

# Balkan Think Tanks Convention II

“The Renewed Strategic Importance of the Balkans”

November 3-4, 2016  
Pristina, Kosovo

**SUMMARY REPORT**

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## Introduction

The Balkan Think Tanks Convention is an annual gathering of Balkan think tanks focusing on political research. The event is led by the Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA), a leading think tank in Turkey, and supported by the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), a public institution affiliated with the Prime Ministry of Turkey. The first edition of the event took place in Ankara in June 2015 with the participation of 30 think tanks and research institutions from twelve countries.

The second edition of the Balkan Think Tanks Convention was organized on November 3-4, 2016 in Pristina in partnership with the Democracy for Development Institute (D4D), a Pristina-based think tank. With the general theme “The Renewed Strategic Importance of the Balkans,” the convention brought together more than 30 experts affiliated to 27 institutions from 12 countries.

The convention included a two-day-long workshop on the common political agenda of the Balkans and Turkey. The opening remarks of the convention were given by Valon Murtezaj, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kosovo, Kivılcım Kılıç, the Turkish Ambassador in Pristina, and Kudret Bülbül, the President of YTB. Following this, the current trends and challenges facing the Balkans, the strategies and orientations of the Balkan countries, and external factors and developments influencing the region were handled in six panel sessions. Each panel included four interventions followed by an open roundtable discussion. During the sessions, the participants presented recent research conducted by their institutions and offered their perspectives on selected themes. The themes of the panel sessions were as follows:

- 1) Regional Security and the Future of the Euro-Atlantic Alliance
- 2) Impacts of the Refugee Crisis: Policies and Outcomes
- 3) International Actors in the Balkans
- 4) Regional Economic Cooperation and Development
- 5) Kosovo’s Place in the International System
- 6) After Brexit: The Future of the EU’s Relations with the Balkans and Turkey

This report presents a general summary of the panel sessions, including the main points of discussion and policy recommendations. Since the convention was held under the Chatham House Rule, the names and affiliations of the speakers are not specified in this summary report.



This report summarizes the remarks made during the workshop.





# Session I

Regional Security and the  
Future of the Euro-Atlantic  
Alliance



## Session I: Regional Security and the Future of the Euro-Atlantic Alliance

Security and stability in the Balkans depend on many factors. While unresolved interstate and intercommunal issues can lead to disputes and conflicts, issues that originate from elsewhere, such as the refugee crisis and transnational terrorism, also affect the security situation in the region. Since the maintenance of peace and stability in the region has been taken up by the international community since the Cold War ended, any change in foreign policies of international actors, particularly those in the Euro-Atlantic bloc, can also affect the security of the Balkans.

A speaker argued that cooperation among Balkan countries is crucial for development and Euro-Atlantic integration. Common values, such as language and culture, can be a strong basis for mutual understanding; multiple trade and security cooperation opportunities can be drivers of peace and stability, while common security concerns, such as violent extremism and radicalization, also provide an impulse for further development of relations among countries. Positive examples of increasing dialogue and cooperation are

those between Albania and Serbia, and among Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. By implementing some articles of the Brussels Agreement, Serbia and Kosovo have made optimistic, albeit slow, progress towards the normalization of relations.

Another speaker stressed that the effectiveness of the Euro-Atlantic bloc in international politics will depend very much on its ability to maintain solidarity, unity, values, and principles. There needs to be a joint and mutual EU-NATO understanding over security issues and crisis prevention. From the second half of the 2000s onwards, the interest of the EU and NATO in the Balkans has notably decreased due to the conflicts in Georgia, the Middle East and Ukraine, whereas Russia's presence in the region has grown. Pressing problems like the ongoing refugee crisis, security issues in Europe and conflicts around the world have been keeping Europe's attention away from the Balkans. Today, there is a fear in the Balkans that the Euro-Atlantic bloc may sacrifice the region to larger geostrategic interests. According to the speaker, this will satisfy Russia only temporarily and bring long-term complications for Europe. In order to ensure a safe and committed neighborhood, NATO and the EU should reconfirm and prioritize their interest in the Balkans. In the meantime, Balkan countries should assume a stronger role in ensuring Europe's security by tackling the prevailing risks and threats, ideally in a collective way.

According to another speaker, the EU's application of a stricter conditionality over time is in the disadvan-

tage of the countries that are currently in the negotiation process. The inconsistent attitude in Europe about the Balkans and the lack of a coherent EU enlargement policy encourages actors like Russia to profit from uncertainty. Russia has recently been more actively endeavoring to discourage Montenegro, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina from becoming NATO members.

