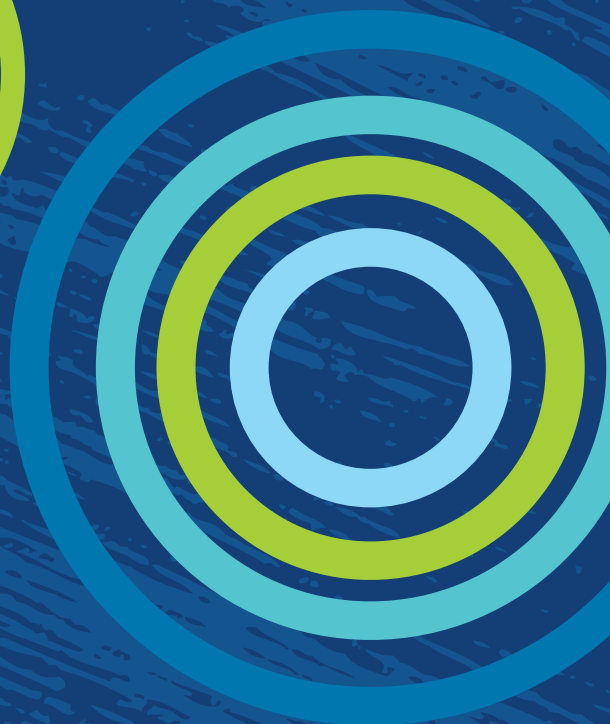




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Policy Forum
DELIVERING SECURITY
IN THE WESTERN BALKANS
MARCH 2017



**Tirana
Initiative**

INPUT

The European continent is experiencing troubled times in terms of security, stability and economic growth. The rise of populism and political unrest in different countries has posed into question the liberal democracies and risks to destabilize the existing international order. The potential erosion of the geopolitical and security milieu raises many concerns in the Western Balkan countries. The region has been frequently perceived as divided into two natural spheres of influence, among NATO and Russia. Since these two international powers are at odds, the standing in the middle of the dichotomy has spurred to the region continuous instability and stress.

The recent developments in EU and US certainly seem to be adversely contributing to the overall discourse. On the one hand, the EU is losing a member country and is somehow enfeebled by its internal disputes. On the other, the declarations of the newly established US president on the declining role of NATO have raised concerns about the future European security and alliance unity. If the US will move towards a new isolationist policy, the immediate effects will be first and foremost felt in the transatlantic security order.

Since the annexation of Crimea and outbreak of conflict in Ukraine, Russia has flirted in several occasions with Serbia, but not only. Moreover, Russia seems triggered to further expand its influence in the east and to test the readiness and credibility of the alliance. A related consequence of its wider strategy is reflected in the jeopardized alignment of the Balkan countries with the EU restrictive measures against Moscow. This policy division between the Balkan countries brings then into question the issue of improving the sense of regional cohesion and undermines further prospects of Euro-Atlantic integration.

In presence of a security vacuum, the Western Balkans risk becoming more vulnerable to infiltrations, especially for an assertive Russia that aims to expand and exploit the region's prospects. In front of this complex context, this policy forum will seek to address the following key uncertainties and provide for independent insights on how to better deal with these 'fluid security' stances:

- What does the future hold for NATO-Russia relations?
- To what extent do the Western Balkans remain a potential playground of these international actors?

The second policy forum focused on the present geo-political rivalry between NATO and Russia in the Western Balkans. NATO member states and Russia have not managed to become constructive partners and this is hardly probable to become true in the near future. The perception factor plays a key role in this regard, as some countries see NATO as a political-military organization that provides for the security of the member states; whereas, Russia considers it an alliance that threatens its interests and security. Currently, the prevailing friction is strictly linked to the enlargement policy of NATO in the region. In this framework, the discussion panel focused on the following key issues:

NATO-Russia relations

There are many aspects of NATO-Russia relations that affect regional areas in Europe. The existing instability and uncertainty in the Western Balkans has provided a fertile ground for third actors' interference. Per se Russia does not have any long-term vision for its involvement in the region. It understands its relative power towards EU and NATO; therefore, it is using this asymmetric competition in methods, such as opportunism and acting as a spoiler in the Balkans, in order to create a 'non-functional neutrality' in the region. Russia has made use of the existing historical, cultural, political, and military ties with certain countries in view of its agenda of fostering instability.

