

A REGION IN LIMBO: SOUTH EAST EUROPE IN THE LIGHT OF STRAINED WESTERN-RUSSIAN RELATIONS

Policy Recommendations Study Group Regional Stability in South East Europe



PfP Consortium of Defense Academies and
Security Studies Institutes

30TH RSSEE STUDY GROUP WORKSHOP,
Reichenau , 23 – 25 April 2015

Situation Analysis

Russia's reappearance in territorial conflicts in the heart of Europe, in particular using the instruments of "hybrid" warfare in the Ukraine crisis, has alarmed EU and US politicians as well as political leaders in some of the capitals of Central, Eastern and South East Europe. Russian political and economic pressure has been increasingly perceived as an alarming shift in the Russian geopolitical interest. The Western Balkans as a part of South East Europe that is still passing through a complex process of post-war consolidation need further international support to successfully continue with conflict resolution. Hence the advancing geopolitical rivalry between "the West" and Russia, which also has a considerable impact on the before-mentioned region, threatens to impede positive processes.



With his new geopolitical strategy regarding the Western Balkan countries, Putin seems to aim at undermining,

slowing down or even preventing further rapprochements with, or even accession to the EU – not to mention NATO. Clear signals for that course of the present Russian leadership can be identified in Moscow's latest harsh criticism directed to Brussels and Washington that the Western Balkan countries would be "forced to integrate into the EU and NATO". In line with this argument was Russia's abstention during the voting in the UN Security Council in November 2014 on the extension of EUFOR Althea's presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

As Russia seems to have rediscovered the politically and economically weak – and therefore still not fully consolidated – countries and entities in the Western Balkans as an area of influence, traditional alliances gain on importance.

In this regard, Moscow is mainly focused on Serbia and the Bosnian entity Republika Srpska, in parts bringing back glorified memories of both traditional friendship and strong religious Orthodox and cultural bonds. Russia tries to present itself as a key ally of Serbia and the Republika Srpska, but also with strong interests in Macedonia, Montenegro and Bulgaria. Although all the Western Balkan countries officially are dedicated to EU and – with the exception of Serbia and the Serb politicians in Bosnia and Herzegovina – also to NATO membership, the influence of Putin's political model is already visible in some of the Western Balkan countries. Leading politicians like Milorad Dodik (Bosnian entity Republika Srpska), Aleksandar Vučić (Serbia), Milo Đukanović (Montenegro) and Nikola Gruevski (Macedonia) practice a cult of persona-

lity that is contrary to the democratic standards of the European Union.

The Russian Federation's geopolitical drive in the Western Balkans has been mainly expressed economically, especially in the field of energy supplies and energy transport. Above all with Serbia, more and more political and even military cooperation can be observed. This has raised question marks in Western alliances as the EU and NATO. It is interesting to note that the Western Balkan country with the highest share of Russian FDI in its economy, Montenegro, has beside Albania and Kosovo taken the clearest pro-Western stance among South East European countries concerning the Ukraine crisis and the question of joining economic sanctions towards Russia.

Russia – like any other country – has the legitimate right to follow its own economic interests in South East Europe and to strengthen trade relations. However, it cannot be overlooked that in recent times Moscow with its increasing anti-Western policies has acted as a producer of new dividing lines in this region rather than as a contributor to consolidation and regional cooperation. Serbia, which tries to balance between its official pro-EU orientation and its traditional friendship with Russia, has found itself in an unpleasant political position. The President of the Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Dodik, in turn openly supports the Russian military intervention in the Ukraine and flirts with establishing a special relationship between his entity and Russia, presenting this cooperation as a serious alternative to the integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures. Such a policy finds no support in the other entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina and therefore deepens gaps and complicates the already difficult processes of defining common state priorities in this country. Macedonia, in turn, symbolizes the limbo situation the best which some of the Western Balkan countries currently are part of. Being blocked in its EU and NATO aspirations for several years by Greece and passing through a new wave of political and possibly ethnic polarization, Macedonia is at the crossroads for its future political orientation without having a clear perspective.

