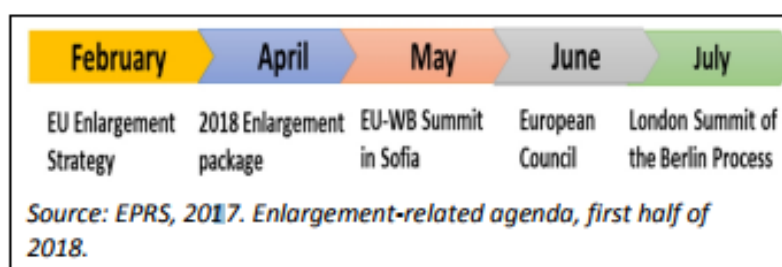
48. At an institutional level, the EU has established 16 bodies that foster transnational integration amongst the Western Balkans. These initiatives are further backed by countless financial and diplomatic efforts. To name only a few:

- The Stability and Association Agreement (SAA). All the countries in the Western Balkans, including Kosovo, have signed a SAA with the EU; through this instrument, the EU establishes contractual duties and obligations tailored for each country, with the goal of stabilising the area and preparing for EU membership (Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, DG NEAR 2016a).
- The Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA). Offering financial and technical help, the EU ensures that countries are able to implement their reforms in key sectors. For the 2014-2020 period, the EU dedicated EUR 11.7 billion to the IPA, making it by far the largest donor to the region (Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, DG NEAR 2016b).
- The Berlin Process. Since 2014, the EU has held yearly ministerial meetings in the framework of the so-called Berlin Process, initiated in 2014 to favour EU-integration of the Western Balkans. Each of the meetings of the Berlin Process framework has a theme with the July 2018 meeting focusing on areas of mutual concern, i.e. security. At this meeting, the six nations

agreed to share police and intelligence data to fight terrorism and organised crime (The Economist, 2018).

49. 2018 is widely considered to be crucial for the future of the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans, according to the EU Enlargement Strategy released in February. Furthermore, until July, the Council of the European Union was presided by Bulgaria, which made the Western Balkans one of its priorities, hosting the first EU-Western Balkans summit of head of states since Thessaloniki in 2003 in its capital in May 2018.

50. The EU set 2025 as a potential date for the accession of Serbia and Montenegro, which are currently considered the forerunner candidates. That said, the EU Enlargement Strategy notes that none of the Western Balkan countries currently is a functional market economy, given clear elements of state capture and collusion between the state and organised crime. Moreover, the Strategy also stresses the prerequisite of full adherence to the EU's values and the resolution of all bilateral disputes before accession.



51. However, the EU's approach is arguably dictated not only by the situation in the candidate countries, but also by its own internal situation. Barely ten years have passed since the EU member states unanimously decided to admit Romania and Bulgaria, even though their reform process in certain key areas, including corruption and the rule of law, was far from over. In addition, the EU is facing considerable internal challenges of its own, including Brexit and the deterioration of democratic standards in some member states. Given this context, it will be difficult for the EU to balance its enlargement agenda with its own internal reforms and structural changes after the departure of the United Kingdom.

52. The limited success of the EU's approach to the Western Balkans in the past may also have been due to the fact that the democratic agenda and the regional cooperation model pursued by the EU sometimes seemed oblivious of the reality on the ground. Indeed, persistent open disputes over borders paired with ethnic, social and religious tensions remain highly charged. The new Enlargement Strategy now commits the EU to six "flagship initiatives", and one of them is meant to support reconciliation and good neighbourly relations.

53. The official position of DG NEAR is that the EU is in no position nor wishes to impose anything on the Western Balkans: accession and Euro-Atlantic integration, including what it takes to achieve them, remain a free choice. Yet, for a region that remains riddled with unresolved border issues and persistent ethnic tensions, the EU could have given a higher priority to the reconciliation process. Commenting on the EU's enlargement strategy, the NGO Impunity Watch argues that without a stronger commitment by the EU to ensure reconciliation, the ethnic divisions of the region will supersede the efforts towards regional cooperation (Stappers and Unger, 2018). There are clearly competing views within the European leadership on how and when the accession of the Western Balkans should take place. EU Commissioner Johannes Hahn has stated his disagreement with the views of French President Emmanuel Macron on delaying the entry process of Western Balkan candidates into the EU until internal reforms take place - arguing these things can happen simultaneously, as for the EU not to lose influence in the region (Heath and Gray, 2018).

54. The other five flagships initiatives mentioned in the EU Enlargement Strategy are designed to strengthen the rule of law, reinforce engagement on security and migration, enhance support for socio-economic development, increase transport and energy connectivity and create a Digital Agenda. These are areas deemed to be in the interest of both the EU and the Western Balkans; the concrete policies laid out by the EU so far only cover the 2018-2019 period. One wonders whether certain measures (e.g. helping lower – not even removing – roaming fees) would have any impact on the average citizen of the Western Balkans. On the other hand, commitments such as facilitating Serbia and BiH's bid to the WTO would facilitate and reassure private foreign investors and have an impact on both countries' economies.

55. Perhaps the biggest shortcoming of the EU and NATO's approach to the Western Balkans was to have kept them on "autopilot mode". A renewed focus of the EU and NATO on the Western Balkans is therefore overdue. The engagement of the EU and NATO should remain unwavering and adapt to new challenges, as the region remains of crucial importance due to its geographical proximity, and its cultural affinity and economic ties with the rest of Europe.

V. CONCLUSIONS: NATO AND THE WESTERN BALKANS – THE WAY AHEAD

56. The security of the Western Balkans is crucial for European and Euro-Atlantic security. What happens there affects us all. While this region has come a long way already in overcoming the difficult legacy of the past, the countries of the Western Balkans still confront a range of internal and external challenges. These include limited socio-economic progress, the temptation of nationalism and populism, old and new forms of corruption, disinformation and lack of information about NATO and the EU, the influence of radicalism, Russia's attempt to interfere in local politics and democratic processes, and migration movements from and through the region.

57. The developments in recent years have shown that the European Union and the Alliance cannot take progress in Western Balkan democracy for granted: the risk of backsliding is ever present. There are many worrying signs that a kind of vacuum has been created in the region which is being filled by forces with a decidedly anti-democratic and anti-Western agenda. There was a false assumption that democratic reform in the region was inevitable, but this was overly optimistic. More active international engagement is essential to encourage and sustain reform processes. While it is true that the Alliance is facing multiple challenges, it cannot afford to let the Western Balkans off its radar. The Western Balkans are of eminent importance to Europe and indeed to Euro-Atlantic security. Not only is the region at our door step, several countries from Southeastern Europe are already NATO member states. Moreover, another country in the region, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, will join once the naming dispute is resolved, and NATO Allies continue to support the membership aspiration of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

58. There must not be a security vacuum. NATO's continued military presence and its political engagement with partner countries of the Western Balkans are crucially important for regional stability. The EU should show its political support and affirm that its door will remain open for the accession of the Western Balkan countries when they are ready. The EU needs to foster and push for the continuation, and indeed the deepening, of the reform processes. For this, it is important to be involved politically and not to only foot the bill. The process of European and Euro-Atlantic integration can have a transformative effect that helps strengthen democratic institutions and consolidate respect for human rights and for the rule of law – which are the foundation for economic progress and political stability.

59. The relations among the Western Balkan countries must not be considered as a zero-sum game. The countries of the region need to understand that they are much better off when they cooperate. In no other region than in the Western Balkans has close cooperation between NATO and the EU been as instrumental for stability and security. Both organisations can do more to encourage the countries of the region to work together and not against each other.

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