

STRATEGIC BALKANS

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Date: 30 June 2017

Title: Radicalisation of Young Adults in the Balkan States: Counter-Measures, Healthcare Provision, and Community Involvement.

Key words: Radicalisation, Balkans, terrorism, religious extremism, youths

Source: Journal for Deradicalization

Link: <http://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/102/85>

Summary

The spread of terrorism and religious extremism is becoming a noticeable problem affecting the young adults in the Western Balkans. Radical organisations flourish when the Government fail to supply and provide for their citizens, as they appear to be a valid alternative, hence assuming the vacant role of 'provider'. This way they are able to form a paternalistic connection with young and impressionable adults. Approaches to deradicalization should consider "the importance of building communities through improved links between state-security, health, education and social care." Indeed, a wider utilisation of healthcare, especially in developing countries where it is inconsistent and underfunded, could be a strategy in the prevention of radicalisation. Applying these policies in the Western Balkans could be extremely difficult as the legitimacy and ownership of the State is so contested.

Date: 03 July 2017

Title: Belgrade, Pristina to start new phase of dialogue after meeting with Mogherini

Source: Sputnik News

Key words: Serbia, Kosovo, EU External Action Service, reconciliation, normalization

Link: <https://sputniknews.com/politics/201707031055181601-belgrade-pristina-talks-mogherini/>

Summary

After an informal meeting with EU Commission Vice-President and High Representative for foreign affair Federica Mogherini, Serbia and Kosovo agreed to start working on a new phase of reconciliation talks. In 2013 the two countries signed the Brussels Agreement on normalizing relations, and a subsequent proposal for forming the Community of Serb Municipalities, a self-governing association in the regions of Kosovo that have a Serb majority. Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić told Sputnik News that he is ready to hold direct talks with President Hashim Thaçi. The EU External Action Service stated that the two countries "agreed to work on starting a new phase of the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina for normalization of relations and reconciliation, and they decided that the respective teams will start working on preparations".

Date: 07 July 2017

Title: How to fix the Western Balkans

Source: Foreign Affairs

Key words: Balkans, European Union, Russia, Slavic Orthodox population, external influence

Link: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/southeastern-europe/2017-07-07/how-fix-western-balkans>

Summary

As countries in the Western Balkans are dealing with corruption and economic stagnation, the region has become of geopolitical importance again, especially because local leaders are reembracing ethnic nationalism as an instrument to take attention away from the mentioned problems. The EU's crisis – the 2008 economic crisis, the immigration challenge, and the rise of populist nationalism – have, without a doubt, slowed the integration process for the Balkan states. Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia and Albania are formal candidates for EU membership, however government officials are growing sceptical that their countries will join the Union anytime soon. Russia's effort to influence in the region has been growing too, through economic aid, diplomatic support and a targeted communication aimed at turning public and elite opinion against EU integration. Moscow's main aim is to reinforce the idea that the Slavic Orthodox population of the Balkans should identify with the "Russian world".

Date: 10 July 2017

Title: Nikola Dimitrov: "Geopolitics return to the Balkans"

Source: Die Presse

Key words: Macedonia, NATO, European Union, Balkans, enlargement

Link: <http://diepresse.com/home/ausland/aussenpolitik/5249985/Nikola-Dimitrov-Die-Geopolitik-kehrt-auf-den-Balkan-zurueck?from=suche.intern.portal>

Summary

Nikola Dimitrov, Macedonia's foreign minister, talks about the dispute with Greece over his country's name, leaving an opening to the usage of the FYROM name in order to join NATO, mentioning however how the country will need to hold a referendum in order to take this type of decision. Questioned over the role of the EU in the region, he insists that the Union needs to go ahead with the enlargement even though the Balkan states are suffering from corruption, decline in democracy and repression in freedom of the media, which has brought to a certain scepticism over the accession. He continues by stating that geopolitics has returned to the Balkans, mentioning how as soon as problems arise in the region, "people start talking about borders again". Concerning former Prime Minister Gruevski, Dimitrov is very frank replying that crimes can't go unpunished and that it is the job of the judges to decide.