In this geopolitically negative climate, latent nationalistic tensions surface easily. This was recently the case with some of the comments of Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama that could have been interpreted as a plea for creating a Greater Albania. Nationalistic setbacks of any kind which still appear in the region complicate the integration efforts of candidate countries into the EU und NATO. Such a development is most probably in the current interest of Russia which actually seems to be more interested in keeping the Western Balkans in a not fully consolidated situation. A renewed partnership between the EU, USA and Russia would be beneficial also for the Western Balkans, but it's – unfortunately – highly unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future.

Summary of Recommendations

Regarding the Relations between EU, the United States and Russia

The West should pursue a realistic and pragmatic relationship with Russia, which should primarily be focused on mutual economic interests and joint engagement in mitigating the spread of global threats like terrorism, weapons of mass destruction etc. These channels of communication should be kept open in any case.

On the other hand, the fact cannot be ignored that Russia's actions in Crimea and in particular in the Eastern Ukraine are perceived as a flagrant breach of international norms by most of the political leaders in the EU and in the United States. For this reason, a return to cooperative and trust-based security relations between the West and Russia should be subject to the condition that Moscow reaccepts the fundamental norms of the United Nations Charter, the Helsinki Final Act and other OSCE documents and acts accordingly.

The EU could support positive trends in the Western-Russian relations by showing openness for a fostered economic cooperation with the Eurasian Union for which the Russian Federation has become a motor. Such a constructive policy carried out by the EU would increase the chances for avoiding further antagonist geopolitical confrontations with Putin's Russia.

As long as the official relations between the West and Russia will remain tensed, NGO activities should be used to foster the dialogue, also in regard to the Ukraine crisis.

Russian attempts of undermining partially EU's consolidation policies vis-à-vis the Western Balkans (e.g. in Bosnia and Herzegovina) should not be taken lightly. In these cases Brussels should react with adequate political and economic counter strategies.

Regarding Internal Developments in the EU

The crisis of Western-Russian relations has shown the necessity for the EU to refocus on its own unity. Bilate-



ral agreements between single member states and Russia which are not in accordance with common EU goals have to be avoided.

EU's future highly depends on the identification of its citizens with the goals, policies and institutions of the Union. Information campaigns that are aimed at increasing public support – also in regard to further enlargement – and at addressing the rising EU scepticism among EU citizens therefore should be intensified.

The previous developments have shown very clearly that too much dependency on Russia's energy supply makes the EU vulnerable. Therefore, implementing the plans for diversifying this sector represents a key challenge for EU's common energy policy which is in the process of arising.

Regarding EU and US Policies vis-à-vis the Western Balkans and Single Countries

At the Western Balkans Summit in August 2015 in Vienna, special attention and room for discussion should be given to the implications of the deteriorating relations between the West and Russia for the Western Balkans.

Critical shortcomings in the regional consolidation processes that can be exploited by Russia – in particular in case of continued geopolitical antagonism (e.g. energy sector, policies of nationalistic and authoritarian politicians etc.) – should be addressed concretely by the EU and the US.

The enhanced Russian interest for South East Europe and the IS religious-ideological infiltration and terrorism in mind, the EU and the West have to become clear about the Western Balkans' strategic relevance in this context again.

To answer both challenges properly, a “smart power” bulwark must be erected, serving the overall European community and the European partners in the Western Balkans. By far the best “smart power tool” in the regional context remains the EU perspective, flanked by specific supporting policies, as for example in the energy sector.

In this sense, EU and NATO enlargement processes in Brussels should again be seen as important strategic rather than only technical processes. A fast entering of all Western Balkan countries in the negotiation phase of the EU integration process would underline such an approach and could contribute to the faster consolidation of countries, which like Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia suffer from internal tensions.

For the purpose of underlining the reliability of the EU's enlargement process, accompanying economic initiatives

like the “Berlin Process” for the whole region or the “German-British Initiative” for Bosnia and Herzegovina should be concretized and implemented in a short time period.

Western policy makers should be reminded that EU and in particular NATO enlargement was and is primary a matter of security policy. If there is a vacuum in regard to EU and NATO integration, then the region as well as individual countries will be open to potential negative consequences for democracy and rule of law deriving from different actors with dubious agendas.



