



NATO Foundation  
*Defense College*

# BALKAN PERSPECTIVES 2020

THE FIGHT FOR A TIMELY INCLUSION



NDCF  
NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE FOUNDATION

The NDCF is a unique think-tank: international by design and based in Rome, due to its association with the NATO Defense College. Its added value lies in the objectives stated by its charter and in its international network.

The charter specifies that the NDCF works with the Member States of the Atlantic Alliance, its partners and the countries that have some form of co-operation with NATO. Through the Foundation the involvement of USA and Canada is more fluid than in other settings.

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**BALKAN PERSPECTIVES 2020**

**The Fight for a Timely Inclusion**

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THE FIGHT FOR A TIMELY INCLUSION

*Conference organised by*  
THE NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE FOUNDATION

*in co-operation with*  
THE NATO PUBLIC DIPLOMACY DIVISION,  
THE BALKAN TRUST FOR DEMOCRACY,  
THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE

*With the support of the European Commission*  
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*Special thanks to*  
PHILIP MORRIS INTERNATIONAL



Detail of three women dressed in traditional Serbian clothing dancing a traditional ballet.







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ALESSANDRO MINUTO-RIZZO  
*President, NATO Defense College Foundation, Rome*

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## WELCOME REMARKS

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, buongiorno a tutti. Welcome to this conference dedicated to the Balkan region. 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.

After so many repetitions it is not easy to find the right title that we are changing every year according to the prevailing conditions. We used “Balkans at a cross-roads” and others. We have now decided that “The fight for a timely inclusion” is an appropriate title.

In other words, there is no doubt for us that this part of Europe should join the European and Euro-Atlantic institutions. In our eyes this is a natural destiny.

It seems to us that the main issue is about timing. It means that for the peoples concerned the point of arrival should be visible and concrete. To avoid frustration and disillusion.

The Balkans are important to us for another good reason. Because this is a region, I would like to underline that, where NATO and the European Union have worked for years in close cooperation for the benefit of all. Just a couple of examples: In Bosnia-Herzegovina we have at present the European operation “Althea”, following the NATO’s previous operation. Common work is concrete in Kosovo and elsewhere.

What does it mean? It is a proof that practical cooperation between two organizations having a similar membership including the most significant democracies can be of real benefit and a multiplier.

This precedent should be used in other parts of the world and it would be welcomed by our citizens.

I am happy of your presence here. To keep the conference in this format has not been an easy decision, the alternative being a discussion via the web.

We thought that it would be good news to go back to normality with the right guarantees of safety as we are doing with this meeting, following the existing rules.

We all wish to put this terrible period behind us as soon as possible and a physical event is also an act of hope.

In spite of the difficult environment, we have been able to put together an impressive group of personalities coming from different destinations. We have the best sources of knowledge and expertise on the Balkans and I thank them all for having accepted our invitation.

The philosophy, or in better words, the methodology, that we use remains the same.

Our aim is to provide for the general public, and not only to the specialist, a good frame for discussing strategic issues relevant in today's world.

You all have the booklet with the programme and the relevant information.

The introductory remarks are coming from the NATO Public Diplomacy Division, by Mr. Nicola de Santis.

The first panel will debate the complex situation concerning the problems of accession, including a presentation by the European Commission, which is a novelty.

Afterwards, we will be in touch with the other side of the Atlantic: an interview with the Vice President of the Atlantic Council, Damon Wilson.

The second panel will address societal and economic issues of the region, things that have to proceed in parallel with the institutional process of accession. A struggle with a number of problems.

The Hon. Piero Fassino, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chamber of Deputies and a real expert attached to the Balkans, will deliver the concluding remarks.

I wish to thank all those who have supported us: PMI, the NATO Public Diplomacy Division, the Balkan Trust for Democracy, the European Commission and of course the staff of the Foundation for their very difficult work,

I thank you all for your presence and for your attention.

Buon pomeriggio a tutti.





STEPHEN J. MARIANO  
*Dean, NATO Defense College, Rome*

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## WELCOME REMARKS

**O**n behalf of the Commandant, Faculty, Staff and Course Members of the NATO Defense College, let me welcome everyone to this conference.

The College is proud to be a co-sponsor of this event and we have a long history of collaboration with the Foundation.

We have leveraged the Foundations' experience and expertise in a number of ways, for example, by involving them in the Senior Course Committee Study Projects process, giving lectures to courses, and as part of our robust outreach and engagement activity.

We have expanded our areas of cooperation with the Foundation and recently partnered with them on aligning two seminars with our Senior Course: one was on NATO's recent adoption of space as the fifth domain (along with land, sea, air, and cyberspace) and a second was on the Western Balkans.

The seminar on the Balkans was disrupted by the Covid-19 crisis but the seminar on space was conducted with the assistance of the European Space Research Institute as well as academic and industry partners. Over 100 participants joined the session virtually using the College's education technologies as the College demonstrated what could be done virtually.

In fact, the College proved to be extremely resilient during the Covid-19 crisis and, although we cancelled five courses scheduled to occur in the spring of 2020, we managed to remain open with a skeleton crew, move the curriculum on-line, and after adopting extensive Covid-19 protection measures, eventually brought everyone back to the college in June 2020 to complete the course in person.

The College faculty, staff, and course members demonstrated incredible courage and determination during the period which resulted in the successful graduation of nearly 70 Senior Course members on 16 July 2020.

The NDC-Foundation is demonstrating that same courage and determination by organizing this conference. With the majority of its participants here in Rome abiding by international protocols for personal protection and social distancing,

and by bringing a few speakers in virtually, the Foundation is showing us what can be possible when it comes to sharing ideas about security and defense.

Their efforts are a good omen for the topic of this conference and for Europe. I have every confidence that the College and the Foundation are providing good examples, for the Western Balkan states, who will undoubtedly show determination when it comes to the cause of peace and security in the Euro-Atlantic area.

Best wishes to the Foundation and all the participants for an intellectually stimulating – and safe – conference.



ALESSANDRO POLITI

*Director, NATO Defense College Foundation, Rome*

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## POLITICAL SUMMARY

**T**he conference highlighted the difficult situation of a region that has on the one hand a remarkable record of peacekeeping and building after the end of the Yugoslav wars of dissolution in 2001 and on the other a very difficult path to integration.

From a geostrategic point of view, the Balkan Six (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) are solidly encapsulated within an array of Euro-Atlantic countries, namely from West to East: Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Greece. But from a geopolitical perspective they are deeply divided between countries that have a prospective path to integrate into one or both main organisations (EU and NATO) and countries that have no perspectives at all for the time being (Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo).

Serbia is in different ways the lynchpin around which important political dynamics revolve both in Sarajevo and in Pristina: it has clearly stated its path to neutrality vis-à-vis NATO, but important Serbian-speaking parties in both countries clearly have Belgrade as reference point and may contribute to slow NATO's accession in both capitals.

That said, the speakers pointed out clearly that a main internal retarding factor was the existence of so-called stabilocracies. These ruling elites are characterised by the exploitation of an indefinite transition time towards full Euro-Atlantic membership in order to capture the state, extract the maximum possible benefit from international assistance and donors and amass privileges and riches for their own interests. In the meantime, the extent of corruption, illegal trafficking and organised crime grows in order to strengthen power and status of the stabilocrats.

The external factors that help these rentier elites are essentially two: the misplaced priority by the EU and the USA on stability at all costs, in order to avoid expensive troop deployments, and the very long period of chapters' negotiation to certify that the new members practices are compatible and compliant with the

*acquis communautaire*. Both factors are surely influenced by previous negative experiences (never ending wars abroad and EU members that clearly disregard main tenets of Union), but the enlargement fatigue is an important element that, despite the recent reforms in the accession path to EU, keeps enlargement a bureaucratic process instead of a political dynamic.