Another participant opined that when speaking about regional cooperation the discussion should not be limited to regional developments only. Trends and developments in international and global politics can also have strong repercussions for the Balkan region. The crisis in Ukraine has recently taught us a lesson that borders can easily change through the intervention of a strong actor, in this case Russia. On the other hand, U.S. involvement in international crises is quite changeable, depending on the administration in charge. The next president of the U.S. may bring significant changes in international politics. The lack of clarity about U.S. foreign policy under the forthcoming presidency makes it difficult to estimate whether NATO will reinforce its position in the Balkans against Russia or will be a silent observer in the region.

Other participants agreed that NATO's course of action would depend on U.S. foreign policy commitments and underlined that U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and its non-involvement in Ukraine have had negative effects on the regional security environments. According to a participant, if the next U.S. president prefers to follow a non-involvement policy, this could benefit the American economy but create more instability in various other regions, including the Balkans.

According to another discussant, the security context has recently changed not only in the region but in the whole world because of new problems such as the refugee crisis and the issue of foreign terrorist fighters. Furthermore, wider problems relating to governance, education, employment and minority rights are indirectly affecting the security situation in the Balkans. Mitigating all these problems necessitates stronger international action with innovative measures. However, the EU's lack of internal cohesion in

handling the refugee crisis, the United Kingdom's Brexit decision, and the rise of right wing parties in some member countries have put into question the extent of shared values in Europe. Under these circumstances, it is difficult to expect, in the short term, a strong and dedicated Euro-Atlantic initiative in the Balkans. Meanwhile, Russia's increasing assertiveness can make some actors in the Balkans turn their faces more resolutely towards the West.

A discussant raised the question of what regional actors would do if the Euro-Atlantic alliance were no longer to provide the Balkans with security. One answer was that any genuine effort for regional cooperation, rather than the steps taken for the sake of EU membership, will consolidate solidarity and peace. Some discussants argued that regional cooperation does not necessarily require the leadership and sponsorship of international actors, and Balkan countries should take stronger initiatives to develop links and cooperation among each other. Besides, the politicians in the region should be aware that any populist discourse they use, even if intended for domestic audiences, has wide repercussions in the Balkans, where historical disputes, social problems and skepticisms exist among nations and communities.

A participant underlined that although Kosovo has managed to become a member of some regional security initiatives, its role has been very limited due to the exclusions imposed on it. Moreover, as Kosovo has a very limited capacity to tackle its security problems by itself, it needs further support in preventing and combating violent extremism, radicalization and organized crime. For effective international cooperation on security issues, Kosovo's full integration in international and regional security organizations is necessary.

Some discussants stressed that the world has become more interdependent than ever, and a threat emerging elsewhere can seriously affect a country or region. It would therefore be a narrow approach for the Euro-Atlantic community to secure itself through closing its borders and reinforcing its flanks. Instead, it should focus more on resolving political, economic, and social problems all over the world.





## Session II: Impacts of the Refugee Crisis: Policies and Outcomes

During the last couple of years, the refugee crisis has been a paramount challenge for Turkey, the Balkans, and the European Union. Most of the refugees were forced to leave their home countries due to war conditions and undertook a long and unplanned journey into Europe for asylum. The EU and member states, caught unprepared in economic, social, political, and logistical terms, devised measures and policies only after the number of asylum seekers reached an alarming level. Governments in Europe and the Balkans have agreed upon certain arrangements to mitigate the problem, but more effective measures and mechanisms could not be formed due to differences of opinion. Even though the existing arrangements, particularly the closure of the Balkan route and the Turkey-EU deal of March 2016, were able to control the influx of irregular migrants to a great extent, whether they will continue to work in the long term is still uncertain.

One country that has been affected most seriously from the refugee crisis has been Greece. Reportedly, Greek citizens are not sufficiently informed about the crisis and they underestimate the scale of the refugee influx. A research has shown that while Greek citizens were largely disappointed with their government's and the EU's handling of the refugee crisis, they had at the

same time an overwhelming sympathy towards the refugees. Greece has been facing a recession for seven years and this has affected the country both economically and socially. Due to its shrinking and aging population and the constantly increasing need to fill vacant jobs, immigration can be in the advantage of Greece. In order to receive the economic and demographic benefits of immigration, the Greek government needs to develop a strategy on immigration.