Date: 13 July 2017

Title: The EU must show the Balkans they still have a chance of joining

Source: The Economist

Key words: Western Balkans, European Union, enlargement, commitment, trafficking

Link: <https://www.economist.com/news/europe/21725020-europes-inner-courtyard-drifting-towards-crime-and-authoritarianism-eu-must-show>

Summary

Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia and Montenegro are still trying to join the EU despite Jean-Claude Juncker statement that there would be no enlargement during his five-year term. The mentioned countries are facing a corrupt elite which is not eager to allow media freedom, the strengthening of the rule of law and the liberalisation of their economies, as well as their countries lack of strong bureaucracies that could drive the change. Vessela Tcherneva (European Council on Foreign Relation) claims that “they don’t believe it anymore when we lie to them about accession, and we don’t believe them when they lie to us that they will commit to EU rules”. It seems that the EU has given up on bringing political change to the region, focusing its attention in trade and investment. However, human and drugs-trafficking routes that lead to the EU have already been established in the region, and weapons that were used in the 2015 Paris attacks came from the wars of the 1990’s.

Date: 13 July 2017

Title: If the shadow of Moscow returns to stretch

Source: Il Sole 24 Ore

Key words: Western Balkans, European Union, Russia, long-term strategy, credibility

Link: <http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/mondo/2017-07-13/se-l-ombra-mosca-torna-ad-allungarsi-063820.shtml?uuid=AEfeHbwB&fromSearch>

Summary

A generation has passed since the dismantling of Tito’s Yugoslavia, but the effects of the wars and the scars inflicted on the population have not been healed and the region represents, periodically, a security threat to Europe. Jihadist cells were born from the conflict between Serbs and Kosovars, a quarter of ISIS militants come from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and Kosovo. Additionally Saudis and Turkish financing has helped an Islamic rebirth in the region. It seems that the European project is losing its attraction power, leaving space for Russia’s influence in countries such as Serbia. Moscow recognizes the region as a strategic asset to be recovered, and weapons furniture to Belgrade with practical no economical compensation, as well as the free trade agreement between the two countries, its proof of that. The region is under pressure and Europe cannot dilapidate the accumulated capital of credibility that it has built through economic and military interventions.

Date: 13 July 2017

Title: Democracy in the Balkans is under siege, and the West is looking away

Source: Washington Post

Key words: Western Balkans, European Union, populism, rhetoric, democracy

Link: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2017/07/13/democracy-in-the-balkans-is-under-siege-and-the-west-is-looking-away/?utm_term=.f11ccd87aa06

Summary

As the European Union has been facing its own crises, it has delayed on the expansion to the Balkans, showing a lack of strategic decisions in the long term. It can't be forgotten that the Western Balkans are the most direct link between Europe and the Middle East, and its importance has been reminded in the recent European refugee crisis. The region is seeing the re-emergence of autocrats and populist rhetoric. Macedonia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina have experienced massive street demonstrations, whilst there are calls for the creation of a Greater Albania. Kosovo, apart from supplying the largest number of fighters per capita to conflicts in the Middle East, is experiencing a presidential election between Ramush Haradinaj, who was controversially acquitted by the ICTY, and Albin Kurti, "one of the most radical populist politicians in all the Balkans". Democracy is under siege in the Balkans and the EU needs to act fast.