The enlargement fatigue in the EU is compounded by a waiting fatigue across Western Balkan societies: more than 20 years after, post-war reconstruction benefits have been unequally distributed, patronage and nepotism stifle fair competition and the best educated youth votes with its feet, emigrating and worsening the brain drain. Low regional economic integration is another negative feature that slows down the different countries.

In fact, as they still are and could be, Western Balkans economies are scarcely sustainable and economic security is a serious issue, stemming from that toxic combination of poverty, weak rule of law and corruption that produces in turn stabilocracies. Unfortunately, the average income per capita in the region is only 13% of average EU one and this implies that the catch-up time may last between seventy years and a century. The successive global economic crises of 2006-2009 and of the pandemic have inevitably impacted on the region,

What of course attracts more the attention of Euro-Atlantic chanceries are the political and/or economic influence operations of Russia and China in the area, in addition to the ambiguous behaviour of some NATO allies vis-à-vis the two mentioned great powers and the friction created by neonationalist policies. Evidently, Russia continues its rearguard action in the region, despite having lost the bid to intimidate Podgorica in joining NATO in 2016 and its influence in FYROM one year later. China is making comparatively more solid inroads into the region, but the concrete economic benefits for its partners are less visible than the commercial imbalance in favour of Beijing.

Once again, the main problem has been a recent lack of unity of intents among Brussels, the main European capitals and Washington that reflected more or less visibly in the international organisations acting in the region. That said, Kosovo and the Balkans as whole are still considered the best example of transatlantic collaboration and are a solid foundation for further progress.



MATTEO TACCONI  
*NDCF, Western Balkans Chief Analyst*

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## BACKGROUND POLICY PAPER

Almost thirty years have passed since the outbreak of the wars that ultimately led to the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the collapse of Albania's communist regime. While the NATO integration process in the Balkan region has constantly advanced throughout this period, securing Slovenia, Albania, Croatia and Montenegro's membership, the pace of the European enlargement has been slower. Only Slovenia and Croatia are members of the European Union. Ljubljana joined in 2004, Zagreb in 2013. Serbia and Montenegro have embarked accession talks, but many chapters are still open and it is taking longer than predicted. Albania and North Macedonia are due to start accession talks, after the EU Council gave the green light in March 2020. Being optimistic, the process will last at least ten years. As for Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, they lag behind: EU accession talks are not on the horizon.

The Western Balkans are facing troubled times. The very fragile economic scenario is forcing a growing number of young talented people to leave, seeking better opportunities in Western Europe. This is devastating in terms of social-economic sustainability. Catching up with the rest of Europe becomes even more difficult.

Beside this, a concerning trend of democratic backsliding jeopardizes the future of the region. Respect for the rule of law, media pluralism, separation of powers and administrative decentralization are worsening throughout the region, especially in Serbia, Montenegro and Albania, as highlighted by independent research centres.

The migrant crisis is another potential disrupting factor. The Western Balkans do not have financial and technical resources to cope with the flow of people, mostly coming from the Middle East, who cross the region heading to Western Europe. This trend is exacerbating political disputes in Bosnia and Herzegovina, currently the bottleneck of the Balkan Route, and can further complicate the situation in the whole region.

Geopolitical projections try to carve the region, too, threatening that EU sta-

bilizing role, once undisputed. Russia and Turkey are exerting influence mixing soft power, investments in infrastructures and energy, political pressure and hybrid means, a Moscow's special skill. China is emerging as a game-changer, turning the region into a relevant hub for the Belt and Road Initiative through massive infrastructural investments. Last, but not least, the USA are back, claiming a strong role in the Serbia-Kosovo talks (led by the EU in the last ten years), after years of low-profile. The US re-engagement is a chance for the European perspective, yet Washington and Brussels must find a way to develop a balanced and coherent action. Competitive attitudes are hampering cooperation.

In sum, the Western Balkans are trapped in a limbo, that cannot last too long. It is primarily up to the EU, the first lender, the first trade partner, the first political partner for the Western Balkans, to end it. The 27-nations union must re-energize its strategy for the Western Balkans and act more resolutely as a democracy provider. Addressing more seriously issues like the rule of law, minority rights, transparency in the administrative field and fight against corruption is vital to improve the political scenario in the Western Balkans but also to develop a better economic environment, that would slow down the drain of young talents and reduce social inequalities.

The economic downturn caused by the Covid-19 pandemic could accelerate them. According to a recent World Bank study, more than 400.000 people could fall into poverty, while the share of the middle and upper classes could shrink substantially, between 2 and 10% depending on the country and the length of the crisis.

The EU simply does not lead: it is against its nature. Soft power and dialogue are and will be the tools to reignite the European perspective in the Western Balkans, where people are still attached to the European perspective, but a new and clear political impetus is required. Differently from the Commission, that throughout the years has demonstrated its long-term commitment for the region despite facing very tough challenges (Eurozone crisis, Brexit and more recently the post-pandemic reconstruction), the member states' initiative for a timely inclusion of the Balkan Six has been unsteady. The enlargement fatigue came out after the EU historic expansion in 2004 is still a big rock on the road.

The new methodology for enlargement, devised under France's impulse, could clear the path. Previously based on a chapter-by-chapter approach, the mechanism focusses now on six clusters, and the first one, "Fundamentals, including rule of law", gives the enlargement process a much stronger political dimension, proving EU's concern for the ongoing democratic backsliding. Will it be effective? It is a two-sided story. Western Balkans leaders must show a genuine will to make reforms, so far extremely weak. On the other hand, the EU member states must support the Commission in developing the new strategy, showing that it is not just on paper.



NICOLA DE SANTIS

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Division, NATO Headquarters, Brussels*

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## INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

I am very pleased to contribute with some thoughts to this Conference on the Western Balkans, organised by the NATO Defense College Foundation, with the support of the NATO Public Diplomacy Division. NATO's role in the Balkans is, indeed, not new.

You may recall the debate in the early nineties in which some believed that taking action during the crisis in the former Yugoslavia would have meant for NATO to act “out of area”, somewhat out of its mandate, and that this would have required a sound political basis, as well as an international mandate. This prompted US Senator Richard Lugar to state publicly that NATO should have gone either “out of area, or out of business”.

As well know, in the end NATO did go out of area and remained in the business of continuing to provide security not only to its member countries but also to the countries in the Balkans.

In June 1992 NATO Foreign Ministers meeting in Oslo, provided the political basis for the Alliance's role in the former Yugoslavia, announcing NATO's readiness to support, on a case-by-case basis, in accordance with its own procedures, peacekeeping activities under the responsibility of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) – subsequently renamed the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). During their December 1992 meeting in Brussels, NATO Foreign Ministers stated that the Alliance was also ready to support peacekeeping operations under the authority of the United Nations Security Council. NATO leaders also believed that article 4 of the Washington Treaty provided NATO's internal legal basis for action.

Between 1992 and 1995, the Alliance took several key decisions, leading to operations by NATO naval forces, in conjunction with the Western European Union, to monitor and subsequently enforce the UN embargo and sanctions in the Adriatic; and by NATO air forces, first to monitor and then to enforce, the UN no-fly zone over Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Alliance also provided close air support

to the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and authorised air strikes to relieve the strangulation of Sarajevo and other threatened Safe Areas. Coupled by diplomatic efforts, NATO's action allowed to break the siege of Sarajevo, led to a genuine cease-fire and made possible a negotiated solution in autumn 1995.