Another speaker gave an outlook of the situation of refugees in Turkey. Granting temporary protection to Syrian refugees, Turkey has set up 25 camps to host them. Yet, most of the nearly 3 million Syrians in Turkey do not live in these camps. Most refugees are children, and only half of them are receiving formal education. Many of them have priorities other than education, for instance they opt to help their families by working, often they get married at a young age, and many expect to go back to their country. Instead of public schools, many Syrian families prefer to send their children to temporary education centers, which were opened specially for Syrian refugees and teach in Arabic. The plans of the Turkish Ministry of Education to transform these temporary centers into public schools are still debated because of the concern that the lack of Turkish comprehension will hamper the integration of Syrians in Turkey. Another obstacle for their integration is their cultural differences with Turkish society. Women's education is another problem due to the fact that many Syrian girls and women do not want to attend mixed schools.

While Turkey has spent enormous effort to provide basic services to the refugees and stop irregular crossings into Europe, the failed coup of July 15, 2016 forced the Turkish government to postpone some projects for refugees. While there is still possibility of an



other influx of migrants in Turkey, the Balkans, and Europe, the future of the EU-Turkey deal is uncertain, due to the complications in Turkey-EU relations. If the deal is canceled, it may take some time to find another way to control the movement of refugees, and until a solution is reached Greece and the Balkan countries will face the burden.

Another participant examined the refugee crisis from the viewpoint of Albania. Anticipating that Albania could possibly be a transit corridor, the Albanian government, despite its limited funds, made preparations to accept around 3,000 refugees. So far, Albania has accepted around 300 refugees from Syria. A Committee of Refugees and Asylum to deal with the issues and complaints of refugees was established in 2016. The Albanian government has also expressed a positive attitude for international cooperation to collectively resolve refugee issues. Taking these facts into account, the speaker suggested the consideration of Albania as a transit country where refugees could be sheltered until they are admitted by another country. This transitory period could be used also to assist them with language courses and preparing them for the country they aim to seek refuge. The number of refugees coming to Albania unexpectedly decreased sharply thanks to the EU-Turkey deal of March 2016. Nevertheless, Albania still tries to prepare itself for the worst-case scenario and is currently increasing its reception capacity to 4,000 refugees.

Unlike other countries in the region, Kosovo has not been a part of the Balkan route used by refugees, which is somewhat surprising because the existing routes are very close to the borders of Kosovo. Even though Kosovo is not a member of the United Nations (UN) and, resultantly, not a signatory of the Geneva Convention, it has obligated itself by including the clauses of this document in its constitution and has made them legally binding. In the meantime, Kosovo

faces its own problems due to its political status, its fragile economy, as well as the difficulties of readmitting its own citizens, who are being sent back from European countries. Had there been a refugee influx, these difficulties would have left Kosovo highly unprepared.

Discussants underlined the poor prioritization of policies and allocation of funds in handling the crisis by many Balkan countries. For example, more than 20 percent of Bulgaria's budget was spent for securing the borders without much consideration on how to better tackle the refugee crisis. Another participant noted that, as seen in the example of Serbia-Croatia relations, migration flows have caused political rifts in the region, and Balkan governments experiencing common problems have largely failed to cooperate for their collective resolution.

Another matter of discussion was Europe's inconsistent and incomplete handling of refugee issues. A discussant criticized the apathy of the EU and member states to refugee issues until they faced the crisis. Another discussant stated that the EU still did not appear very well organized in handling the situation and there existed a diversity of opinions in the European public about the policies to be adopted. According to another discussant, even though the EU-Turkey deal achieved positive results in stopping the migrant flow, it was still a stopgap measure. If the conflicts in the Middle East continue, there can always be new waves of migration towards European countries. Europe should spend more effort to resolve the conflicts in the Middle East and, until the conflicts are ended, to establish safe zones for refugees. Other discussants claimed that international support to the countries that are overwhelmed by refugee influx was still inadequate. Facilities in Greece need significant improvement and Turkey has yet to receive the funds promised by the EU in the March deal.





## Session III: International Actors in the Balkans

Even though the Balkans are not in the limelight of international politics, they have long been a strategic region, where various international actors have competed for greater influence. Since the early 2000s, the EU has been the main international actor in the Balkans. The EU enlargement process has gathered and oriented all countries in the region towards a common European path. In the meantime, a number of Balkan countries have become NATO members. All this led to the expectation that the entire region would be integrated in the Euro-Atlantic world in the near future. However, since the mid-2000s onwards, the presence and influence of various international actors has been increasing.

