

The Future of the Balkans Will Depend on Itself

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- Is a conflict in the Balkans likely in a near future?
- What are the implications of global politics on the stability of the Balkans?
- How should the ongoing disputes in the region be resolved?

The decline in the speed of the EU enlargement and in the EU's transforming power has led to the rise of alarmism among international commentators regarding the future of the Balkans. The argument is usually twofold: if the EU integration of the Balkans is delayed further, not only will ominous third actors jump in and bring instability, but also the Balkan people will start grabbing each other's throats. This is obviously a hegemonic discourse based on the immutable assumption that the EU is and will be the only legitimate international actor to be present in the region and ensure peace and prosperity there. It also assumes, by disregarding the historical contexts of the earlier conflicts in the region, that the Balkan societies are inherently violent and immature.

Contrary to this view, I think that a major conflict in the Balkans is unlikely in the foreseeable future, thanks to certain structural factors, a few of which will be mentioned below. These factors have arguably contributed to the increase in political dialogue among the Balkan governments in recent years. Still, for a breakthrough in the Balkans, a number of inter-ethnic

and inter-state issues need to be resolved, and a lasting solution of these problems is dependent on the will and determination of the regional actors.

I find a major conflict unlikely because, first, any sort of adventurism is a big risk for any actor in the Balkans. Undermining regional stability will surely do more harm than good. If an armed conflict breaks out, it is bound to result in destruction and international intervention, as happened in the wars after the break-up of Yugoslavia. And we should note that these wars occurred within the vacuum of the transforming international system. In 2001, when the post-Cold War security priorities and arrangements of the Euro-Atlantic bloc had largely consolidated, a similar conflict was not permitted in Macedonia. Today, at a time when the EU and the USA are already vigilant about security (largely owing to their concerns about Russian revisionism), it is not difficult to predict that they will intervene in the slightest tension in the Balkans. In fact, the active role played by the West in resolving the political tensions in Macedonia between 2015 and 2017 was an instance of a mild intervention.

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Second, Balkan politics is pragmatic. It is true that nationalist and populist actors can feed on tensions and maintain a rigid posture about certain “sensitive issues”. However, any nationalist/populist discourse or action by these actors is not necessarily an indicator of a potential conflict, as often misinterpreted by the Western observers and commentators. In the Balkans, politicians can every now and then resort to impulsive, inflammatory, even provocative, language and acts, but what usually prevails at the end of the day is pragmatism. This means that there is always room for a mutually acceptable solution. In Bosnia Herzegovina and Macedonia, despite the predominance of nationalist parties with seriously diverging political positions, power-sharing arrangements have been followed for a considerable period of time. Recently, a nationalist government was able to come to power in Kosovo with the support of Serb lawmakers close to Belgrade. Current relations among the Balkan governments are also marked by pragmatism. While disagreements among countries sometimes lead to tensions, governments are careful to keep these tensions within controllable limits.

Third, common socio-economic and security risks, such as slow development, youth unemployment, external migration, and organized crime, are urging states to cooperate. Due to the region-wide character of these pressing and complicated problems, interests cannot be defined narrowly through the lenses of ethnicity or nation-states. While international or regional powers may resort to unilateralism, smaller states like those in the Western Balkan are unable to provide their security and development solely on their own. Regional development is a must for the Balkans; there is no other way to become more secure and prosperous.

Accordingly, the region appears to gradually recognize the fact that conflict is not a viable option. Regional and international conditions during and in the immediate aftermath of the breakup of Yugoslavia created a permissive environment for conflict, making some political actors believe that substantial results

could be obtained through the use of force. Today it is doubtful that even the most chauvinistic actors in the Balkans genuinely think so. The most pressing problems in the Balkans are of economic, not political or ethnic, character, and the ubiquity of these problems throughout the region makes the societies increasingly aware that they can only be resolved with a regional approach. Even though this situation does not necessarily strengthen the idea of regional integration, it compels mutual understanding and cooperation.

It is therefore not surprising to see that political engagements among the Balkan countries are strengthening. Both the friendship agreement between Macedonia and Bulgaria and the name settlement between the Macedonian and Greek governments were remarkable developments. Despite all complications that could arise, the recent exchange of opinions between Belgrade and Pristina regarding the possibility of a land swap should also be regarded as an attempt for political dialogue. After all, it is much healthier for the Balkans that the ideas for settlement of problems come from within rather than being imposed from outside. It is no harm when parties of a dispute bring forward novel, even if unusual, ideas for discussion. If these ideas find popular support from both sides they will be implemented; if not, another solution will be sought. The implementation of the Prespa Agreement should also be considered within this frame.

