



## BALKAN PERSPECTIVES 2020 *The Fight for a Timely Inclusion*

The High-Level Conference was organised by the **NATO Defense College Foundation**, in co-operation with the **NATO Public Diplomacy Division**, the **Balkan Trust for Democracy**, the **European Commission** and the **NATO Defense College**. It was held last **Monday, 28<sup>th</sup> of September 2020**, at the [Centro Congressi Roma Eventi - Piazza di Spagna, Via Alibert, 5/a, Rome](#), in full compliance with the national and regional security measures related to COVID-19 and public events.

Marking the Foundation's annual initiative dedicated to the Western Balkans, the event gathered 18 highly qualified panellists and more than 200 participants (both in-person and virtual) in order to address and discuss the main trends unfolding in the area. From EU-NATO integration and external actors' influences to demographic and economic challenges, a lively debate delivered key insights on the Balkans' security framework and political future. Some extracts follow below.

**Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo** - *President, NATO Defense College Foundation, Rome*

"This is an event that we keep every year since 2014, when we decided that this part of Europe deserves a special attention and a better visibility. [...] We have now decided that "The Fight for a Timely Inclusion" is an appropriate title. In other words, there is no doubt that this part of Europe should join the European and Euro-Atlantic institutions. In our eyes this a natural destiny. [...] This is a region where NATO and the European Union have worked for years in close cooperation for the benefit of all and it is a proof that practical cooperation between two organisations having a similar membership with the most significant democracies can be of real benefit and a multiplier."

**Maciej Popowski** - *Acting Director-General, Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, European Commission, European Union, Brussels*

"Security in the Balkans remains a priority for the European Union. Over time, we have focused on organised crime, migration and corruption. But COVID-19 brought new security challenges, like disinformation and hybrid threats. [...] We are supporting long-term economic recovery of the Western Balkans and the Commission will include an investment plan for the region. [...] Most importantly, in 2020 we have started to reinvigorate the membership process in the Balkans with a new enlargement methodology and aim: to make enlargement more credible, dynamic and predictable."

**Valerie Hopkins** - *South-East Europe Correspondent, Financial Times, Budapest*

"It is quite interesting to view the Serbian relationship with China in relation to the deal that we have just seen struck signed in Washington and to the country's potential EU membership. [...] We should acknowledge that, in March 2020, 40% of Serbians believed that China was the biggest donor, while fewer than 20% thought it was the EU. Besides, this is a trend that we see greatly increasing: 14 out of the 18 new technology projects in the region that China invested in were in Serbia [...]. Whether the agreement signed in Washington will reverse and change that really remains to be seen, along with the influence that the upcoming US elections will have on that. Moreover, at this time Serbia has the strongest relationship with NATO that it can have, but as it continues to buy more weapons and technology from China, one wonders at which point it will become challenging."

**Damon Wilson** - *Executive Vice President, Atlantic Council, Washington DC*

"The economic future of the Western Balkans is in an integrated economic market place linked in the European supply chain, as part of a democratic trading regime. But it also has to come with historic reconciliation and some deeper political ties, and that is through the process of EU enlargement, as well as through the process of building the partnerships with the NATO Alliance. As per the bigger picture, I think that, ultimately, [...] there is a much larger set of issues at stake today, and we need the free world, and the Balkans is part of this free world, to be aligned with how we are actually going to deal with these greater global challenges. For this reason, there is an urgency to accelerate the processes of normalisation, integration, economic development and EU accession talks."

**Michele Risi** - *Commander, Kosovo Force (KFOR), NATO, Pristina*

“Over the years, international partners - UN, OSCE and EU - have reduced their presence and competencies relinquishing many to the institutions in Kosovo. KFOR, while also duly registering a contraction of its military force - at current around 3,500 soldiers from 26 countries including 18 members of NATO - has kept intact its role as the only security force unanimously recognised. This can be explained by the fact that now we are complemented by the Kosovo Police and the Kosovo Security Forces in assuring security and freedom of movement. Today KFOR has the mission of maintaining the security of Kosovo as 3<sup>rd</sup> responder in order to facilitate the normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo. [...] We are doing our best to take steps forward and prevent Kosovo from becoming a frozen conflict, but the risk - needless to deny it- exists.”

**Piero Fassino** - *President, Foreign Affairs Committee, Chamber of Deputies, Rome*

“Italy must consider the entire Balkans, and the Western Balkans especially, as a priority area of strategic interest to be fostered both through bilateral relations and with a perspective towards their integration into the international and multinational organisations of which Italy is a member. However, this requires Italy to make a qualitative leap in terms of structuring its presence, with a constant and thorough political and diplomatic effort. [...] We are the first- or second-largest partners of the countries in the region and we have been and are contributing with our military to the stability and peace in the region. [We] must also strengthen the instruments that support its economic projection [and] aim for greater integration between Italy’s and the Western Balkans’ respective markets. [...] There will not be full security in Europe until we achieve full integration of the Balkans.”

Full recording of the event available on the NDCF [YouTube channel](#).

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