The EU, the U.S., and Turkey all present Euro-Atlantic perspectives to the Balkans. For instance, the USA invests in the region's stability and security by using the NATO membership carrot, as seen in the case of Montenegro. The EU requires Western Balkan

countries to ensure the rule of law, stronger democratic institutions, public administration and a functioning market economy; yet the prolongation of the accession process has left the Western Balkans in limbo. While the EU continues to pressurize the Western Balkan countries to follow EU foreign policy guidelines, the unknown future of EU enlargement weakens EU conditionality. Meanwhile, the Euro-Atlantic actors do not seem to be perfectly dedicated to make countries of the region more democratic, as they increasingly place more emphasis on security and stability.

Nor do all members of the Euro-Atlantic world have identical interest and involvement in the Balkans. Despite its influence over the region as a global power, the U.S. has left the affairs of the region largely to the EU after the 1990s. Whereas many EU member states are indifferent to Balkan politics and the accession of Western Balkan countries in the EU, Germany, has lately taken up the leadership role in promoting regional dialogue and cooperation. Turkey, which is a NATO member and EU candidate, has been endeavoring to expand its cultural and economic influence in the Balkans and assert itself as a leading regional power.

Russia, which aims to reclaim its position as a superpower, is trying to undermine the influence of the West. Perceiving NATO as a threat, it has been using various means to slow down the region's Euro-Atlantic integration. One of these methods is supporting illiberal actors including authoritarian leaders, Eurosceptic political parties and interest groups. Russia has been endeavoring to monopolize the supply of energy wher-

ever possible, and to thus make the region more dependent on it. Recent and obvious examples of this strategy are the South Stream and Turkish Stream projects. Russia has also a particular interest in keeping the frozen disputes in the region. In order to exploit the situation created with the migration crisis, Russia has even bolstered paramilitary organizations in countries like Montenegro, Serbia and Bulgaria. Nevertheless, a participant stated that even though Russia has strong relevance in the region, its Balkan policy proceeds in a somewhat disorganized and rather spontaneous fashion.

As a global economic player, China is also looking for further economic clout in the Balkans. While trade between China and the region increased sharply during the 2000s, China has also engaged in the Balkans with diverse investments projects in areas such as energy, infrastructure, transportation, and machinery. A participant stated that China's economic activism should not be a matter of concern for the region since it does not have a political agenda and its investments will create more jobs. According to another participant, China has stronger economic potential in Western Balkan countries, since they are not subject to the strict EU regulations.

A speaker argued that the ongoing turbulence in world politics can deeply affect Balkan politics, as the latter strongly depends on the approaches of main international actors. The decision of the UK to leave the EU has shown that people were more concerned with internal politics than international politics and cooperation. Brexit and the rise of the far right bring the concepts of European values and identity under question, and hence make the future of the EU uncertain. The forthcoming presidential elections in the USA could result in major changes related to international politics. The Syrian crisis still affects the lives of millions of people, while Turkey is dealing with around three million Syrian refugees despite its own issues such as terrorism and a recent coup attempt. All these and other developments have brought about the question whether there is a leadership crisis in the world.

Another speaker focused on globalization and offered an analysis of the various actors' influences in

specific Balkan countries. The speaker argued that the Balkans were regarded by the Western world as a part of Western civilization. The West has constructed an imaginary geography called "Western Balkans," as a typical setup of "European orientalism." Meanwhile, the concept and definition of globalization is changing to benefit other actors. For instance, according to Russia, the Balkans are part of Eurasian civilization, which is in antithesis to Western civilization. Since the Balkans are not exclusively Western or Eastern, there exists a strong political competition among the EU, the USA, Russia and Turkey. Each of these powers are involved in the Balkans by the use of various hard and soft power instruments. An increase of international interest in the region will exacerbate this competition and may involve other global and international players in the region.

Another speaker claimed that political leaders in the Western Balkans are primarily power-oriented, and they often neglect democratic norms for the sake of consolidating their position in politics. They approach reforms pragmatically rather than genuinely aiming to improve the well-being of their citizens. While politicians and people of the region expect the EU to continue its "babysitting" role, the latter, tired by the lack of progress in reforms, has increasingly been stressing the concept of shared responsibility in governance. Despite collective efforts in specific areas, such as combatting organized crime and corruption, very limited progress has been made so far. As the EU fails to resolve the political and economic problems in the region, political leaders in the Western Balkans resort to other international actors for cooperation and support.