On 14 December 1995, the Bosnia Peace Agreement was signed in Paris, after it had been negotiated in Dayton, Ohio. On 16 December, the Alliance's North Atlantic Council launched a major military operation, Operation Joint Endeavour. Based on UN Security Council Resolution 1031, NATO was given the mandate to implement Annex I A, regarding the military aspects of the Peace Agreement. A NATO-led multinational force, called the Implementation Force (IFOR), started its mission on 20 December 1995. IFOR was given a one-year mandate.

IFOR succeeded in accomplishing its primary military tasks by maintaining the cessation of hostilities; separating the armed forces of the Bosniak-Croat Entity (the Federation) and the Bosnian Serb Entity (the Republika Srpska) by mid-January 1996; transferring areas between the two Entities by mid-March; and, finally, moving the Parties' forces and heavy weapons into approved cantonment sites, which was realized by the end of June.

Due to IFOR's early success a secure environment was established, the High Representative and other organisations which attended the London Peace Implementation Conference of 8-9 December 1995, could start their work with regard to the implementation of the civilian aspects of the peace agreement and the creation of conditions in which the return to normal life in Bosnia-Herzegovina could begin. Within the limits of its mandate and available resources IFOR provided substantial support to the High Representative and to the other organisations. One important element was the support given as a matter of priority to the organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), in preparing and conducting the elections held in September 1996.

#### *Participation of non-NATO nations*

All NATO nations contributed to IFOR. But IFOR was more than just a NATO operation. Non-NATO forces were incorporated into the unified command structure alongside NATO forces, under the command of the IFOR Commander and his multinational divisional commanders. At the end of the IFOR mission 18 non-NATO countries were participating in Operation Joint Endeavour, most of them being Partnership for Peace countries.

Russian forces joined the Implementation Force in January 1996. Russia's participation in the implementation Force was subject to special arrangements agreed between NATO and Russia. The Russian contingent was directly subordinated to a Russian military officer Col. General Leontiy Shevtsov, as General Joulwan's Russian deputy. In theatre, the Russian Brigade was placed under the tactical con-



trol of the US-led Multinational Division (North) within NATO's command arrangements.

The role of IFOR (Operation Joint Endeavour) was to implement the peace. The role of SFOR (Operation Joint Guard) was to stabilise the peace. The difference between the tasks of IFOR and SFOR is reflected in the names of their missions.

After the peaceful conduct of the 1996 September elections, IFOR successfully completed its mission. However, it became clear that much remained to be accomplished on the civil side and that the environment would continue to be potentially unstable and insecure. On the basis of this plan and the Alliance's own study of security options, NATO Foreign and Defence Ministers concluded that a reduced military presence was needed to provide the stability necessary for the consolidation of the peace. They agreed that NATO should organise a Stabilisation Force (SFOR), which was subsequently activated on 20 December 1996, the day on which the mandate given to IFOR expired.

#### *The Role and Mandate of SFOR*

Under UN Security Council Resolution 1088 of 12 December 1996, SFOR was authorised to implement the military aspects of the Peace Agreement as the legal successor to IFOR. Like IFOR, SFOR operates under Chapter VII of the UN Charter (peace enforcement). SFOR has the same rules of engagement for the robust use of force, if it should be necessary to accomplish its mission and to protect itself.

The primary mission of SFOR was to contribute to the secure environment necessary for the consolidation of peace. Its specific tasks were: to deter or prevent a resumption of hostilities, or new threats to peace; to consolidate IFOR's achievements and to promote a climate in which the peace process could continue to move forward; to provide selective support to civilian organisations within its capabilities.

SFOR's size, with around 31.000 troops in Bosnia, was about half of IFOR's size. Building on general compliance with the terms of the Dayton Agreement ensured during the IFOR mission, the smaller-sized SFOR is able to concentrate on the implementation of all the provisions of Annex IA of the Peace Agreement, i.e.: stabilisation of the secure environment in which local and national authorities and other international organisations could work; and providing support to other agencies (on a selective and targeted basis, in view of the reduced size of the forces available).

#### *Participation of non-NATO Nations*

Every NATO nation with armed forces committed troops to SFOR, as was also the case with IFOR. Iceland, the only NATO country without armed forces,

is providing medical support. But SFOR is more than a NATO operation. All the 18 non-NATO nations that participated in IFOR are also participating in SFOR: Albania, Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Russia, Sweden and Ukraine – all of which are Partnership for Peace countries – plus Egypt, Jordan, Malaysia and Morocco. All of the last four, except Malaysia, are participating in the Alliance's Mediterranean Dialogue. Slovenia and Ireland have also joined SFOR, bringing the total of non-NATO participating nations to 20.

Russian forces joined IFOR in January 1996 and Russia continued to contribute to SFOR. Russia's participation was subject to special arrangements between NATO and Russia. The Russian contingent was directly subordinated to a Russian officer, Col. General Leontiy Shevtsov, as SACEUR's deputy. In theatre, the Russian brigade was under the tactical control of the US-led Multinational Division (North), within the NATO's command arrangements for SFOR.

#### *The Humanitarian Catastrophe in Kosovo*

Following the failure of the Rambouillet Conference in March 1999 NATO was forced to take action again in the Balkans, to halt the humanitarian catastrophe that was then unfolding in Kosovo. On 23 March 1999 NATO Secretary General Javier Solana, announced he had directed the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), General Wesley Clark, to "initiate air operations in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia".

The decision followed more than a year of fighting in Kosovo. Tens of thousands of refugees crossing into neighboring countries. And the failure of international diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict.

The NATO air campaign was never against the Serbian people. It was to protect civilians in the wider region. And to halt the humanitarian catastrophe that was unfolding in Kosovo. In view of the developing crisis, NATO's use of force was both necessary and legitimate and it enjoyed broad international support.

For over two decades, KFOR has been a success story, making a major contribution to stability and security in Kosovo and the Western Balkans region. NATO is fully committed to Kosovo's security. In line with its United Nations mandate, the KFOR mission will continue to provide a safe and secure environment and freedom of movement for all communities in Kosovo, as mandated by UNSC 1244 of 1999. NATO regularly assesses the KFOR mission. Based on that assessment, all Allies agreed that we should maintain the current strength of roughly 3,500 troops, from 26 contributing nations, including NATO Allies and partner countries.

Also, NATO fully supports the continuation of the EU-facilitated dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina as the only lasting solution for Kosovo and for the Western Balkans, as a whole. This is critical for Belgrade and Pristina, but also for regional peace and security and for our own security.

Security and stability in the Western Balkans are of strategic importance for NATO, because it is crucial for peace and stability in Europe. Democracy, the rule of law, domestic reforms, and good neighbourly relations are vital for the progress of all in the region. Since the end of the nineties, our forces have helped to keep peace and stability in the Western Balkans. NATO offices in Sarajevo, Belgrade and Skopje promote political dialogue and carry out practical cooperation. NATO policies in the region – including its Open Door policy – are aimed at strengthening stability and at building greater cooperation. The Alliance is determined to continue to help the countries of the region to implement reforms. This will benefit their citizens and those in the whole Euro-Atlantic region.

Since the early 2000, countries of the Western Balkans have decided to join NATO's Partnership for Peace Program. The Alliance has made available to our regional partners the full NATO partnership toolkit, focusing on strengthening institutions and capacity building.