Date: 13 July 2017

Title: From war to commerce, the dream of the Balkans

Source: La Stampa

Key words: European Union, Balkans, Trieste Summit, Italy, infrastructures, connections

Link: <http://www.lastampa.it/2017/07/13/esteri/dalla-guerra-al-commercio-il-sogno-dei-balcanti-bqeCsO0kiFDbWqrgsB9LMP/pagina.html>

Summary

After twelve years of complicated negotiations, the Balkan countries (with the exception of Bosnia and Herzegovina) have signed the Transport Community Treaty; a first step forward towards the creation of a single Balkan market. The Trieste Summit gave the EU an important opportunity to "control" the Balkans, through the creation of infrastructure and internal connectivity, despite the economical investments of Russia, Turkey and Saudi Arabia in the region. In this regard, 194 million euros of funding will be settled by the Community for infrastructure and connectivity, generating investments for 500 million euros and 80 thousand jobs by 2025. Italy, which is the second country for commercial relations with the Balkans, is reaching an interchange of 7,5 billions, 250 enterprises are present, representing 5,5 billion of investment in the region. Italian foreign ministry Angelino Alfano stated that "where there is a transit of goods soldiers do not pass, where there is economic integration there are no wars".

Date: 19 July 2017

Title: Russian spies face trial over ‘coup plot’ in Montenegro

Source: The Times

Key words: Montenegro, Russia, NATO, espionage, trial

Link: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/russian-spies-face-trial-over-coup-plot-in-montenegro-eduard-shishmakov-vladimir-popov-milo-djukanovic-kremlin-ttjs70n38>

Summary

Eduard Shishmakov and Vladimir Popov, officers of the Russian Military Intelligence Service, will face trial *in absentia* in Montenegro accused of being behind a network of Serbians who planned to assassinate the Montenegrin prime minister last October, thus trying to prevent Montenegro from joining NATO. This will be the “first time that evidence of Russia allegedly seeking to disrupt electoral processes in Europe will be heard in open court”. As “Russian state bodies” seem to be involved in the coup attempt, the news has attracted the interest of NATO allies. There are twelve others accused of the conspiracy, including two members of the New Serb Democracy. Andrija Mandić, one of the two accused from the NSD, denies criminal wrongdoing and states that the coup plot was performed to discredit his party.

Date: 20 July 2017

Title: The Balkans and the European Union: what does remain after the Trieste Summit?

Key words: Western Balkans, European Union, governance, civil society, good practices

Source: Le Courrier des Balkans – Le portail francophone des Balkans

Link: <https://www.courrierdesbalkans.fr/Les-Balkans-et-l-UE-que-reste-t-il-du-Sommet-de-Trieste>

Summary

The Trieste Summit, on July 12th, has been the fourth Summit organised since 2014 as part of the “Berlin Process”. This is a German initiative addressed to the Western Balkans in order to revitalize the accession process of the region to the European Union through confrontation and collaboration. The Berlin Process is an intergovernmental co-operation initiative which, although the European Union is not directly involved, except in the measure of some of its Member States, remains part of its “institutional architecture”. Reading the comments in the newspapers, disappointment has prevailed after the Summit. However, it demonstrated that the Western Balkans remain a test ground for “new governance” experiments. Indeed, in Trieste, civil society has been actively engaged through learning mechanisms which make possible for local actors to share and learn, through meetings and workshops, through good practices to be used in the local context.

Date: 25 July 2017

Title: Croatia, Russia, and the Balkan Great Game

Source: Foreign Affairs

Key words: Croatia, Russia, Balkans, regional expansion, Western interests

Link: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/croatia/2017-07-25/croatia-russia-and-balkan-great-game>

Summary

Croatia's stability has great implications for the Western countries as it can shift the balance both in the EU and in the Balkans, where economic problems, corruption and nationalism are on the rise. Most important, Croatia stands as one of the strongest allies against Russian renewed expansion in the region. Russia is using a *divide et impera* strategy, fomenting ethnic violence, spreading propaganda, provoking discord and utilising its companies to pressure local governments in a more favourable attitude towards Moscow. The Adriatic Trilateral initiative, a regional association aimed at improving cooperation between Croatia, Albania and Montenegro, is also serving as a mean to prevent Russia's influence in the region. Thus, in order to prevent the risk of the majority of central European countries to succumb to Russian business proposals and adopted a pro-Russian foreign policy, it becomes vital for Western interests to maintain stability and moderates in power in Croatia.

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