A discussant asked the question whether the increasing competition and disputes between the Euro-Atlantic bloc and Russia means a second cold war. One response was that this is unlikely, not only because the two blocs do not have competing ideologies, but also because Russia is still economically and militarily inferior to the Euro-Atlantic bloc. Another participant challenged this view by claiming that Russia was promoting an ideology of Eurasianism and its economic activities undermined liberal economy.





## Session IV: Regional Economic Cooperation and Development

Due to political and historical differences, cooperation among Balkan countries has often been fragile and complicated. Since the turn of the 2000s, the EU has been using membership conditionality to encourage Balkan countries to reconcile their differences and cooperate with each other. Institutions like the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and countries such as Germany, the UK, and Turkey have also contributed to promoting regional cooperation.

Because of common economic problems experienced by Balkan countries, discussions and projects of regional cooperation have recently been focused on economic cooperation. According to a public poll, approximately 77 percent of the respondents in the Western Balkans think that regional cooperation is of key importance for the prosperity of the region. The same public poll has demonstrated that the biggest issues of concern in the Western Balkans are unemployment, economic stagnation, and corruption. It is telling that while policymakers tend to focus more on political and security-related issues, people in the region think that their most pressing problems are economic and want their governments to focus more on development and the creation of jobs.

A speaker highlighted that the EU sees the Western Balkan countries as potential sources of political and financial risk, and that due to their poor economic situation it is reluctant to accept them as EU members. The spillover effects of the Eurozone crisis, the region's lack of competitiveness in global markets, youth unemployment, the rapidly aging population, and increasing emigration are all reducing hopes about the future. Although the ongoing internal crisis of the EU makes the member countries even more averse towards enlargement, the EU can still take steps to prevent further socioeconomic deprivation in the Western Balkans. In order to do this, the EU should first start to treat the region not as an external geography but as politically and economically integral to Europe. It can extend its Cohesion Policy to the future members in the region and allow free movement and trade with member states. Reforms in political and economic institutions can be encouraged with the use of EU structural funds. Economic sectors in the region can be more strongly integrated with EU economies through institutions, like in the example of the Energy Community.

Another discussant drew attention to the important historical and cultural ties of Turkey with the Balkan countries as well as their geographic proximity, all of which constitute a strong potential for economic cooperation. Thanks to all these factors and Turkey's increasing dynamism as an economic actor, economic and commercial relations between Turkey and Balkan countries have become strong. Being one of the world's leading donors, Turkey provides large sums of official development aid to the region, especially to



Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. Turkish businesses are growing in the Western Balkans, particularly in the fields of transportation, infrastructure and finance, while Turkish SMEs are becoming increasingly active, too. Free trade agreements between Turkey and the Western Balkan countries have increased mutual trade in recent years, even though Turkey is still behind some European countries in imports and exports.

Economic integration with Europe is a common aspiration for both Turkey and the Balkans. A speaker discussed the benefits of the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) for economic cooperation and development in the Balkans. By abolishing import taxes, CEFTA has led to the increase of trade volume among its members, which in turn contributed positively to inter-state relations and regional stability. Meanwhile, Turkey is looking for a revision of the Customs Union Agreement, which has been in effect since 1996. This agreement, while having strengthened commercial relations between Turkey and the EU in the last two decades, restricts Turkey's trade options with third countries and does not cover the service sector, which constitutes more than half of the Turkish economy.

Improvement of relations among countries brings various, even unintended, benefits to regional economy. One such example is the informal economy, which is one of the factors hampering the development of the private sector in the region. When there were trade blockages between Kosovo and Serbia, the informal economy in North Kosovo flourished; yet the signing of the agreement between the two countries significantly reduced informal economic activities.

Deficiencies in the rule of law and political instabilities are important factors preventing large international companies from investing in the Western Balkans. A speaker advised that to ensure a higher standard of living, the Western Balkan countries should take reforms seriously regardless of their prospects of joining the EU.

Another discussant underlined that swift advancements in technology have been deeply affecting production and economy. In the 21st century, economic sectors have shifted towards digitalization, requiring more entrepreneurship and innovation in information technologies. However, the economies in the Balkans are still highly dependent on traditional sectors, such as industry and agriculture. Instead of moving along traditional ways of thinking, new ideas for business and investment should be encouraged in the Balkans. With an innovative idea, a small IT enterprise, which could be started without any state or EU funding, can prosper in a short period of time.