Serbia has been, a very active member of the Partnership for Peace programme. NATO is helping Serbia to reform its security forces and institutions and it trains Serbian soldiers for international peace-keeping missions. NATO and Serbia are close partners. NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg is in regular contact with Serbian President Vučić and other leaders. NATO and Serbia work together to be better prepared for civil emergencies, such as floods and forest fires. Bosnia and Herzegovina has joined PfP as well; it developed an Individual Action Plan, the Program of Reforms, and its contributing to Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan and to NATO's Training Mission in Iraq.

There have been undoubtedly important developments in the Western Balkans. If we compare the NATO members and partners list of today with that of the early years 2000, we will see that we have now more countries of the region sitting around the table of the North Atlantic Council as members, than as partner countries, with Slovenia, acceding in 2004, Albania in 2009, Croatia in 2009, Montenegro in 2017 and North Macedonia in March of this year.

Complementarity between NATO and the other international actors, especially with the EU, has been a characteristic of the support of the international community to security and stability in the Balkans. Crucial to security and stability is, as well, the EU current policy developed to support the gradual integration of the Western Balkan countries with the Union. On 1<sup>st</sup> July 2013, Croatia became the first of the seven countries to join, and Montenegro, Serbia, the Republic of North Macedonia and Albania are official candidates. Accession negotiations and chapters have been opened with Montenegro and Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are potential candidate countries.

Finally, if we look at recent opinion polls, the people of the Western Balkans have realised the importance of the role played by NATO and the EU. For exam-

ple, 92% of the people in Kosovo have a positive view of NATO and 75% of the EU; 78% of the people in Albania have a positive view of NATO and 87% of the EU; 66% of the people in North Macedonia have a positive view of NATO and 57% of the EU; 46% of the people in Montenegro hold a positive view of NATO and 54% of the EU. Public support for both NATO and the EU is therefore high in the Western Balkans. Testifying of the fact that the people of the region see today these two major international institutions that have allowed to develop conditions of security stability and peace for nearly three decades, essential to their future as well.

# Session I

## WAYS AND MEANS FOR A CREDIBLE INCLUSION





Mostar, Old Town and Bridge, Bosnia-Herzegovina













MACIEJ POPOWSKI

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

## EFFECTS ON FUTURE AND CURRENT ENLARGEMENTS BY THE EVOLVING POLITICAL SITUATION AND THE NEW ENLARGEMENT METHOD

**T**his year is really another Balkans year for us for the European Union. The region remains a top priority for the EU as stressed by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. In her recent State of the Union address, she devoted quite an attention to the Balkans saying that we share the same history and it is our strategic interest to bring them closer. With this in mind, we started to reinvigorate the enlargement process. Well, it started in the first weeks of 2020 with the new enlargement methodology that we put forward, proposed by Commissioner Várhelyi, that helped us to overcome the deadlock in the Council with concerning the opening of accession with Albania and North Macedonia.

Now we are moving there, and this is very important. The new methodology aims to make enlargement more credible, predictable and dynamic, but also to give to the member states a stronger political steering. In short, this new methodology will bring a strong focus on fundamental reforms, starting with the rule of law, functional democratic institution and public administration as well as the economies of the candidate countries. The whole process remains merit-based, so this is not going to change. The future work of the accession process will be streamlined. The process will be organized in six thematic clusters: first are fundamentals; second is the internal market; third is competitiveness and inclusive growth; fourth is green agenda and sustainable connectivity; fifth is resources and agricultural cohesion; sixth is external relations.

So, we will open negotiations on each cluster as a whole, not going chapter by chapter, which is a novelty. We will also provide more clarity to the candidate himself on the things that are going to be consented. Building on this, we are going now presenting our annual enlargement package, that is due to be adopted next week, and that will provide a detailed overview on the state of play of fundamental reforms and the accession process. This is our annual exercise, nevertheless, we take it very seriously. It is based on objective criteria. We used a lot of reporting, and reach out to some partners and friends, including some of the

organizations present either on stage or online. Of course, this year report will be, as everything else in the world, affected by the Covid-19 pandemic because it brought unprecedented challenges for individuals, societies, and governance structures in the region.

We stood by the Western Balkans countries right from the onset of the crisis and provided them with a huge support package where some 3,3 billion of euros (that have been allocated) to help the region overcome the consequences of the Covid-19. We used a different mix of tools, grants, soft loans, micro and macro-financial assistance, and then also a 1,7 billion package of assistance by the European Investment Bank (EIB). Still, the consequences for the region will be severe, that is why we now focus on supporting the long-term socio-economic recovery of the Western Balkans, and its convergence with the EU. In order to get there, the Commission will adopt soon, next week, a second Communication that will be adopted by the College.

Also, the European Commission will adopt an economic and investment plan for the region and it will include a substantial investment package. It will also increase financial guarantees to support the private sector, and focus on connectivity, digitalization and green agenda. So, the plan for the region will create a link among the top priorities of the von der Leyen Commission, the EU as a whole, and the area. Few additions on security, which is on everybody's mind over there in Rome. Regional security remains a priority, and the whole enlargement process has a clear security dimension with a strong focus on better law enforcement, fighting organized crime, terrorism, money laundering and on dealing with irregular migrations. Some new tools at our disposal will be helpful, because the Commission has put forward the blueprint of the new pact on migration and asylum, and it would strengthen our hand, also in dealing with partner countries and countries of transit in particular.

Post Covid-19 environment brought new security challenges or exacerbated existing ones. In particular, it exposed some vulnerabilities in our societies and infrastructure, vulnerabilities to fake-news, to cyber-attacks, and all kind of hybrid threats. The whole Balkan region was highly exposed to this kind of disinformation and misinformation campaigns by all types of actors. For this reason, we are also going to step up our cooperation with the regard of the media, medial literacy, and media landscape in general. The whole domain of hybrid threats is an area where the cooperation between the EU and NATO in the Balkans has been exemplary. I am not going to many details, but we are not talking only about us working in parallel in places like Bosnia and Kosovo with a presence on the ground, but also looking at specific issues like transparency, good governance, accountability of the defence sector, and capacity building. We are different organizations, we have different tools, and we are following different procedures, but we are settled united by the common purpose of building long-lasting stability, security and prosperity in the region.



VALERIE HOPKINS  
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## THE EXTERNAL ACTORS IN THE BALKANS

I just arrived here from Serbia, after a week doing some reporting and research about the role of China in Serbia and the increasing positioning between EU-China trade wars. I am thinking to focus a bit on that. First of all, I should say that I am speaking in my personal capacity.

I think it is quite interesting to view the Serbian relationship with China now, concerning the deal that we have just seen struck and signed in Washington. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) has recently published a sensational report, and I am sure many of you have already seen it. Those who have not, will have to look at the “still friendship” between Serbia and China, especially in the wake of Covid-19. The report goes as far as to it calls now Serbia as a client state of China, which is a concerning title for a prospective EU member. I do not represent CSIS of course, but the report makes quite some interesting as well as compelling recommendations about how much stronger the EU needs to present itself and its work in Serbia.

We should acknowledge that now, in March 2020, 40% of Serbians believe that China is the biggest donor to Serbia, and fewer than 20% thought it is EU. This is an increasing trend, because in the whole region out of 18 of new technology projects China invested on, 14 were in Serbia, and 40% of those projects were signed since 2019, which seems a massive increase. Whether this Letter of Intent signed in Washington will reverse this situation remains to be seen. It will be quite interesting to see the influence of the elections in the United States.

