

Vienna Security Dialogue 2019 – Perceptions on the EU Western Balkans Strategy

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Opening Speech

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning and welcome to our conference on “Perceptions on the EU Western Balkans Strategy”.

First of all, please allow me to thank the Commandant of the National Defence Academy, LtGen Erich Csitkovits for hosting today’s event. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Ivan Krastev and his team from the Centre of Liberal Strategies for inviting such a distinguished international audience to our conference.

You see that although AT EU presidency is over we try to keep the WB high on our national and on the EU agenda.

This conference is to be seen as a concrete follow-up to our presidency and the results shall feed into the national and European policy process.

Coming from the Munich Security Conference I would like to share with you three impressions with regard to SEE:

1. There seems to be no alternative that the EU needs to develop more strategic autonomy. If this assumption is correct then I see no better place for showing EU’s strategic credibility than on the WB. If EU fails on the WB she will not be successful in other regions.
2. Strategic competition and misperceptions between the great powers are growing. This creates negative spill-over effects in all regions including WB. EU should keep a “balanced” approach with all global actors, avoid developments leading to further tensions, stay engaged with all global actors and maintain open political and economic ties.
3. EU is no longer the only actor on the WB. The does not have a monopoly over the Western Balkans. A precise and realistic assessment of the strategic

interests of all involved actors must be an integral element of EU's strategy process and is a precondition in order to avoid misunderstandings.

MSC report says and I quote:

“Full Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans will not happen anytime soon ... The Lack of political and economic progress in the region as well as enlargement fatigue with the European Union have diminished the believe in the enlargement on both sides.”

Other actors fill the vacuum which the EU has left and they are increasing their influence in particular China, Russia and Turkey. We must avoid that the WB become a key part of a new “great game”.

And we must avoid that current negative development trends in the regions (transformation of KSF into KAF; ethnic tensions in BiH; constant emigration; rising influence of political islam and socio-economic problems) lead to renewed outbreaks of local violence and ethnic conflicts.

Make best use of one recent positive development:

The historical agreement between North Macedonia and Greece overcoming a conflict that lasted for a generation shows that progress is possible. Two implications of the PRESPA agreement: how best to reward this courageous step and how to make the formula of this compromise copied by other actors in the region?

Against this background AUT will remain its security political focus on SEE.

- We will continue to contribute to the implementation of EU's WB strategy.
- We support the enlargement process and think it is time for the EU to deliver.
- Therefore AT continues to advocate for negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania in June.
- We will continue to foster strategic debate on the WB in all relevant EU formats.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

The goal of today's event is to work out a comprehensive, strategic picture of the current political situation in the Western Balkans in order to improve the European

Union's Western Balkan Strategy. The findings of our conference should feed into the development of "conflict prevention strategy" which lies out how the EU can best influence negative trends. The status quo in the WB is not sustainable because stagnation will lead to further deterioration.

During the conference, we focus on the political challenges and efforts of the EU in the Western Balkans, and seek some clarification about Russia and Turkey on the EU Western Balkan Strategy. We want to understand their strategic interests, their commonalities and differences in their regional policies. This conference will be followed by a special seminar on the Western Balkan politics of China in Berlin.

In today's world management of perceptions is a key element in every strategy process. This is especially true for the WB. I would like to highlight this with two examples. A recent opinion poll showed that the people of BiH think that Turkey is the biggest foreign investor spending 10 times more than Austria does. In reality, the biggest foreign investor is Austria. And Turkey is number eleven, responsible for 3 %.

Or another figure: Only 36 % of the citizens in WB countries believe that their countries will join the EU by 2025.

During this conference we seek answers to some of our guiding questions, which are:

- What are the strategic interests and intentions of external actors in the Western Balkans?
- What are the fields for cooperation and joint efforts for stability and progress in the region?
- What are the conflicting issues among major actors?
- How can the EU facilitate the implementation of the EU Western Balkan Strategy and make best use of the PRESPA agreement?
- How does Russia and Turkey perceive EU's efforts in the region?
- What are the priorities from the perspective of the Western Balkan countries – The EU must better include the perspectives of the region in its strategy development process. We have to speak with the WB countries and not about them?

Ladies and Gentlemen!

Allow me some explanations of Austria's WB policy.

Under the Austrian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, we emphasised the critical importance of stability in the Western Balkans. Together with other likeminded countries we have brought the WB back on the agenda of the EU. This was a success and will be continued by Romania, Finland and Croatia. This is good news because we have to export stability and in order to avoid import of instability.

From our point of view we see that military presence is still necessary and therefore we will remain to be a substantial contributor to EUFOR and KFOR. We think that this missions are still necessary for providing a stable framework for reforms in other areas.

We believe that these missions should be adopted when concrete conditions are met. But we are not there yet neither in BiH nor in Kosovo. At the same time we must step up our security and defence capacity building efforts in the region. Providing a safe and secure environment and enhancing resilience through capacity building are the two elements of our WB-defence strategy.

We aim to support the Western Balkan countries to resolve their own security tasks, and to improve their resilience concerning the new hybrid risks. In doing so, we hope to further assist the Western Balkan states in becoming security providers and active contributors to CSDP.

In September 2018 Minister Kunasek has invited the defence ministers of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia. For the first time since 7 years, the defence ministers of the Western Balkan countries gathered and signed a framework for future dialogue and cooperation (“Graz declaration”. I think that we can take the “Graz Declaration” as a starting point for a process for supporting defence integration of all WB countries into CSDP. In my opinion there is no alternative to the EU-Integration of the WB, but it will take time. Therefore we should develop an “interim strategic framework” for a more structured defence policy process. In this regard one option could be that we enlarge the existing “Central European Defence Cooperation” (CEDC: Austria, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia and Croatia) to a “CEDC Plus” format which includes all Western Balkan defence ministries.

AT MoD has developed a specific “Western Balkans Defence Package”. This includes amongst others

1. the involvement of the Western Balkan states in EU missions, concentrating initially on the EU training mission in Mali,



2. the strengthening of border management capabilities and hybrid threat prevention capabilities,
3. the improvement of regional disaster relief,
4. and a broad range of training measures.

The establishment of a regional defence and training academy is a particular flagship project. For this project, High Representative Federica Mogherini has commissioned a feasibility study. First steps in this respect, such as fact-finding missions to all the countries in the region are already ongoing.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

Seminars like this either end in more confusion and in unresolved questions or in the best case they feed into concrete policy recommendations and contribute to the strategy development process.

As organisers we will try to make the best of your expertise and use your experience for our strategy process.

Please let me close my opening statement in wishing our team great success for our conference, and, once more, expressing my gratitude for your attendance and participation.

Thank you.