Policy Brief: Geopolitics of the External Powers in the Western Balkans

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Even though the Western Balkans region has for two decades experienced a period of peace, it still has been exposed to insecurity, which is sometimes instigated by external influencers. On the one hand, the region is facing local challenges due to lack of rule of law, high levels of corruption, social unrest, slow economic progress, high number of returnees (110) and foreign fighters (1000), and is one of the migration routes. These contribute to ineffective democracies or the creation of illiberal democracies that are present in the region. On the other hand, Eastern actors are seeking to enlarge their geopolitical standing in the Western Balkan, which is viewed as a gateway to Europe, including NATO and the European Union. The actors that comprise the influencers from the East are Russia, Turkey, China, Iran and the Gulf States: the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Kuwait, all led by an authoritarian leader typically pursuing an agenda which will either strengthen economic ties and/or legitimize their leadership styles and power in the region. Thus, the combination of the domestic challenges alongside with the presence of the external influencers indicate long term threats for the region as well as for the wider Europe.

Therefore, the role of the Eastern actors in the Western Balkans region is important to be understood. Consequently, the Eastern actors focus on influencing the political elites and the societal fabric of the Western Balkans countries through various foreign policy tools such as economic, political, religious, cultural and security

mechanisms.[1] The Eastern actors have holistically been using hybrid threats to win their geopolitical influence through winning the hearts and minds of the local population. For example, Russia employs disinformation warfare and covert operations, Gulf countries (the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates) employ disinformation warfare to re-engineer the societal identity, spreading violent extremism, whilst China may debt-trap some Western Balkans countries in the long term. Particularly, it is very important to treat Chinese investment in the Montenegrin's port of Bar with caution as it may raise long term military risks to Europe due to its potential dual usage of Chinese commercial and military activity. Moreover, the arms trade between the Western Balkans countries and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) poses further challenges as the WB countries may be violating EU practices on arms trade when trading with the KSA as they may have prolonged the duration of warfare in Syria. Turkey is also attempting to re-engineering the identity of the regional populace by promoting political Islam, historical revisionism, while using the local security apparatuses to advance their national and geopolitical interests.

The impact on the region has been vast, resulting in polarization of the society. This has risen distrust among communities and hate speech rhetoric across the region, mirroring the early 90's developments before. There is rising far-right violent extremism identified in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia, as well as the poignant consequences from religious violent extremism. In fact, Kosovo accepted 110 returnees without a comprehensive approach on how to deal with them, whereas the number of homegrown jihadists in the region due to the government's lack of capacity to identify suspects is unknown. Whilst the findings of our report presents how schisms in the societal fabric have grown, our report also finds that the political elites may also be less willing to engage with the West since the promotion of the rule of law may change the status quo, hence be subject to removal from power. Moreover the long term challenges; the lack of personal ties between the Western elites and the WB elites; the lack of coherent strategy (united Europe or united West); the 'failed' post conflict reconstruction due to the prioritization of stability over democracy; and the lack of a realistic EU enlargement agenda pose further challenges for the construction of peace and stability in the region, all contribute to the instability of the region.

Therefore, it is paramount to respond fast as the Eastern actors are becoming attractive to cooperate to the local elites of the Western Balkans due to the simplicity to collaborate and securing their grip on power. This, in turn, may hinder the peace and state building process and indicate that the seeds of conflict are present

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[1] Rrustemi, Arlinda, Rob de Wijk, Connor Dunlop, Jovana Perovaska, and Lirije Palushi. "Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans." *Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans*. HCSS, September 30, 2019. https://hcss.nl/sites/default/files/files/reports/Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans_0.pdf, 153-163.

throughout the region which could derail the region's stability and have a spill over effect in Europe, resulting in higher levels of migration and potentially exporting the insecurity to the rest of Europe. Therefore, it is crucial to promote democracy in order to return legitimacy to the international community, setting out a coherent accession plan to the EU and NATO, and to minimize local governments endorsing external influences. Providing a realistic EU enlargement agenda to the local government would also help winning the hearts and minds of the local population. It is crucial to open the membership negotiations for North Macedonia and Albania, award Bosnia and Herzegovina a candidate status, and provide visa liberalization for Kosovo. This, in the eyes of the local population, would signal that Europe is dealing justly with them and, in the long run, would not only guarantee security and peace in the region but also for Europe. As history shows, enlargement of Europe to the East, for example the Baltic states, as well as in Romania and Bulgaria, have secured a peace and it is therefore crucial to promote it in order to prevent another conflict.

The specific policy recommendations have been centred around the aspects of law, security, economics and society. In regard to law, the most pressing recommendations focus on strengthening the judiciary and enhancing the rule of law. Concerning economic measures, policy recommendations are focused on providing further economic funds, along with public and private investment within rural areas. In terms of security recommendations, precedence is placed on harmonizing security policy of the Western Balkan countries and the EU's defence and foreign policy (especially on arms exports), and appointment of locally educated imams over foreign educated imams to maintain local customs and beliefs, thereby reducing exposure to foreign influence. Lastly, on a societal level, policy recommendations have been directed towards promoting public awareness regarding the attractability of the EU and un-attractability of the Eastern actors. This in turn would enhance civic participation and re-establish trust in democracy. More concretely, it is essential to build resilience against the distribution of fake-news and violent extremism through journalism/critical academic research in civil society. In addition, increasing media presence, while reporting on court cases of the violent extremists. The latter would assist individual responsibility, hopefully making individuals more reluctant about participating in violence. Lastly, increasing cultural exchanges and language courses will engage the youth in Europe.