A participant responded that public investment is necessary for economic development, but Balkan countries, many of which depend on external aid and remittances, lack substantial tax revenues to channel into public investment. In order to raise their tax revenues, Balkan governments may think of supporting small enterprises, which can spearhead industrial development and create employment in a short period of time. Another participant added that since most SMEs in the region produce exclusively for domestic consumption and do not aspire to work or market abroad, governments also need to provide them with such a business vision. In this regard, Balkan countries can take lessons from Turkey's strong experience in developing SMEs.

Upon a question whether political leaders should be involved in promoting regional business cooperation, a participant said that politicians should rather spend their efforts to create the appropriate infrastructure for businesses to invest and collaborate across borders. Since cooperation is a natural outcome of necessity, favorable conditions will facilitate cooperation among national chambers and private businesses without the need for any external push.

According to another participant, the discrepancy between education systems and market demands indicates the necessity of an education reform. In Balkan countries, it is often the case that there are either un-

skilled workers or university graduates; thus unemployment continues to be high while companies look for skilled labor. New types of schools are needed to create skilled workers. Another speaker added that universities and schools in the region were not strongly adaptive to the changes in production and economy, and this caused the potential of young brains to remain underutilized. More IPA and other external development funds should be used for applied research, which is significantly lacking in the region. A short-term solution for the lack of skilled workers could be increasing the mobility of professionals across Balkan countries.



# Session V

Kosovo's Place in the  
International System



## Session V: Kosovo's Place in the International System

Kosovo is better placed in the international scene after eight years of independence. Kosovo has so far become a member of nearly 60 regional and international organizations and initiatives, including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the Permanent Court of Arbitration. Its inclusion as an equal player in the South-East European Cooperation Process and the Berlin Process were landmark developments as well. Kosovo is currently recognized by 111 countries out of the 193 UN members. Its recognition by more states, in particular by those in the EU, will improve its standing in the international scene.

Kosovo's independence was a joint project between Kosovars and the international coalition. Since the declaration of independence, the international community has been actively involved in Kosovo's state-building process. This is why Kosovo has been subject to international monitoring and scrutiny much more than any other country. At the same time, Kosovo's international status is inevitably being affected by trends and developments in international politics. According to one view, Russia's annexation of Crimea may further delay Kosovo's membership to the UN and other international organizations. Decision makers and experts in Kosovo thus need to closely follow the trends in global politics that can affect Kosovo's future.

A panelist noted that despite its successes as a newly built state, Kosovo has still features that make it something "less than a state." It lacks an army, and despite having been admitted to some regional organizations it has yet to become a member of key international organizations and forums. Kosovo's perception of an unequal standing compared to the other countries in the Western Balkans has been an obstacle to effective regional cooperation. The main problem behind Kosovo's unequal status is the fact that it has not been recognized by two members of the UN Security Council and five members of the EU. Kosovo should intensify its efforts to advance its relations with the five countries in the EU that do not recognize it, even though they continue to oppose Kosovo's recognition.

According to another speaker, the fact that Kosovo has been recognized by the majority of states and accepted in various international organizations indicates that its independence is irreversible. However, Kosovo's place in the international system has not consolidated yet. Two permanent members of the UN Security Council, i.e. Russia and China, are currently against Kosovo's UN membership. While the former, because of its own interests, actively opposes Kosovo's independence, China considers the case of Kosovo as a European issue and awaits a consensus among EU countries before recognizing the country. The countries that are withholding diplomatic recognition in Europe (five in the European Union and four in NATO) are blocking Kosovo's integration in Euro-Atlantic institutions. While four of these countries in the EU have developed pragmatic approaches to cooperate with Kosovo, Spain opposes engaging in any kind of relations with Kosovo, due to its concerns about Catalo-



nia's independence claims. Because of Spain's opposition, NATO has not yet established any former relations with Kosovo. In addition, Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the two countries in the Western Balkans that have not recognized Kosovo, have blocked the country's membership in regional organizations.

