

ARTICLE

A region in crisis

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While the EU is coping with serious internal problems such as Brexit and is very much occupied by a series of important national elections, the situation in the Western Balkans is deteriorating, with growing tensions in and between countries of the region. Much needed reforms are delayed and the EU accession process has lost momentum. New players such as Russia and Turkey are increasing their presence. Will the region again become the tinderbox it was not so long ago?

US senator John McCain remarked after a recent visit to the Western Balkans that his country and Europe need to engage in the region in order to prevent the simmering tensions from boiling over into full conflict. At an international conference the German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel in the same vein expressed his concern about the problematic situation in the area.

Many years after the local wars ended the Western Balkans is still not out of the danger zone. The situation even seems to be getting worse, with strong political polarisation in most of the countries and the growing nationalist sentiment that pits groups and countries against one another. Of course, coping with these conflicts is first of all the responsibility of the peoples of the Western Balkans themselves, but the international community, and especially the EU, would make a grave mistake by not getting more involved since there are evident dangers for Europe as a whole. The region is an important factor when it comes to controlling refugee flows. The poor state of the local economies and a clear lack of perspective create migratory pressures.

The European Council discussed the Western Balkans at its meeting of the 9th of March 2017 and mentioned – somewhat less alarmistic than the American dignitary – in its conclusions the ‘fragile situation in the region which it will keep under review’. The government leaders were informed about the state of play by High Representative Federica Mogherini who visited the Western Balkans early March. She went there to take stock of the serious political problems in some of the countries.



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In March 2017 EU High Representative Federica Mogherini informed Western Balkans leaders of the European Council decision to take the fragile situation in the region under review.

The volatile situation in (countries of) the region was not directly addressed in the last formal annual debate about the Western Balkans in the Council of Ministers in December 2016 when the European Commission's enlargement progress reports were discussed. The ministers reiterated their unequivocal support to the European perspective of the region and made the usual remarks about strict and fair conditionality, own merits, the need for good communication, the necessary absorption capacity of the EU as well as about 'fundamentals first' meaning democracy and rule of law. And – as always – they pointed to the need of good neighbourly relations.

These official recommendations of the Council are of course based on the assumption that the offer of EU membership and EU support for reforms has helped and will help the region to overcome its conflicts and problems, between and within countries.

Anno 2017

Anno 2017 one has, however, to come to the conclusion that this assumption only partly became true – while most countries made at least some progress, many conflicts remain unresolved or are even heating up again. These complicate the stability and association process, that links the region to the EU, and might slow down the ongoing membership negotiations. The EU also needs good relations with some of the countries in the region in order to be able to deal jointly with refugee issues.

Russian influence in the region

And nowadays there is competition. The EU is no longer the sole player in the region since Turkey and especially Russia claim a stronger role there. In Montenegro there has been upheaval after the police uncovered plans to stage a coup at election day instigated by ‘Russians’.

Another example is the way in which Moscow has been dealing with recent developments in Macedonia where it criticized attempts by the United States and the EU to help form a new democratic government, based on a majority coalition, which would block the return of the former rather autocratic one that was involved in a huge wiretapping scandal. The president of the country, Ivanov, representing the outgoing party, initially used as an argument against handing over power the fact that two parties representing the Albanian minority and part of the new coalition had been granted concessions regarding the use of their own language which were according to him damaging to the Macedonian nation. Partly under international pressure he eventually had to give up, but bringing into play the Albanian factor was significant and worrying at the same time.

The difficult situation in Kosovo

The same was done elsewhere in the region with Albanian prime minister Edi Rama making remarks that a merger of his country and Kosovo, where the large majority is of Albanian descent, could not be excluded if the perspective on EU membership would fade away. And this was repeated by Kosovo president Thaçi. Such references to a greater Albania are not very helpful. An EU spokesperson criticised the remarks stating that political interference undermines the consolidation of good neighbourly relations.

It complicates the already difficult situation in Kosovo where a very vocal opposition agitates against the Pristina-Belgrade dialogue, which started some years ago under EU auspices and which is the basis of practical cooperation between Serbia, that has never accepted the ‘unilateral’ separation of its neighbour, and Kosovo in, for example, the areas of education and communication. The latter has in particular been very critical of the fact that the Serb minority has its own security arrangements. One major party has made unification with Albania the main item of its platform.

The EU and the US are trying to save the dialogue but obviously do no longer have the leverage of the past. Since Kosovo declared itself independent in 2008 it has been less willing to accept foreign interference. Although NATO and EU remain popular in the country they have a limited impact on the internal political dynamics even though with its military presence in the form of KFOR the alliance maintains overall security and the EU with the rule of law operation called EULEX – that was set up to assist the young country in that area – and the recently concluded association treaty is promoting a reform agenda. Elections in June 2017 saw both the largest pro-European and the main ‘pro Albanian’ party winning.



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The EU law operation EULEX is not beloved by everyone in the Western Balkans as this graffiti in Kosovo shows.

In Belgrade all this is monitored with suspicion. Apart from the total unacceptability of a merger of Albania and Kosovo, the debate further diminishes the trust between Serbia and Kosovo which hampers the implementation of the EU supported Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. It helps Serb nationalist radicals and those Kosovar politicians strongly opposing cooperation with Serbia. The country itself seems to keep its options open by being friendly to both Brussels and Moscow. As elsewhere in the region there are concerns about the alleged autocratic tendencies of the newly elected president Vučić.

In the meantime Albania went through another of its deep crises, the opposition boycotting the parliament and demanding more say about the way the upcoming national elections will be conducted. In May 2017 a deal was finally struck between both sides in order to clear the way for the elections.

