

Open Letter to EU, US, and NATO Governments:

This is Your Deterrence Failure: Confront It

Prior to 2018, the standard talking point for most Western governments toward the Balkans was fully consistent with the ideal of a Europe “whole, free, and at peace:” that no further pursuit of border changes or ethnoterritorialism would be permitted. Equality of citizens and acceptance of the historical reality of multiethnicity throughout the Western Balkans was presented not only as a prerequisite to Euro-Atlantic integration, but a requirement for maintenance of peace and comprehensive security after a series of wars left over 130,000 people dead in the span of a decade.

For well over a decade before 2018, the West’s policies in the region remained on bureaucratic autopilot – formally committed to Copenhagen criteria and liberal democratic values and standards, but increasingly distracted and defaulting to formalism and transactionalism with local elites. This zombie policy allowed NATO and EU enlargement without true resolution of outstanding disputes with neighbors. This error was raised at the time – and its effects can be seen now.

An inherently polarizing national authoritarian populism reminiscent of that seen in the former Yugoslavia beginning in the late 1980s became increasingly apparent among a number of EU member states and in the US with the election of Donald Trump. This cocktail of factors accelerated the negative trajectory of democracy in the Western Balkans. The only positive in this period – a breakthrough, now largely squandered in North Macedonia – came not because of the West’s policy, but despite it. Popular pressure forced the EU and US off the fence to compel Gruevski to new elections, then to accede to the results.

The embrace of the proposed partition of Kosovo made in summer 2018 by Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and his Kosovar counterpart Hashim Thaçi – marketed variously as “land swap,” “demarcation,” and “border correction” – first by the EU’s Federica Mogherini, then by the US government, deviated from nearly two decades of transatlantic (and in America’s case, bipartisan) policy. Unfulfilled nationalist agendas regionwide immediately took note; florid ethno-nationalist dreams never disappeared in the Balkans; they had been suppressed and deterred by a West that hoped the EU enlargement process would obviate the need for deterrence. Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik had long advocated state dissolution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, so readily used the new talking point. Vučić pointedly spoke of the need for good relations among “Serbs and Albanians,” with the clear implications that the borders in the region are not sacrosanct, but negotiable.

This is currently visible in the joint EU and US policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where – camouflaged in talk about election integrity – an effort to “amend the election law” is actually also about internal border demarcations and granting HDZ leader Dragan Čović his long-articulated dream of a *de facto* or *de jure* Croat third entity – the ethno-territorial holy grail of divisive nationalists. Even worse, the Western (EU/US/UK) support for this is using the Sejdić-Finci, Zornić, and Pilav cases as talking points, even though these rulings compel BiH to open the political space, not to tighten the feudal order. Croatia has made itself felt throughout this debate to press Croat ethno-territorial claims within BiH. The non-paper, Croatia put forward with illiberals Bulgaria, Hungary, and Slovenia, together with Greece, menacingly links state dysfunction (promised Čović and Dodik deliverables) to EU border control, to further inflame right and far-right fears of migrants and asylum seekers.

As a direct result of this morally rudderless policy, in the past week, we reached a new low. While the veracity of the document is still hotly disputed, an alleged “non-paper” put forward by Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša proposes the unification of Albanians, Serbs, and Croats in the region, partitioning BiH, North Macedonia, and Kosovo, but leaving Montenegro curiously unscathed, and not touching Serbia’s Sandžak. Whatever the provenance of the “non-paper,” there is no doubt a sincere cohort of adherents to such ethno-nationalist agendas. The first-order intent may be to make changes below this threshold seem more reasonable. But nobody should be fooled into belief that attempts to achieve these ends could be done without massive violence and forced population movements. Many on the “wrong side” of existing and projected lines on maps are vulnerable – and know it.

Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama – self-styled national chieftain and one of the likely beneficiaries of such a carve-up – claims to have discussed the “non-paper” with Janša. It is important that such a proposal be denied and rejected, or confirmed by the EU Commission President and EU Council President. If it was indeed genuine, then Slovenia’s upcoming presidency should be called into question, as it would be delusional to believe that there would not be moral, reputational, and material impact on the EU’s security during its leadership tenure.

There is still time for the US and EU to arrest the current trajectory, which would eventually end in violence. But only a willingness to confront the reality of a failed policy to date can achieve this – at the commanding heights of government. Reinforcement of the deterrent forces in the region (EUFOR and KFOR) to credible strength and mobility is long overdue to ensure a vision of values-based comprehensive security is not simply rhetorical.

We, the signatories, representing civil society, academia, and concerned citizens from throughout the region and beyond – including citizens of the EU and US – implore Presidents Biden, von der Leyen, and Michel, and Secretary General Stoltenberg, as well as heads of government of leading EU and NATO member states to recognize the clear and present danger yielded by their current policies and to recalibrate them accordingly.

Sincerely,

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