Regarding this, and also the degree to which Serbia uses that as a pretext to decouple maybe a little bit from China, you and we all have mentioned this idea of convergence, and I think that it is going to be quite interesting to watch, at this point, where it will go. As we know, Serbia has the strongest possible relationship with NATO, but it continues to buy more and more weapons and technology from China; therefore, one might wonder at what point this situation will become challenging. I am trying to put some points for the discussion that we can maybe

consider later for the Q&A session with our audience. The current developments are rather peculiar because sometimes there seems to be a Chinese interest for Serbia to join the EU and maintain very close ties to the West, while in other occasions it seems that the Chinese are burning the Serbian bridge while the EU is building it. I also think that it is crucial to talk about the political implications of this Sino-Serbian relationship.

Last February, Marco Djuric, Director for Kosovo and Metohija (Government of the Republic of Serbia) and next Ambassador to Washington, spoke in a video about a trip that he made to Xinjiang (officially XUAR - Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, PRC). In this video, he affirmed that the standards under which people were being held in Xinjiang, in what of most of my colleagues call concentration camps, were very good, and that the minority protection in China should be the envy of his country and many other countries. Somehow it did not make big news, but this kind of soft things are a little bit alarming from a very powerful official of the ruling party in Serbia.

It would be interesting to ask Ambassador Orizio, how much pushback there was for such a statement. I have not heard any other western officials say something like that, of course, the EU is a community of values and at to a certain rate also is NATO.

I will also talk about the role of the external actors. It is also interesting to observe the evolving role of the USA in the region and especially in Serbia. I think that this deal signed in the Oval Office shows an increased interest of by USA in the region, but it remains to be seen how much of that deal will be implemented.

For instance, we need to watch out for the promises that were made by US representatives in terms of financing some of these deals. We have spoken in this panel about the Belt and Road Initiative and its huge effort in the infrastructure sector, but the US International Development and Finance Corporation that came to Serbia probably will not find completed the highways in Montenegro that should connect the port of Bar to Serbia. Corruption is still present and financing is still more an issue of spheres of influence than of economic sustainability.

I also think that, if there is some cooperation or collaboration among the USA and Serbia, it could be quite powerful. I was in Belgrade on Tuesday when US envoy Grenell was saying that it was under the American pressure that Serbs agreed to start using the new border-crossing built by the EU on the border between Kosovo and Serbia. If that is the case, there have been some quite positive developments from the EU. Positive signs are also visible in the soft power domain: this week Operation Halyard's anniversary was celebrated (a daring rescue of Allied airmen downed in Yugoslavia thanks Serbian assistance in 1944) and it was the first time this year. Moreover, a commemorative monument has been erected and this shows a more serious US effort to influence positively bilateral relations.

Officials in the Serbian government are excited about the current situation, some of them told me they have never experienced such a level of ties with Washington

in the last 140 years; one has just to consider the presence of the Commander in Chief of the US Special Operations during the abovementioned celebration.

Regarding Russia, it seems to me that there is a slow deliberate flow pull back from Russia and I do not know if you perceive it as well. In terms of public communication, you still see that Putin t-shirt everywhere, but the way officials are communicating with Russia and about Russia is interestingly shifting.

Another point regarding the increased US involvement in the region concerns the latest developments in Croatia. Zagreb is part of the EU, but we recently saw US Secretary of State Pompeo coming to Croatia to urge Croatians not to give a 50-years concession for their port in Rijeka to the Chinese. What is interesting for me, is that I am quite sure a lot is going on behind the scenes among EU ambassadors, and I am quite curious to see whether and how Secretary of State Pompeo will be successful.

I also want to address some of the regional security challenges Director Popowski mentioned, as well as Dr Vejvoda (Moderator of this panel) did: organized crime, corruption, disinformation and also cyber-attacks. We also saw in North Macedonia, during the election this year, that there was a massive cyber-attack to the electoral systems. I think these kinds of things are quite alarming and hopefully they should diminish in future. I also think that it is essential to acknowledge that these countries have done a great job, helping to manage irregular migration, even if lots of problems still remain. Of course, the pictures you see especially from Bosnia are quite alarming, but I think there has been a lot of cooperation, especially in the monitoring of the return of foreign fighters. The fact that we had not any major incident shows there is a good cooperation.

It is also interesting to observe the religious affinity of the region with the Turks. For example, I find that relations between Turkey and Serbia are very strong: when Erdogan made a big trip to the region, he stayed four days in Serbia, much longer than he stayed everywhere else. The following Friday, Vučić went to Istanbul to talk about the negotiations in Washington, and to try to make amends, perhaps, for what Mr Erdogan saw as an inappropriate commitment to move the Serbian embassy to Jerusalem. I did not see that Kosovo was asked to do the same thing. This is the reason why I am strongly convinced that there is a strong tie between Serbia and Turkey.





AHMET EVRİM

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## THE STRATEGIC LINKS BETWEEN THE BALKANS, RUSSIA AND THE MEDITERRANEAN

At an earlier NDCF conference on the Balkans<sup>1</sup> here in Rome, I suggested that the predominance of centrifugal forces detracted from cooperation among states and the region and hence adversely affected the very coherence and stability of the area. A significant share of the centrifugal forces in question are home-grown in the sense that they arise from competing identities that have guided, over centuries, the adversarial trajectory of Balkan nationalism. Others result from a competition among external powers to cultivate alliances in that region. To be sure, there has been a great deal of progress in the region since the civil war that broke out at the time of Yugoslavia's collapse. Hostilities have ended. At present, four of the Western Balkan countries have reached the negotiation stage for EU membership; and four different ones have acceded NATO. But there is still no evidence of an overall convergence among the Balkan states; to the contrary, the region is largely characterized by the diverging priorities and policy objectives of an array of neighbouring states.

To give a recent example, the Deutsche Welle reported only last Wednesday, 23<sup>rd</sup> September, that Bulgaria was trying to stop the EU from opening membership negotiations with North Macedonia scheduled for December 2020. Bulgaria claims that it has a common history with North Macedonia that was obliterated by the ethnic and linguistic engineering that had taken place in North Macedonia under the authoritarian regimes following the Second World War. "*According to the official Bulgarian view of history, people of Slavic descent who live in North Macedonia are Bulgarians who speak the Bulgarian language but were brainwashed during the Josip Broz Tito's communist regime in the former Yugoslavia and were artificially given a new 'Macedonian' identity and language in the process*". As a result Bulgaria

<sup>1</sup> Balkan Perspectives: *Adapting the Partnership and Integration Paths*, Rome: 16<sup>th</sup> of May 2019.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/bulgaria-asks-eu-to-stop-fake-macedonian-identity/a-55020781>.

has demanded that North Macedonia admit its shared history with Bulgaria, a demand that is viewed as being tantamount to asking North Macedonians to deny their modern language and identity. On the 18<sup>th</sup> of December 2020, Bulgaria continues to veto North Macedonia's accession negotiations to begin.<sup>3</sup>

The question of identity, rather than of particular identities standing out in contrast to other ones in the region, come back to haunt any discussion, any consideration of any aspect of the Balkans' history, society, politics or culture. The topic of the present conference brought to mind the vivid and masterfully depicted explanation by Ivan Krastev of the reason why ethnic homogeneity became so important in central Europe:

*Eastern European states and nations emerged late in the nineteenth-century, and they did so almost simultaneously. While in Western Europe, it was the legacy of the colonial empires that shaped encounters with the non-European world, Central European states were born of the disintegration of Europe's continental empires – Germany, Austro-Hungary, Russia – and the process of ethnic cleansing that followed. The nineteenth-century ethnic mosaic of Western Europe was generally harmonious like a Caspar David Friedrich landscape, whereas that of central Europe resembled more an expressionist canvas by Oscar Kokoschka.*<sup>4</sup>

What Krastev says about Central Europe in this book is equally valid for the Balkans where the nation-states, like those of central Europe, were born in the wake of the disintegration of the Ottoman and the Habsburg empires and where, like Central Europe, common descent -- that is, ethnicity, language, and culture and not citizenship -- has determined the nation.

