NATO Parliamentary Assembly

POLITICAL COMMITTEE

SECURITY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

DRAFT REPORT*

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* Until this document has been approved by the Political Committee, it represents only the views of the Rapporteur.
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I. INTRODUCTION – THE WESTERN BALKANS AND EURO-ATLANTIC SECURITY

1. Few regions in the world can claim a mix of cultural, religious and demographic diversity richer than the Western Balkans. One of the most famous quotes from Josip 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).

2. As NATO Allies have focused on Afghanistan, the fight against extremist groups and the challenges from the South, the Western Balkans region has somehow fallen off the radar screen. This situation is compounded by the fact that the EU has become increasingly preoccupied with internal matters, particularly Brexit, the continuing economic and financial crisis and migration.

3. This lack of focus is also due to the prolonged period of stability that the region has enjoyed. After the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s and early 2000s, NATO and the EU had intervened to provide peacekeeping and peacebuilding capabilities to the war-ridden countries and contribute to the post-Yugoslav states. These successful interventions and the accession to either organisation by some of the newly independent states created a false assumption that democratic reform in the region had now become irreversible but this was overly optimistic as developments in the recent years have shown.

4. This short paper provides a general overview of security and stability in the Western Balkans. It argues that NATO and the European Union need to remain engaged to encourage the countries of the region to continue their reform process, providing assistance when necessary.

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

A. ECONOMY: THE STATE OF PLAY

5. At the end of 2017, the World Bank anticipated economic growth in the Western Balkans 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 still have not returned to a GDP level on par with what it was prior to the break-up of Yugoslavia. Not surprisingly, there is significant discontent with the economic situation among the populations of the Western Balkans.
6. 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 (FYROM), BiH and Kosovo. While the 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 adds 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 the 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.

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* Turkey recognises the Republic of Macedonia with its constitutional name.
B. NATIONALISM AND BILATERAL DISPUTES

7. The Yugoslav wars are still 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 and where states still form national identities, nationalism can all-too-easily be exploited by populists and by those who romanticise the past. In this political climate, underlying tensions can resurface and be manipulated at any time. The assassination of Oliver Ivanovic, a Kosovo Serb politician who supported the integration of the Serbians living in Northern Kosovo serves as a reminder of this risk (Gallucci, 2018).

8. As a result, 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 tends 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.

9. While most of these territorial disputes appear manageable in the short- or medium term, two major issues are far from being resolved.
   - Serbia 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 had 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, but a new round of negotiations in early 2018 seems to have led to a compromise; however, given the nationalistic protests in both countries, it remains to be seen if the majority of the populations will accept the agreement (Casule, 2018).

10. 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, which formed states by drawing territorial lines along ethnical borders. 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. Reasoning along those lines, however, would open a Pandora’s box of territorial claims - the more 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

11. 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).
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 July 2017 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 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.

D. GOVERNANCE AND RULE OF LAW

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 populistic 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 the importance of economic reforms in the public discourse. In the past, the political elites in the Western Balkans have focused more on maintaining the status quo that kept them in power than on pushing for necessary reforms (Less, 2016; Mujanovic, 2017).

As a result, the countries of the Western Balkans are still grappling with longstanding structural deficiencies of the socialist era. 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 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. The judicial system is plagued by
serious structural shortfalls, such as lack of accountability, integrity, independence, and transparency. The rule of law and law enforcement remain dubious at best, as the citizens of the Western Balkans believe neither in the independence of the judiciary system nor in the equality of everyone before the law (Marovic, 2017).

17. 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 sufficient 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 doubts that prosperity and a better quality of life in the region can be reached only through a serious fight against corruption, which should be "rooted out without compromise".

18. The problem of poor governance and corruption has 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. Outside actors like Russia and China never address such matters or, in Russia’s case, openly encourage these vices. The region would be well served by a far higher degree of transparency and accountability. All too often, cronyism and corruption are 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.