To achieve its goal, Russia would have to weaken, destabilize and dismantle EU and American influence in the region and to derail Euro-Atlantic integration. As the opportunities for 'grand bargaining' are decreasing, Russia will try to influence single events in the Western Balkans, so as to keep specific states far from joining NATO. To a certain extent, it has exploited the prevalent weaknesses and lack of action of EU and NATO. Hence, the latter should ensure for a greater consistency in the long run to push the Balkans to be more inclined towards the West.

The future of Western Balkans

Euro-Atlantic integration process has been the main driver of state-building and regional cooperation since the '90s. EU membership remains the only game in town for the Western Balkans and nothing can be taken for granted. In this context, the so-called Berlin process, considered as complementary to the enlargement process, is currently under risk and there are not available alternatives in case it fails. The threats are both internal – as regional cooperation is deteriorating – and external – due to the populist upsurges in some EU countries and the forthcoming elections in France, Germany, etc. The Western Balkans spectrum of security challenges exceeds the narrow military perception, moving from weak governance and corruption to high unemployment, lack of opportunities and people leaving their countries. Despite the enlargement fatigue and the multiple crises that the EU is facing, the leaders in region should continue with the implementation of their reform agendas and this demonstrates responsibility in governing.

The adoption of a long-term vision remains a regional cooperation imperative, so as to go beyond the fluctuation of political actors' initiatives within the EU or other international actors. At the same time, progress should be made in improving regional relations, building trust between the people, enhancing communication and working on the establishment of a common labour market for the Western Balkans.

DISCUSSION PANEL

VALBONA ZENELI a professor of national security studies since 2011, and director of the Black Sea Eurasia Program at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies. Previously she served as deputy director for the Central and Southeast Europe program. Dr. Zeneli's academic credentials include a PhD in international political economy from the University of Studies of Bari, Italy, a postgraduate studies degree on International Marketing from Georgetown University, Washington D.C. and a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration from the University of Bologna, Italy. Her research interests extend to various issues of European and Transatlantic security, economic security, international trade and development; good governance and anticorruption. She has published numerous papers and book chapters and is a frequent contributor to many international leading magazines. A native of Albania, she speaks English, Italian, and German.

MARKO SAVKOVIC works as Program Director at the Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence (BFPE). He is in charge of the program of the Belgrade Security Forum, while he was directing the Regional Academy for Democracy from 2013-2015. Previously, Dr. Savkovic worked for seven years as a researcher in the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP), specializing in the fields of defense reform, civil-military relations and Euro-Atlantic integration. While working in BCSP, he co-authored the first "Dictionary of European Security" published in BHS languages, followed by a pioneering study in Serbia's and Western Balkans' civilian capacities for peace operations. Dr. Savkovic holds a PhD from the Belgrade Faculty of Political Science, with thesis written on privatization of peace-building efforts worldwide. From 2011 to 2014, he was a guest lecturer at the Centre for Security Cooperation – RACVIAC. He is a member of the working group dedicated to chapter 31 of Serbia's European integration process, within the National Convent on the EU. He is an alumnus of the Belgrade Open School and Die Zeit foundation's Bucerius Summer School on Global Governance.

REDION QIRJAZI is currently working as a Research Fellow at the Institute for Democracy and Mediation, in Tirana. Previously, he had been working for over 7 years as an officer in the Albanian Army. He holds a Bachelor of Science degree in International Relations and a Minor degree in Terrorism Studies from the United States Military Academy (U.S.A.). In 2016, Qirjazi was awarded the U.K. government's Chevening Scholarship and received a Master's degree in Applied Security and Strategy at the University of Exeter. While working as a Course Director for the Military Academy, he helped build Albania's first officer commissioning course consistent with contemporary NATO standards. Previously, he served a combat tour in Afghanistan as an Operational Mentor and Cultural & Religious Officer where he oversaw the implementation of various security and development projects. Quite often, besides his command responsibilities, Qirjazi acted as a cultural negotiator on behalf of NATO teams. Qirjazi enjoys working on issues related to national security, defense, terrorism, conflict resolution and development at both the strategic and operational level. Mobility." Her research interests include areas such as migration, labor mobility, labor and migration politics, trade union relationships with migrants, gender studies, human and political geography, Western Balkans, Southern Europe.



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