Strategic links of the region with other regions follows the same pattern of affinity, particularly confessional affinity. The Orthodox Church, for example, has historically reinforced, and continues to reinforce, a special relationship that bonds Russia and Serbia together. The bombing of Belgrade by NATO forces during the Kosovo war (1998-1999), it may be recalled, brought Belgrade and Moscow closer at that time. Although Serbia is now cooperating with NATO, it still does not feel sanguine about committing to full membership of the Atlantic Alliance.

Turkey's AKP government has been keen to cultivate its own strategic links in the Balkans as an important part of its strategy to confirm and project its status as a regional power. Ankara's so-called neo-Ottoman approach to its broader neighbourhood, including certainly the Balkans, has meant that Turkey places priority on building relationships with the Muslim populations of the region, supporting religious instruction in parts of the Balkans and providing funds for the restoration almost exclusively of Ottoman mosques and religious buildings in Bosnia. It cannot be denied that what was dubbed as Turkey's soft power reaching out to the

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3 <https://www.ft.com/content/68191f23-0230-4a71-9c5e-437195b5d25a>.

4 Ivan Krastev, *After Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), p.48.



former Ottoman territories had the effect of raising consciousness of the confessional differences among the peoples of the region.

More dangerous for the region's security and stability was the involvement in the civil war of radical Islamist cadres. In the wake of the Bosnian war, several Muslim countries and Muslim aid organizations came to support programs and projects to propagate conservative and even radical forms of Islam especially in Bosnia but also in other parts of the Balkans. At that time, around 2.000 Salafists came to Bosnia to join the fighting. They saw the war as an opportunity for conducting jihad and establishing a foothold for radical Islam in the region.

A far more important strategic link is now being forged between the Balkans and the Mediterranean by China's Belt and Road Initiative. China's purchase and development of the port of Piraeus has resulted in the Western Balkans becoming an arterial link in the economic space between the Eastern Mediterranean and Central Europe. This might be viewed as a unique opportunity by many of the Balkan countries to be on the main artery to a market of half a billion prosperous consumers and, at the same time, having a chance to build their own infrastructure on a par with that of the market in question. Would the Belt and Road Initiative be the catalyst to prepare the Balkans for a credible inclusion in the European club?

There are serious doubts about that eventuality. For one, the Belt and Road Initiative is seen as a project that carries the danger of burdening smaller countries with large debts that they would not be able to repay. The often-quoted example from the region is the highway project in Montenegro. The loan that Montenegro took from China's Export-Import Bank for this project pushed its GDP-to-debt ratio up to 80%.

For another, the large financing facilities that China extends in association with the Belt and Road Initiative is also seen as an inducement for increased corruption, particularly among autocratic governments. But there have also been frequent reports of widespread corruption even in those countries where a culture of transparency has not taken root. Needless to say, great many countries fall in the latter category. Examples from several South East Asian countries have received international news coverage of large-scale corruption that took place in connection with funds associated with the Belt and Road Initiative.

China's increasing influence reaching Europe's immediate neighbourhood provides another example of an externally driven centrifugal orientation that the Balkans have experienced. Beijing's 17+1 initiative to promote the Belt and Road Initiative in Central and Eastern Europe is considered by a majority of knowledgeable observers and political analysts, as well as by the EU itself, as a divisive move, one that has the effect of driving a wedge right in the middle of the EU. It is difficult to ignore the continued play of centrifugal forces on the Balkans, both from within and outside the region.

Nevertheless, I hasten to add that although there is good reason to be con-

cerned, there is also reason not to be overwhelmed by pessimism. The Balkans are no longer unique in displaying a lack of regional coherence or convergence of interests. At the moment, we are witnessing a global transition away from the certainties of the old order, but we do not know into what kind of a new order, or at least what kind of an international arrangement, the world might be transitioning at the moment. We do not even know if the world will be capable of establishing any kind of a coherent system in the foreseeable future. With respect specifically to the Balkans, however, it would be safe to say that the region will be able to achieve convergence and coherence if and only if the peoples and the governments of the region are able to identify their collective interests in the same way as Western European leaders did in the aftermath of the Second World War.



ANDREA ORIZIO

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## THE EXPERIENCE OF THE OSCE MISSION TO SERBIA

I am very pleased, at the end of my four-year tenure as Head of the OSCE Mission to Serbia, to address such a distinguished gathering of experts and discuss OSCE's role in the wider integration of southeast Europe. I thank the organizers for having me here today, above all the NATO Defence College Foundation and in particular invited its president Ambassador Minuto Rizzo, with whom I had the pleasure to work earlier in my career.

The panellists who spoke before me outlined how changing geopolitics impact the developments in the Balkans. Against this backdrop, the OSCE provides a platform for inclusive dialogue even at times when the return of geopolitics may pull to the opposite direction and multilateral diplomacy faces a gradual disengagement from influential global players. 2020 marks the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act and the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Charter of Paris for a New Europe.

These documents laid the foundation for dialogue and co-operation throughout the OSCE region whose aim was building trust and fostering lasting peace and stability. The longevity of the Organization (born as Conference in the era of détente between the two blocs) testifies to its capacity to adjust to new challenges and develop means to address them. The current Albanian Chairmanship-in-Office built its priorities in response to the uncertainty and pressures undermining multilateralism as an element of the global security architecture.

I would like to stress the OSCE's relevance in providing a framework of values coupled with its fieldwork on institution building and democratization, as a necessary precondition for integration. Indeed, the concrete expression of OSCE's multilateralism in action is the work of its field operations, such as the OSCE Mission to Serbia that is mandated to provide assistance to the host country on its reform path. The main tenets of our strategy under my stewardship – partnership with domestic institutions and civil society and the country's ownership of its reform achievements – have proven to be a recipe for success.

The Mission delivers tailored assistance across its four mandated areas that cover the main elements of a modern democracy on its integration path:

- a system based on the rule of law with clear separation of powers and an independent judiciary (rule of law);
- accountable security forces under effective democratic oversight (security cooperation);
- functioning, representative and inclusive democratic institutions for all citizens including national minorities (democratization);
- free and professional media, performing their watchdog role in a clear legislative framework on the basis of high ethical standards (media).

Since the OSCE is recognized throughout southeast Europe as a trusted partner and an honest broker and its assistance is regularly sought, the Mission to Serbia actively promotes regional co-operation whenever possible.

Allow me to provide a few significant examples of our activities, which are always guided by the belief that lasting security cannot be achieved without respect for human rights and functioning democratic institutions.

One of the areas ranking high on the OSCE agenda, and currently commanding worldwide attention, is media freedom and the safety of journalists. Upon request of the top authorities, the Mission supported the development of a new Media Strategy, a key tool toward a healthier media environment based on media freedom, ethics, professionalism and literacy. Our support enabled a transparent and participatory discussion, attended by stakeholders who traditionally lacked mutual trust. Just days before my departure, I signed a grant agreement with the Head of the EU Delegation to Serbia aimed to further support media reform, as this process is now entering in its crucial implementation phase.

In addressing trans-national threats, we applied a cross-dimensional approach to our activities supporting the fight against organized crime by tackling, in a holistic way, its drivers and manifestations, by strengthening law enforcement capacities and by promoting sustainable cross-border cooperation. In this spirit, we fostered the establishment of and continue supporting the Permanent Conference of Organized Crime Prosecutors, gathering prosecutors from 12 EU and non-EU countries. Furthermore, the Mission has provided numerous capacity-building opportunities to the Ministry of Interior's Task Force for Combatting Smuggling of Human Beings and facilitated its operational meetings with other counterparts from the region, which resulted in an increased number of charges against members of organized crime groups.

