

Europe Must Play a Key Role in the Balkans



While it is a delusion to expect the EU to solve problems in the Balkans through accelerated enlargement, so is the suggestion that it can be a mere spectator to a deepening crisis which it has enabled

In his opinion piece 'Europe is not Going to Solve Balkan Dramas', BIRN editor Marcus Tanner skewers a widely-held delusion that the magic wand of enlargement alone will save the Western Balkan countries from further political instability. This concept was most recently promulgated by none other than European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker.

Keeping in mind the cautionary tales (the status dispute with Cyprus, endemic rule-of-law problems in Romania and Bulgaria), it ought to be clear by now that reform must precede, not follow, membership.

Potential for Violence

The EU's leverage and ability to enforce its rules and values evaporates once countries join the club – a point now evident in the cases of former star performers like Hungary and Poland. The 'get them in' argument is not only damaging to reform prospects in the prospective member state; it is also tone-deaf to the political reality within the EU. With the possible exception of Montenegro, none of these countries in their current condition is saleable to European legislatures, let alone to their publics. Tanner's points were a necessary corrective to an increasingly hyperbolic policy discussion regarding the region.

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However, Tanner promotes other delusions. His argument - that "Balkan states must resolve their own crises, not look to others to do it for them" - neglects the fundamental truth that the current crises have been fostered by a decade of the EU's policy; they are a co-production with Balkan political elites.

It also implies that the EU has the luxury of putting the region on the back burner while it addresses its debilitating internal issues. It doesn't. The question is rather how can the EU engage its equities in the Western Balkans effectively while contending with its own challenges.

Increased EU attention towards the region is indeed warranted. The most pressing crises in the region – the Macedonian regime's effort to rekindle ethnic polarization to avoid ceding power, Bosnia and Herzegovina's structural dysfunction and potential for disintegration, and the resurfacing of friction between Serbia and Kosovo – all carry the potential for violence. All also have been enabled by a EU policy posture which has abetted political elites who pay lip-service to European values, but actively defy them in their actions. Instead of consistently confronting such

behavior, insisting on meeting conditions, and aligning with those inside these countries who are the active exponents of Europe's liberal democratic values, the EU has enabled them to get into the "mess" Tanner identifies.

Further retrenchment will only accelerate the speed of degeneration, leading to crises that the EU will be unable to ignore – and which themselves can result in driving further wedges among the EU's members. Luckily, the EU has a great deal of potential leverage in the Balkans. The EU cannot 'fix' these countries on its own, or do the work of local actors. But it can and must provide a more conducive environment for those citizens and political forces who genuinely do want to join the club – and who demonstrate willingness pay the dues of adherence to the rule of law, liberal democratic norms, and the *acquis communautaire*.

Straight Talk

A vital part of the equation is to limit the potential for these elites to generate fear and polarization. The EU can stymie their perpetual political arbitrage by ensuring security. Member state leadership can tip the balance. Chancellor Angela Merkel in summer 2011 bluntly told then-President Boris Tadic that until Serbia faced the reality

of its borders and stopped fomenting unrest in northern Kosovo, it had no European perspective. This straight talk – not brilliant EU diplomacy – enabled the Pristina-Belgrade dialogue which has now stalled due to Brussels' acquiescence to political malfeasance in both capitals. Dutch steadfastness on accountability for war crimes compelled Serbia to pursue arrests – of Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic in particular – it otherwise would have avoided.

Over a decade ago in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the EU begged to take on NATO's deterrent force mandate – which it has since allowed to wither into tragicomic flaccidity.

Were it sufficiently robust, and combined with policy clarity from Berlin, Brussels and Washington that the country's integrity was sacrosanct, Republika Srpska's drive for independence would never have gained traction as a narrative.

In Macedonia, lack of security guarantees – and an unwillingness to press Greece on the 'name issue' – gave former prime minister and political godfather Nikola Gruevski more ammunition in his attempts to convert an enormously unfavorable political dispute into an ethnic one. And the patronage capacity of all Balkan elites depends on external infusions of capital over which the EU has an influential, and sometimes deciding, vote.

These levers are all within the EU's control. To date, they have been employed in favor of an illusory 'stability' which serves elites who have thereby been empowered in their deepening authoritarian governance and polarizing rhetoric.

In sum, Tanner is correct that the EU cannot solve these countries' problems for them, and certainly not by bringing them on board in their current state. But he is dangerously wrong to assert that the EU can afford to let the region stew while it focuses on its own internal crises. In fact, by adopting a clear and coherent policy towards the Balkans that is true to the EU's values, the Union might even catalyze the reflection needed to enforce these values within the club. Such a policy must maintain an open door to membership, while enforcing a hardline stance on conditions, and actively engaging in these countries on the basis of liberal democratic norms. This must entail active and vocal backing for exponents of these values in their societies, most importantly among citizens, but also among the political elite. The EU cannot afford to maintain an illusive 'realism' toward the Balkans that airbrushes its own contributing role and continuing responsibility out of the picture.

Security Challenges for Western Balkans Come from Within



In an interview with European Western Balkans, Rose Gottemoeller, Deputy Secretary General of NATO, said the instruments are there in the Western Balkans to tackle the security problems, but there are challenges from within

What do you consider to be the main security challenges for the Western Balkans?

It may be a little surprising how I am going to answer this, but I think the main security challenges really come from within. For the countries in the Western Balkans, the challenges are related to corruption and difficulties in institution building, come from challenges to constitutional processes going on. So, I really think of them as challenges from within the societies in the Western Balkans. I will say that I think that there are real efforts afoot to tackle those challenges. For example, I have just been reflecting on the aftermath of the coup attempt in Montenegro, where Montenegro dove in immediately with a proper legal and judicial process involving essentially all the rule of law instruments that are available to the Montenegrins, and they got the Serbians to join in their effort to investigate the coup. So, it lends the confidence to the process that they followed proper rule of law procedures. I think the instruments are there in the Western Balkans to tackle these problems, but there are challenges from within.

How do you see the importance of NATO for the stability in the Western Balkans, especially in Bosnia and

Herzegovina and Kosovo?

I think it is really important what NATO has been doing to build institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. For example my boss, Jens Stoltenberg, the Secretary General of NATO, was just recently out there, at the beginning of February, and he came back with a very strong impression of the construction work that NATO has been doing on the national army in BiH. As Jens likes to say – 20 years ago there were three separate fighting forces in that region, fighting each other, and now through the training efforts that NATO has undertaken over the years, building up defense capacity and defense institutions, there is a national army that is multi-ethnic and a very good fighting force, but one that is again under the influence of the rule of law. He is very articulate on the score, so I am just basically saying what he says, but he saw with his own eyes not so long ago. I think that is a good example of the kind of thing that NATO was doing in the region, including Kosovo and building up the Kosovo Security Force. One important thing that is often talked about is as if there is a competition going on between NATO and Russia in Serbia for example, but we do not see it that way.