19. The current state of freedom of the media is also alarming. As the existing legislation to protect media freedom largely goes ignored, media bias is a serious issue, with clientelism, politicisation, corruption and insufficient political will to promote pluralism being indicated as major flaws (European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, 2017). Public service broadcasters have structural flaws, making their news 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

**Figure 1 – Control of corruption in the Western Balkans**

![Graph showing control of corruption in the Western Balkans from 1996 to 2014.](source)

Source: [Worldwide governance indicators](https://www.worldbank.org), World Bank, 2016. The percentile rank (0-100) indicates the rank of a country among all countries in the world, 0 being the lowest and 100 the highest rank.
precise information about the ownership of media outlets, nor about the level of public financing towards private media, raising reasonable doubts over their bias (Lilyanova, 2017b). A survey published by the Liber Centre for New Media in November 2017 shows that some form of “extreme speech”, almost always based on sensationalistic or completely fake news, was present in 9,436 out of 36,960 articles published in Serbian media (Mejdini et al., 2017).

20. Independent reporters are often victims of physical and verbal intimidations, according to the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), which monitors threats and attacks against the 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.

![Figure 1 – World Press Freedom Index 2002-2016: trends](image)

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

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

A. CHINA AND THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

22. Although only a new player in the Western Balkans, China’s economic and financial clout in the region has increased significantly in the recent past. Reflecting its growing global interests and activities, China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the ambitious project proposed by the Chinese President Xi Jinping, includes plans to invest around EUR 10 billion in south-east Europe to improve local infrastructures. At present, China is particularly engaged in Serbia, where it has invested heavily in the transportation infrastructure. Furthermore, Beijing and Belgrade are aligned on many foreign policy dossiers, including the non-recognition of Kosovo – due to China’s own breakaway regions of Tibet and Xinjiang.

23. China has also invested in Albania, Bosnia, Montenegro and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the latter being a stepping stone to connect the port of Piraeus for which China reportedly invested over EUR 1 billion to make it its bridgehead to Europe. 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. However, China’s investments tend to have a limited effect on the local economy, as the loans often stipulate that most of the resources and workers used in
the projects have to come from China. For now, China’s primary interest in the Western Balkans appears to be economic, not political.

**B. RUSSIA: HISTORICAL INFLUENCE, COMPETING PRESENCE**

24. In contrast to China, Russia has strong historical connection 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 if necessary, 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 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 regional level.

25. Russia is the main (if not only) exporter of gas, one of Russia’s traditional leverages, to Serbia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, thus playing a relevant role in their energy supplies. 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. Furthermore, Moscow is not really an important economic player. On any other economic issue, ranging from external aid to foreign direct investments, the EU’s presence greatly outmatches Russia’s.

![Russia, EU: % total trade/inward FDI](image)

Data from IMF, [trade](#) for 2016, [FDI](#) 2015.

Martin Russell, “Russia in the Western Balkans”, EPRS, July 2017
26. As a result, Russia is far from being capable of significantly shaping up 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 the public opinion, presenting distorted and biased versions of 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.

27. While the current Russian engagement with the region can certainly be seen as an interference with Euro-Atlantic integration, it is an indirect admission that the Kremlin’s influence in the region cannot go past “spoiler tactics”: unlike NATO and the EU, Russia has no boots on the ground, economic relations are decreasing and there are no plans to enlarge either the Eurasian Economic Union or the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) to include the Western Balkans (Bechev, 2017).

C. THE WESTERN BALKANS AND THE REFUGEE CRISIS

28. 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).

29. 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).
30. 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 FYROM-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 to proceed further north.

31. While the EU-Turkey deals certainly relieved some pressure on the region with regard to the influx of migrants, it is only a temporary stopgap solution. In February 2018, Bosnia reported an unusually high influx of migrants directed towards the EU coming from Pakistan, Algeria, Afghanistan and Turkey – signals that the crisis can resurface again anytime soon.

D. ISLAMISM, RADICALISATION AND FOREIGN FIGHTERS

32. 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, Islamic fundamentalism spread considerably during and after the Yugoslav wars, due to the influx of fundamentalist Salafist imams coming from abroad. Expert in terrorism in Bosnia and Herzegovina Vlado Azinovic claims that the objective of these preachers would be 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 Islamist 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.