Kosovo's stability and good relations with other countries in the region will contribute to the overall peace and security of the Balkans. Currently four Balkan countries (i.e. Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece, and Romania) do not recognize Kosovo. Positive progress in the Pristina-Belgrade dialogue is essential for this to change. The ongoing negotiations aim to facilitate the normalization of relations between the two countries, accelerate the state building process, and pave the way for a comprehensive agreement that would lead to the universal recognition of Kosovo. Since negotiations started in 2011, Belgrade and Pristina have signed around 15 agreements of technical nature, in addition to the agreement for normalization of relations signed in 2013; yet the majority of these agreements have not been implemented. Despite the continuation of negotiations, the relations between Kosovo and Serbia can be described as a fragile peace, which is by no means irreversible. The negotiations are not at the top of the agenda of the EU, which appears to lack the capacity to deal with multiple crises at the same time. The rise of nationalism in both countries brings questions about the future of their relations. In order to avoid future tensions and conflicts, the two countries need to change the way they view and deal with each other. Notwithstanding Serbia's current opposition to Kosovo's independence, the fact that the two countries face similar political, economic, and social problems constitutes a fertile ground for cooperation.

A speaker stated that the dialogue between Serbia and Albania can bring new opportunities to Kosovo. Albania has become a NATO member and helps Kosovo in numerous ways. The rapprochement between Germany and France in the aftermath of the Second World War might be taken as an example. In addition, international community mostly stressed regarding Kosovo, but domestically, changing political environment in Kosovo can lead to new consequences in the near future.

Another participant focused on the relations between Macedonia and Kosovo. When Kosovo declared independence, Macedonia faced a difficult dilemma: it could either choose not to recognize Kosovo and deal with problems that could arise from Albanians in Macedonia, or recognize Kosovo and cause its relations with Serbia to deteriorate. After the recognitions by the U.S. and European governments, the Macedonian government decided on the latter option. Relations between Macedonia and Kosovo have been in good terms since then. The future trajectory of the relations will depend very much on the region's Euro-Atlantic integration and the normalization of Kosovo-Serbia relations.

Discussants also underlined that in order to reassure the international community that it is a viable and sustainable state, political elites in Kosovo needed to spend more effort on domestic reforms. Kosovo needs to do a lot of work internally to improve its democracy, develop its economy, fully commit itself to the implementation of the EU integration agenda, and enhance its capacity to manage the affairs of the state. According to one view, this is inevitable since Kosovo's population is growing younger and new generations will doubtlessly push for the transformation of the state.



## Session VI

After Brexit: The Future of  
the EU's Relations with the  
Balkans and Turkey



## Session VI: After Brexit: The Future of the EU's Relations with the Balkans and Turkey

The final session focused on the possible political and economic effects of Brexit for the EU, the Western Balkans and Turkey. With all the implications surrounding Brexit, officials from both the EU and the UK have declared that they would continue to support reforms in the Western Balkans and Turkey towards EU membership. However, since the UK, which has been one of the leading advocates of the EU membership of the Western Balkans and Turkey, has decided to leave the EU, and many member states are ambivalent towards enlargement, complications and delays in the enlargement process are expectable.

In recent years, the lack of a strong will in the EU about enlargement has already aroused pessimism in the Western Balkans about EU accession. Since the UK's decision to leave the EU there appears to be even less interest in Brussels and the member states in the issue of enlargement. Another concern is that

without the UK as a member, the EU's transformative and diplomatic power may diminish. The continuation of problems in the Balkans, such as the Kosovo issue, the fragile situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the name dispute between Greece and Macedonia will be other obstacles for the EU integration of the Western Balkans.

A participant claimed that the EU membership incentive is still the best motivator for reforms in the Western Balkan countries. At the same time, the image and prestige of the EU has been affected negatively by a number of developments such as the global financial crisis of 2008, the refugee crisis, the rise of populism and the democratic backslide in some countries. If the fragile situation of the EU continues, this may discourage the Western Balkans from endeavoring for EU membership, and, concomitantly, the political leaders from carrying out reforms.

According to another view, even though the UK has declared its support for the EU membership of Western Balkan countries for a long time, it has never undertaken a strong initiative for this cause. Germany has lately taken the lead in, on the one hand, keeping enlargement on the agenda and, on the other, preparing the Western Balkan countries for membership. Germany's influence in the Balkans is likely to increase further after the UK leaves the EU.

A speaker discussed the Berlin Process as a useful mechanism to dispel the pessimism about EU integration and encourage communication and cooperation in the Western Balkans. Since its initiation in 2014, the

process has been a platform for the EU and the Western Balkans to discuss concrete regional projects. Under the title of “Connectivity Agenda,” a number of projects on infrastructure, energy and transport have been approved. The process also involved non-state actors, such as NGOs, academicians, grassroots organizations, and the youth in discussions. Unfortunately, Brexit has made the future of the Berlin Process unclear as well.