The Western Balkans are not just any number of neighbouring countries; they share a common heritage of having been once under the same roof

In Bosnia Herzegovina (BiH) the divisions between the different ethnic groups have augmented. The Serb part – Republika Srpska – has announced a referendum on independence and has the ambition to link up with Serbia counting on support from that side.

In reaction to that the Croats, who form a federation with the Bosnians, might also demand more autonomy in the hope that Zagreb will support them in this. It is an open question whether these developments can be contained and the statehood of Bosnia Herzegovina (BiH) preserved. The international community, that is still present in many ways, has not been successful in developing a functioning multi ethnic state. That was the idea behind the 1995 Dayton agreement and the offer of EU membership – where borders matter less.

Past and present

The Western Balkans are not just any number of neighbouring countries. They share a common heritage of having been once under the same roof: Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Bosnians, Montenegrins and Macedonians – Albania (but not Albanians) being the odd one out. The collapse of Yugoslavia and the internecine wars of the 1990s drastically changed the regional landscape. And the resulting wounds – within and between the new republics – have not healed yet.

Reconciliation is a slow and complex process with drawbacks, as nationalist emotions – often misused by the political elite – regularly come to the surface. It has not always been possible to produce sustainable multi-ethnic political structures. Tensions remain – within BiH, between Serbia and Croatia, Serbia and Kosovo, between Macedonia and Greece. Where once people and goods moved freely, now borders create blockades. The resulting lack of economic and infrastructural interconnectivity impedes the development of the region as a whole.

External actors

External actors have played an important role in the region during the last 25 years. NATO, the UN and OSCE have all been involved in settling (violent) disputes and promoting stability. Achieving that has not been simple and maintaining it remains a priority of the international community, even if this sometimes means making the democratic process subservient. NATO is still present militarily and the EU is providing security in BiH with its military operation EUFOR and helping with the rule of law in Kosovo through EULEX.

Some blame the international partners for the present unsatisfactory state of democracy and rule of law in the region. They are being accused of intervening too much locally trying to maintain stability, thereby limiting the capacity of the local elites to run their own affairs. That, together with the substantial amounts of donor money, has created a dependency making it more difficult for some countries to function properly and independently.

At the same time there is criticism of the weak conditionality of the support given by the EU. Somewhat contradictorily, it leads to the claim that the EU should have put more pressure on the national politicians to reform. While NATO has so far only included Slovenia, Croatia and Albania (followed by Montenegro in the spring of 2017), the EU has taken considerable responsibility by offering membership to all countries. Slovenia and Croatia have already joined the EU. Negotiations are under way with Montenegro and Serbia. Macedonia and Albania have candidate status while BiH and Kosovo are potential candidates.

Whether the governments of the region really understand what is at stake is questionable

There are doubts, however, whether this accession process will proceed without interruptions. The EU will not take in any new members before 2019, addressing popular concerns about enlargement. Talks have toughened with a heavy emphasis on the negotiating chapters 23 and 24. These deal with rule of law issues where substantial steps are still to be made in a context characterised by a certain reform fatigue. The nature of the process, the slow progress and the waning image of the EU also have a negative overall impact. Other parties such as Russia and Turkey try to exploit this to increase their influence.

Nevertheless, for the time being the strong orientation on the EU remains – amongst the populations and within the political elite, although the popularity figures have fallen lately. The awareness is still there that this is the only framework that offers scope for living apart together in the 21st century.

Stability before reform?

The overall picture is worrying. Although recently international pressure has helped to move the electoral process forward in Macedonia and Albania, this does not mean the underlying problems in these countries have been solved also. Here as elsewhere in the region democracy is undermined by increased polarisation between parties, illiberal tendencies, autocratic leadership and weak institutions.



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Novi Sad, 2016. “Reconciliation is a slow and complex process with drawbacks, as nationalist emotions regularly come to the surface.”

Corruption remains endemic affecting ordinary people but also poisoning politics as politicians and business intertwine. Nationalism is on the rise again, resulting in the ‘ethnification’ of societies in most of the Western Balkan countries. That in itself hampers the process of conciliation and regional cooperation. Border issues remain unsolved. A high level of organised crime remains a very negative feature of the region.

All these elements pose a serious threat to the long-term stability and not addressing them in order to keep the political elites happy would be a grave mistake with dire long-term consequences.

Eternal transition as a way to survive?

Whether the governments of the region really understand what is at stake is questionable. They wholeheartedly participate in the so-called Berlin process which aims to foster regional cooperation between the six countries with the support of six EU member states. Their leaders held their own summit in Sarajevo in March this year and concluded they were concerned about growing nationalist polarisation but aimed to resolve their political differences within the framework of their democratic institutions and by strengthening mutual political dialogue. They said they wanted to improve on their limited track record to resolve pending bilateral issues. The actual picture is not so pretty and continuous internal divisions stand in the way of a much needed reform consensus.

When meeting their EU counterparts they usually say what is expected of them about European values and regional conciliation but at home they often act differently as the examples show. They seem to prefer a permanent state of transformation – that somebody labelled as ‘transitocracy’ – moving neither forward nor backward. This serves their personal interests best. As does the way in which the multiparty systems are functioning: parties being the vehicles of their (autocratic) leaders with weak (informal) democratic structures. Many of them represent nationalist tendencies and promote the ‘ethnification’ of politics.

They must be aware they can get away with this as long as certain stability is maintained and violent conflict contained. All this might work for the moment and keep Brussels ‘happy’ but it might not stop the region from becoming again the tinderbox it was not so very long ago.

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