At the end of an intensified and focused dialogue, Montenegro should be invited to become NATO member. This would additionally strengthen the Euro-Atlantic ties between the West and the region of South East Europe and would reward Montenegro for its consistent pro-Western course.

Observing the increased internal tensions in Macedonia and the apparent shift of external policies away from the EU and NATO as a result of frustration that EU and NATO memberships were promised but not given due to Greece's obstruction, the EU and NATO member countries should be more distinct in making Greece clear that an indefinite blocking of Macedonia is not any longer acceptable.

At the same time, the EU and the USA should pronounce very clearly towards the Macedonian government that Greece's obstructive behaviour must not be used as an argument for an increasingly repressive domestic policy in the sense that external threats endanger the country's cohesion. To exclude any compromise in the name issue will only help to position and keep Macedonia ever more at the margins of Europe and to make this country receptive for anti-Western external influence.

The EU must have a unique and consistent approach towards all candidate countries concerning the demands for implementation of its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) (especially in the light of enforcement of sanctions and restrictive measures against third states and entities).

EU policy makers should reconsider favouring stability at the expense of democracy. The experience in the region has shown that a strong man rule only leads to authoritarian practices and creates impediments for the consolidation of democracy. The final results are the lack of stability and the deterioration in democracy, as witnessed by recent events in Macedonia.

The spreading of “Putinism” as an authoritarian political role model is a danger for the young democracies in South East Europe. The only possible answer to this is a strict continuation of EU’s conditionality policy in regard to democratic standards. Substantial support should be provided to Civil Society Organizations that foster the democratic culture and to new hopes among politicians.

Regarding the Policies of Western Balkan Countries

Understanding the interests of the Western Balkan countries with their weak economies to benefit from trade relations with Russia, this should not legitimate the policy of some political leaders in the region to present special relations with Moscow – as the Serbian politician Milorad Dodik in Bosnia and Herzegovina is doing – as a possible substitute for EU integration.

Appropriation of authoritarian policies (see for example the complaints of Civil Society Organizations in Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia concerning pressure on media) or emulation of Russia’s governing style is clearly in odds with the democratic values and norms to which EU member states and future members aspire and therefore should be avoided by the political leaderships.

Civil Society Organization in the region should continue to observe precisely breaches of democratic standards and to mobilize a critical mass against such developments.

The Western Balkan countries, which constantly express that their future is solely in the EU, should better harmonize their Foreign and Security Policy with that of the EU. The EU is not any longer just a free market area but has the clear determination to become a political union aligning crucial parts of internal and external politics.

The “red line”, which should be crossed by no means by the regional politicians, is – as again Dodik already did – to show support for Putin’s military expansionism in the Ukraine.

As the present OSCE chair holder, Serbia should recognize its responsibility vis-à-vis the Western Balkans and the all-European community and become active in reinforcing the role of the OSCE in assessing and resolving the Ukraine crisis.

In order to diversify their sources for energy supply and to reduce their dependency on Russia in this sensitive field the Western Balkan countries should try to follow the new trends of building an EU energy community, while leaving large scale infrastructure projects to be decided at the EU level.

By avoiding new gaps in the region as a consequence of Russia’s southeastwards rush, the countries in South East Europe should intensify their cooperation, in particular in regard to the solution of those complex problems that – like e.g. climate change, terrorism, corruption and scarce resources management – no country or organization can adequately address on its own.



These policy recommendations reflect the findings of the 30th RSSEE workshop on “A Region in Limbo: South East Europe in the Light of Strained Western-Russian Relations” convened by the PFP Consortium Study Group “Regional Stability in South East Europe” from 23-25 April 2015 in Reichenau/Austria. They were prepared by Predrag Jureković; valuable support came from Maja Grošinić, Benedikt Hensellek and Aly Staubmann (all from the Austrian National Defence Academy), as well as from the Study Group members Franz-Lothar Altmann, Dennis Blease, Blagoje Gledović, Dennis Sandole, Michael Schmunk and Dane Taleski. It is important to emphasize that a smaller part of the participants of the workshop did not share all the views presented in this paper. This applies in particular to Russia’s general role in the region and its specific role in single Western Balkan countries which by some of the participants was assessed as less negative or as a legitimate pursuing of Moscow’s own interests.