However, other participants responded that the Berlin Process was started rather as a substitute for the unforthcoming EU accession of the Western Balkans and one should not expect too much out of it. It was introduced with Germany’s initiative, mainly due to the pressure of Russia’s increasing influence in the region. While its aims are obvious (e.g. to compensate the enlargement fatigue in the Balkans, to keep the region’s orientation towards the EU, to prevent the spread of Euroskepticism, etc.), there is still a lack of clarity regarding its agenda. Lately the Vienna Summit encouraged countries to resolve bilateral disputes, but did not offer any guidelines about how to do so. Besides, neither the EU nor the member countries, except for Germany, have pushed the process hard enough, and regional governments have failed to show a strong commitment and dedication.

According to another speaker, compared to the Western Balkan countries Turkey has faced more obstacles in the EU accession process. Despite the positive developments in the 1990s and early 2000s, some degree of mutual mistrust always existed between Europe and Turkey. The accession negotiations have been proceeding very slowly, and despite the refugee deal in effect, Turkey-EU relations have been quite unstable in recent years. The current deadlock in the visa liberalization process is damaging the confidence of the Turkish government and society in the EU. Brussels’s further slowing down of its enlargement policy can exhaust Turkey’s optimism for membership and increase Euroskepticism in Turkey even further. In this case, Brexit, if successfully concluded, may provide a model for the future Turkey-EU relations.

The outcomes of the Brexit negotiations between Brussels and London are difficult to predict. One scenario is that the UK leaves and the EU starts to restructure itself with the deepening of relations. In this case, Brussels and the member countries may postpone enlargement for years. Another scenario being discussed is a “two-speed Europe,” which means that some countries will be integrated with each other more than others. If this idea comes into being, the member-

ship of the Western Balkan countries could be easier, but they may remain in the “outer circle” of the EU for long. One speaker even opined that after seeing the complications of leaving, the UK would eventually decide to stay in the EU.

Brexit can undermine the EU’s power as an international political and economic actor. If the British example is followed by other countries, it may even make the longstanding project of European integration collapse. The EU now needs to undertake its own internal reforms and maintain the EU identity to prevent other member countries from following the UK’s steps, particularly with the encouragement of far right political movements. Not only in the Balkans, but also in other parts of Europe, alternative narratives have been emerging as the belief in the EU project gets weaker. At this juncture, a speaker commented, Balkan think tanks should more actively discuss new ideas, build scenarios and reflect on policy development with a regional perspective.

A speaker claimed that Brexit will also show if the EU institutions can learn from their mistakes. The EU has made a remarkable success in sustaining and advancing its structure despite many disagreements and crises. Yet, its ability to survive will depend on whether it can learn from its mistakes and correct them. Another speaker added that too much concentration of power in the European Commission and European Central Bank is the main cause of negative views about the union and the Eurozone, and these can be overcome by giving more power to the European Parliament.

Pointing out the crises the EU has been facing in the last decade, discussants agreed on the view that partnership and coordination among countries is a precondition to resolve crises. The EU needs not only to operate as a family of nations, but also to engage in stronger dialogue and partnership with neighboring countries and regions. Both the EU and member countries should assure the countries aspiring to membership that they are prioritized by Europe. The Balkan region deserves a more comprehensive and inclusive approach from the side of the EU, rather than being treated as a buffer zone. The EU should also act more decisively in handling the migration crisis and counteracting violent extremism. Since these problems affect the Balkans and Europe together, the EU should allocate more resources to handling them.

As regards the Balkan countries, a speaker claimed that instead of waiting for an international actor to help them, they should work towards resolving their own problems. Focusing collectively on ur-



gent economic and social issues without politicizing them could ensure effective cooperation and concrete results. The Balkans should also be careful with the predominance of neo-liberal thinking and its economic, social and political outcomes. In post-Socialist countries in the Balkans, the EU has been focusing more on the issue of privatization rather than on judicial reform, pluralism, or institution building, as if the former will automatically resolve the latter. Market fundamentalism, the speaker continued, in-

creases inequality, which in turn leads to populism and polarization, as observed currently throughout the Balkans.

Another participant emphasized the crucial role of civil society in keeping the EU agenda alive. The EU membership path of the Western Balkans primarily depends on domestic reforms and civil society should be in constant dialogue with politicians to ensure that the reforms are carried out.

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BALKAN THINK TANKS CONVENTION 2016, PRISTINA, NOVEMBER 3-4, 2016

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