33. The emergence of Daesh had a double effect on the Western Balkans. On the one hand, it led to internal security issues; on the other, Syria and Iraq became the ideal destination for the aspiring jihadists of the region.

34. Regarding internal security issues, Daesh’s main online publication, Rumiyah1, explicitly threatened the Balkans with 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.

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1 Literally translatable as “Rome”
Israeli national football team, which was scheduled to play in Tirana, and its supporters. Twenty-five people were arrested by the FYROM and Albanian police forces, in what was a remarkable show of cooperation between the security services of the two countries.

35. 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 swaths 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.

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


36. 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 Islamists, often affiliated to nationalistic movements. Given the volatile situation in the region it is important that countries dealing with similar issues and that have more expertise continue assisting the Western Balkans. This is a 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

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

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

38. 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 FYROM. NATO’s commitment to the region led to the accession of Slovenia, Albania, Croatia and, as recently as 2017, Montenegro, while FYROM is only blocked by the naming controversy. Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, while valuable partners for the Alliance, are currently not pursuing NATO membership.
39. Serbia, which pursues a policy of neutrality, is a NATO partner country that participates actively in the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme. BiH’s NATO membership aspirations are 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 protests any further step towards NATO integration.

40. 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 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.

41. 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 FYROM, 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).

42. 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 FYROM’s police system, and EULEX Kosovo, the much-maligned mission to help reform the judicial system of the country.

B. EU: THE BUMPY ROAD TOWARDS MEMBERSHIP

43. 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).

- **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).

- **The Berlin Process.** Since 2014, the EU held yearly ministerial meetings in 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 had a theme, with the July 2018’s being security (European Western Balkans, 2018)
44. 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 will be presided by Bulgaria, which has made the Western Balkans one of its priorities: in May 2018, Sofia will host the first EU-Western Balkans summit of head of states since Thessaloniki in 2003.

45. 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 none of the current Western Balkan countries is a functional market economy, with clear elements of state capture and collusion between the state and organised crime. Moreover, the Strategy also stresses that there has to be full adherence to the EU’s values and that all bilateral disputes have to be resolved before accession.

![Diagram showing the EU Enlargement Strategy](image)

46. 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 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 remains to be seen if and how the EU can implement an ambitious enlargement policy.

47. 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 tensions at the ethnic, social and religious levels remain high. The new Enlargement Strategy now commits the EU to have six “flagship initiatives”, and one of them is meant to support reconciliation and good neighbourly relations.

48. The official position of DG NEAR is that the EU is in no position nor wishes to enforce 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 where tribalism is still entrenched, 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 to the EU to ensure reconciliation, the ethnic divisions of the region will supersede the efforts towards regional cooperation (Stappers and Unger, 2018).

49. The other five flagships initiatives mentioned in the EU Enlargement Strategy are meant 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 – the roaming fees) would anyhow impact 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’ economy.
50. Perhaps the biggest shortcoming of the EU and NATO’s approach to the Western Balkans was to have kept them on “autopilot mode”. The new 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 remain of crucial importance due to geographical proximity, cultural identity and economic ties with the rest of Europe.

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

51. 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 radical Islam, Russia’s attempt to interfere in local politics and democratic processes, and migration movements from and through the region.

52. The developments in recent years have shown that the European Union and the Alliance cannot take the positive evolution of 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 that 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 galvanise this process. While the Alliance is facing multiple challenges, it must not 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, four countries (Albania, Croatia, Montenegro and Slovenia) are already NATO member states while FYROM will join the Alliance once the name issue with Greece is solved.

53. 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.

54. Therefore, Allied Heads of State and Governments should iterate their commitment to stability and security in the Western Balkans at the upcoming NATO Summit in Brussels in July 2018. We must not allow Moscow to use its energy resources as a political weapon.

55. The relations among the Western Balkan nations 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. This draft report will be updated for the Autumn Session of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.
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