Let me now touch upon another sector of intervention that well illustrates our multifaceted approach: in the fight against corruption, we have supported Serbia on the prevention and repression fronts, which brought about a remarkable increase in the country's capacities in anti-money laundering and countering financing of terrorism.

During my tenure, the Mission also facilitated Serbia's co-operation with the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) in its regional efforts to improve the electoral conditions. Even as we wait for the publication of ODIHR's final report on the 21 June elections, the Mission stands ready to deploy its expertise to assist the relevant institutions to address the Office's recommendations.

With reference to efforts to foster functioning and effective democratic institutions, the Mission has worked hard to help the Serbian National Assembly fulfil its legislative and oversight functions. Further, we endeavoured to foster an inclusive discussion on the draft constitutional amendments on the judiciary, with the goal of safeguarding the separation of powers and judicial independence. Unfortunately, our action in this field has not yet yielded the expected results.

When it comes to our work methodology, I am particularly proud of the Mission's cross-portfolio co-ordination which is best summarized in our efforts to pilot a youth mainstreaming model to prioritize support of youth in peace and security.

This approach, encouraged by the 2014 Swiss OSCE Chairmanship and taken forward by the following Serbian, German, Austrian, Italian, Slovak and the current Albanian CiOs, builds upon the Organization's original commitment to promote the role and the inclusion of youth in society thus contributing to peace and security: indeed, we believe that young women and men can actively promote a culture of peace, dialogue, justice, trust and reconciliation, but too often these voices remain unheard. Similarly, our commitment to addressing the cross-cutting issue of gender equality is reflected in the inclusion of gender mainstreaming in all our projects and activities.

With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic earlier this year, the OSCE proved once again its capability to adapt swiftly to changes on the ground and to react quickly to emerging crises. We, at the Mission to Serbia, promptly adjusted our operations to the host country's new needs in a two-fold manner: by providing immediate relief and by adapting our core programmatic activities, always in line with our mandate. In delivering this assistance, we leveraged our partnership with all stakeholders and relied on our in-house expertise to support the most vulnerable parts of the population.

As you could see from these examples, the OSCE provides its comprehensive assistance across a variety of key areas that are crucial for Serbia's reform and for its democratic future. In moments of crises, the Mission is capable of deploying its resources to address unexpected developments, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, without straying from its mandate.

This work in close partnership with all stakeholders aimed at fostering domestic ownership of reform achievements cannot but contribute to Serbia's progress in attaining its strategic goals in terms of Euro-Atlantic integration even though the OSCE as an organization clearly remains neutral in this respect.





LARIS GAISER

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## THE DIFFICULT PATH TO INCLUSION: THE SLOVENIAN CASE STUDY

I am very glad to be here with you discussing the future of the Balkans. For somebody that comes from the region, the Balkans are the centre of the world, the most important area in the world, and the geopolitical centre of international relations as well as the future of global stability. The Balkans are the great theatre, the great theatre where not everything you see is true, and you have to go through the fog, to join and to discover the truth. Everything that is happening and going on in the Balkans it is a big theatre.

On this stage, major powers, mainly Russia and China, have interests to destabilize the region because the Balkans and, more generally, Central Europe since the dismantling of Austro-Hungarian Empire that for centuries acted as a stabilizing buffer zone, are very much internally divided areas and their political elites are not historically prepared to lead their countries out of this. For these reasons, it is easy to destabilize this part of the Euro-Atlantic region that is, of course, the final target of many regional and global powers.

The NATO Defense College Foundation asked me to speak about the Slovenian integration process that could be easily seen as *passé* regarding the integration of the Balkan region in the EU. How was Slovenia accession to the EU and NATO? Well, I think that the Slovenia case is not such a cold case. In my opinion, the positive image of Slovenia, considered by others as a country that was leading economically former Yugoslavia, and for this reason, predestined to be part of the EU and NATO immediately after the independence, is far from being true. The story is quite different.

Let me share with you a personal moment from a few years back. I was having dinner with the President of Catalunya, Carles Puigdemont i Casamajó, who asked me in the month and the weeks before he declared the independence of Catalunya, to support and advise him on how to follow the Slovenian way of independence. My task was not easy: I had to understand what he had in mind. After some discussions, I told him that Catalonia's declaration of independence would not have

had anything in common with Slovenia's case. The Puigdemont project missed some of the fundamental characteristics that allowed Slovenia to quickly declare independence in 1991, such as a clear bureaucratic and military structure, parallel to the Yugoslav one. I asked many times what the next steps would be after the declaration of independence: Puigdemont replied that quickly after the independence Cataluña would join both NATO and the EU. As I stressed him, that was not the Slovenian path towards integration within the EU and NATO. Slovenia needed thirteen years to complete the Euro-Atlantic integration. At the end of our discussion, he told me that he would find a way to declare independence. At that point, I greeted Puigdemont and told him that he would find out that he was on the wrong side of the story.

Why the Slovenian path was so long, even if everybody was so happy to accept Slovenia immediately at the beginning of the night? The problem was not so much in the international environment as within Slovenia. It is my focus, and I will go now deeper into this point.

The process to join organizations such as NATO or the European Union includes two dimensions, one external and one internal. The latter was the case in Slovenia, and especially from Slovenia to the South. Slovenia represents the limes with a different world. The country went to the referendum in 2003, twelve years after the declaration of independence, to ask the citizens to vote yes and no for the EU and yes or no for NATO on the same day. Well, if Slovenia today is a member of NATO, we have to be grateful to the political elite of that time, not to the citizens.

The political elite understood that Slovenia was absolutely pro EU and not pro-NATO, and we are talking about Slovenia, the northern and most developed place within the former Yugoslavia, something that was "predestined". For two years, the Slovenian politicians founded NGOs, shaped organizations, shaped media messages and public debates to convince Slovenian citizens to vote Yes for NATO. The final result, on the same day, at the same referendum, was that 90% of the Slovenians were pro-EU and 60% pro-NATO. The Slovenian political elite of that time completed its mission. Then, I think this is a sort of benchmark for all the future member countries that come from the Balkan region. Once a country decides to join the EU or NATO, then political elites must commit themselves to shape the internal opinion for such a step.

What was the great plus of Slovenia? It was that the external environment was positive to its accession. EU was ready to accept Slovenia, nobody was against, there was no second thought about that, even for NATO if you want. Today, or at least in the last five years, the perception of the EU from the Balkan is completely different. The EU seems no longer able to lead the process. The Juncker Commission declared there would not have been any other enlargement in the region in the 2014-2019 quinquennium.

The declaration was not a bolt from the blue, and it was something that we



knew. Nevertheless, it say it loud, it was a political mistake, something that was closing citizens expectations and changing the positive attitude of the region towards the EU. Another big mistake was represented by the unacceptable false moves EU did on the North Macedonian issue. Both mistakes created that vacuum where the United States jumped in, taking it over and announcing the Three Seas Initiative. That was because Brussels gave the idea that he had no clear vision for the region's future.

So, the current situation is very complicated, we have many mistakes, we have countries that have to fight inside to choose their future, and a region in turmoil. The solution to overcome the deadlock lies in the outside environment, or Brussels if you want, that has to be stable and give clear direction and option for the future of the Balkans.



# Question Time with



Kosovo and Serbia economic normalization agreements signature (4/9/2020).









