

DPC Senior Associate Kurt Bassuener had a letter published in the Financial Times on the EU's policy posture in the Balkans, following High Representative Federica Mogherini's regional tour.

The letter as published, with link, is posted here:

EU has to demonstrate backbone if it is to bring strongmen to heel

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From Kurt W Bassuener, Democratization Policy Council/ University of St Andrews, UK

Sir, Russia was taking advantage of the west's listless policy in the Balkans well before its seizure of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine ("Europe and the US face a challenge in the Balkans", editorial, March 11). But 2014 did mark a shift from Russia being an opportunistic spoiler to being a more aggressive destabiliser. Moscow encouraged the Republika Srpska's secessionist ambitions in that year, creating frictions with Belgrade which continue. This has only amplified since then, with President Donald Trump's election adding further incentive for Moscow to test the limits.

The reason for this rules-free environment, however, falls squarely on the EU's stubborn insistence on addressing the region solely through its standard enlargement framework, despite years of the proven inadequacy of its soft power alone in the region. Part of this failure owes to the fact that most of the region's political elites don't really want to join the EU, despite their ritualistic statements for material gain and legitimacy. The west, and especially the EU, prioritise stability to the degree that, in effect, they have allied with governments which have no interest in meeting liberal democratic norms. This makes the EU's latest pronouncements of concern on the Balkans — and Russia's role — ring even more hollow.

The EU has the capability — and legal responsibility — to prevent further degeneration in Bosnia and Herzegovina through shoring up its deterrent capability in EUFor, including by placing troops in Brcko, which separates the two halves of the potentially secessionist Republika Srpska. It could also make clear to both Belgrade, which as a candidate pointedly refuses to join in EU sanctions on Russia, and Macedonia, where the government is refusing give way to an opposition majority coalition, that their "European path" is dependent on following the EU lead and adhering to democratic behaviour. That would mean being less accommodating to — and more critical of — local strongmen.

The torpedoing of Russia's South Stream pipeline project by the EU's Energy

Community in 2015 demonstrated that when the EU is willing to play hardball, it can compel compliance. Nothing so impresses Moscow or regional leaders who venerate Vladimir Putin (and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan) as much as firmness in standing up both for Europe's interests and for its democratic principles. This has become even more important in the Trump era. The EU's problem in the Balkans has not been to "win hearts and minds" but to demonstrate it has backbone — and prove to local exponents of its liberal democratic values that it will back them up.

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