What is crucial here is that ideas for the resolution of problems should be reached through public deliberation. Before they take a critical step for the settlement of a deep-rooted dispute, political leaders should make sure that this is strongly and genuinely supported by a wide spectrum of their citizens (i.e., not solely by their voters). This is important not only in deciding on the terms of the settlement, but also for ensuring its legitimacy. It is often a fact that political leaders do not take into account alternative views or proposals, and even keep the opposition distant from an ongoing settlement process. This can happen due to various reasons, such as wanting to take all the credit for any settlement themselves. With this thinking,

they may not inform the public and the opposition before taking an important step. However, hasty decisions can bring further complications in the future. In making agreements with their counterparts, leaders should avoid creating new grievances, which can lead to further disputes and problems. The lack of an agreement can sometimes be less harmful than an unsatisfactory makeshift one.

Given the longstanding peace and higher socio-economic development in the West, it is understandable that the biggest motivation for the settlement of disputes in the Western Balkans is the Euro-Atlantic integration. Even so, the governments should focus on the long-term results of any critical decisions they make. After all, EU membership is not an end in itself; it is rather a means to attain better life standards, order, and prosperity. Governments should focus on the latter, rather than the former. They should carry out reforms not for the sake of EU membership, but to improve the life standards of their citizens, to attract foreign investments to their countries, and to provide better education and employment opportunities to their youth. Again, the settlement of inter-ethnic and inter-state problems should be focusing on bringing peace and security to the Balkan people, rather than simply entering the Euro-Atlantic bloc.

However well-intentioned they are, efforts by the international community to accelerate solutions can be counterproductive. Because of nationalist sensitivities, people can react negatively to the involvement of external actors, which can in turn complicate the settlement. This is exactly what has happened during the current settlement process of the Macedonian name dispute. In order to create pressure on politicians and people in both countries, authorities in NATO and the EU characterized this process as “the last chance”. This, however, has created a (mis-)perception among many Macedonian and Greek citizens that the agreement was not a bilaterally-decided but an externally-influenced one. Instead of rushing the agreement, it would have been much healthier to conduct the process in a more cold-blooded manner, by informing the

two societies of its contents and allowing some time for public discussion. Given the favorable political environment in both countries, as well as the potential benefits of settlement for both sides, adopting this course could have produced a wider consensus, even if with some delay. The primary task of the international community in such a deep-rooted bilateral dispute should be facilitating the negotiations, not hastening them. After all, there is always the risk of making mistakes in a hasty settlement. In fact, the continuation of the status quo may even be better than a solution, which is not widely endorsed by both societies.

The world today is very different from that in the 1990s and early 2000s. Realpolitik is gaining strength while notions like liberalism, globalism and integration are not as dominant as in the early 2000s. Nation-states are still important, and ensuring their wellbeing and security is primarily their own responsibility. Unlike the concerns of many liberals, however, this will not necessarily bring more conflictual relations among states. It is just a system where every state in the world is responsible for its wellbeing. This is to say, no one in the Western Balkans should continue to expect the same level of dedication from the USA and the EU, in sponsoring and transforming the former Socialist countries, as they did in the aftermath of the Cold War. Recent experiences of some EU countries have also shown that the EU membership is far from being a magic prescription for political and economic stability. So, if the Balkan countries want a better future, achieving this is in their own hands.

Prosperity and stability in their region should be the main goal of the Balkan countries themselves. In today’s turbulent and uncertain international context, the Balkan states cannot pass this responsibility onto international actors. The view that all the region’s problems will be solved through the EU’s guidance is too simplistic and obsolete. As “the end of history” notion of the immediate aftermath of the Cold War has turned out to be an illusion and the future of the EU is uncertain, such optimism can lead to big disappointments. If the Balkan societies want to achieve a lasting

peace and stability, they must first acknowledge their common interests and demonstrate that they can resolve their differences on their own. The parameters in the resolution of regional problems should be based on the preferences of regional actors rather than external ones. Meanwhile, the regional actors should prioritize the welfare of the region as a whole and be flexible to accommodate alternative ideas and proposals coming from others. With a strong goodwill and broad par-

ticipation, there is no reason why the Balkan people should not find solutions to their problems.

Complicated issues are not easy to resolve, but the will to resolve them is crucial. If the Balkan people are unable to settle their problems, external involvement in the region is inevitable. As long as external involvement in the Balkans continues to exist, it will never be able to escape being a venue of international competition.



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