DAMON WILSON

*Executive Vice President, Atlantic Council, Washington D.C.*

## INTERVIEW

Interviewer:

ANDREW SPANNAUS

*Journalist and Political Commentator, Milan*



**Andrew Spannaus (AS)**

My first question for Mr Wilson is concentrated on the European Union itself. If we look at the summit that the Atlantic Council recently held on Balkan integration, we see that one of the key issues which was focused on are the Four Freedoms of the European Union. At a time when many people might expect that in Washington there is little attention to what's going on in Europe, we actually see that there is room for collaboration. I would like to start with asking you to tell us about what progress was made at the summit.

**Damon Wilson (DW)**

Well, it's a pleasure to join you and the NATO Defense College Foundation from Washington. I just have to be truthful and say that I wish I could be with you in Rome. I'd rather be in person for this event, but I really want to thank the leadership of Ambassador Minuto-Rizzo – with whom I had the opportunity to work while I was at NATO when he was Deputy Secretary General – for his continuously leadership and spotlighting of the Western Balkans. And Andrew, to your question while I am here in Washington at this time and we are in the crazy season. We are in the midst of a heated campaign; we have had serious and real challenges in this country from the handling of Covid-19, the economic challenge that stems from that, the anti-racist movement and the racial upheaval we have seen in this country as we head to election day. You asked a question about the Americans and their role in the Balkans and how we think about the European Union. First, I want to say, we come to this with the clear conviction that the United States must remain engaged; it's in the American interest to remain engaged. But we have also come to this with the degree of humility in understanding that it's the will of the people of the region that must drive their agenda and build their ultimate destination – that is the European Union. We see our role at the Atlantic Council as facilitators, a catalyst for stronger US-EU cooperation in the



region in term of integration into the Euro-Atlantic community. That's why the Atlantic Council hosted the WB6 leaders from across the regions. We are looking to give oxygen and energy to the ideas of the leaders themselves helping to promote a more rapid economic recovery post Covid-19 through the breaking down of regional barriers to create a more credible and viable internal market to be more attractive to investors.

That's why we want to champion some of those ideas from the region. But also, advance their aspiration to be closer to the European Union, because we see transatlantic interests aligned in that respect. So, that's why the Atlantic Council brought these leaders together, in some respects to raise a novel political ambition to help promote a more integrated regional economic space as a way to facilitate a greater and more efficient use of the recovery funds coming out of Covid-19 before the Sofia summit and to show American support for the European strategy.

AS

Just very briefly, could you give us a little bit of detail about the type of discussion you had in terms of infrastructure and connectivity. We have an audience of experts here, some of them would be interest to go into a little bit more detail.

DW

We're about to get these six leaders, sincerely we are urging them on the path to the Sofia Summit that is actually next month in an effort to try to identify some of the obstacles ahead in reaching this agreement. Part of the significance of the Western Balkans Six summit was that all of these countries came to the table, including Kosovo, which is quite significant. We spent some time behind the scenes working with the delegations to get them all to understand there could be greater economic benefit for regional growth, and so part of the political step was to get them all on board for a common political agenda and then really begin to lay out the next steps.

One of the biggest ideas, is how to remove some of the barriers the Western Balkan Six have to their EU neighbours. This could be brought to the table in Sofia. How can they facilitate the so-called green lanes that allow export transports to cross the borders during the Covid-19 crises and how much of that progress can be maintained permanently? That's part of the commitments from the summit, and now we would like to see a possible extension to EU neighbours.

AS

So, we have something new, of course, from Washington and in the area. The Serbia-Kosovo agreement surprised some people. I had Serbian colleagues who said: Vučić could never recognize Kosovo as a country. But something new has happened here; how big a step forward is this?



DW

This is a pretty significant development and I know in some cases and in some places in Europe there has been a lot scepticism. It has not been healthy that there is a little gap, if you will, between Europeans and Americans in coordinating their strategies. There has been some healthy competition that serves as a catalyst for diplomacy – both in Brussels and in Washington. And so, what happened here at the White House is significant in that it really helps reinforces the process of normalization. This time it focusses on the economic side for Kosovo and in Serbia learning the habits of cooperation, the regularity of breaking down some of the political taboos and getting people focused on the fact that they have some common economic interests.

This is not a comprehensive agreement that is completely done, but it does help generate some momentum and some positive movement. I think it's a good thing to be welcomed and to be built upon. I think that the heavy lifting does remain vital, but I think there is a sense here that it is also a way to begin to build a fundamentally different relationship with Serbia. The United States has been extraordinary close to Kosovo for obvious reasons since 1999, supporting Kosovo in '99 to stop fighting, the declaration of independence, and to support Kosovo in its first two decades of existence. Part of what has been pointed to within the last couple of years is the normalization of the US-Serbian relationship which is also significant. And I think that's one of the things that sometimes gets lost to the equation, that's another part of the normalization.

AS

The Trump administration, without going into the strictly political aspects, has certainly taken a new approach in foreign policy, which we have seen in various places: first using tough talk, but then offering economic development, offering incentives and aid. At times I've called this approach "make money not war". To risk being a bit blasphemous here in Rome, could we ask if this is a form of "peace through development"? Is this the approach you see developing?

DW

Well, these things don't work by themselves and that's why I think there must be an overarching strategy. A few trade deals do not resolve all the political challenges of the Balkans. On the other hand, part of this is creating a momentum, creating a track record, creating habits of cooperation, building confidence, and this we can do through one solid step then another. They can hopefully build upon each other to create a comprehensive set of arrangements. Some people might exaggerate what happened. But on the other hand, I prefer to see this as a bit of a long-term process; now dealing with the specifics of agreements and hopefully that creates some momentum and some confidence that can allow for the next set of agreements. So, the White House rightly put the emphasis on economic trade, trying

to provide a little bit more of the economic incentive for a wider need to be into a normal relationship between Serbia and Kosovo, while recognizing some of the difficult political issues very much remain on the agenda in the process dialogue.

AS

We were reminded in the first panel that this process poses internal issues in various countries, of accepting the change, moving forward. The question is if the elites and institutions in these countries will be able to convince the population. There were recently elections in North Macedonia and in Montenegro. How do you see (maybe in two different ways) these elections as moving the process forward, or creating red flags?

DW

Well, I think you hit it on the head when you said it's part of preparing the people when I think sometimes that's not what has been done, in particular in Serbia-Kosovo context of preparing the population for what normalization looks like, for what this means between the two countries, and so part of the process that's unfolding is to help people understand what it means, what the implications are, what the benefits are, what some of the trades off are in getting the public debate going inside Kosovo and Serbia, where obviously you need progress on a bilateral agenda that is super controversial in both countries.

You know we've seen this summer how vibrant Kosovo's democracy is. It's really difficult to keep a common approach towards controversial issues like the agenda with Serbia. And so, I think this is the importance of peace in the equation.

You mentioned the election both in Macedonia and Montenegro. This is part of what we've been through with the dramatic populist backlash across the transatlantic space, even in my own country, over Covid-19 and all of the economic challenges. So, we see this in North Macedonia and Montenegro is an ultimately healthy, constructive process. We saw a government that took great risk to reach the normalization agreement with Greece and now was able to hold on and to be re-elected in Skopje and now too hopefully looking forward on a deepening reform agenda to accelerate NATO membership and accelerate its path towards the European Union. Not going to be easy.

In Montenegro this was a watershed election, also it was super complicated in some respects. A changed Montenegro can be a good thing when you have had a party in power as long as it has been, and this is very complicated given the nature and diverse interests of the opposition. Some of them do not believe in the existence of the Montenegrin state. This is messy, this is murky, but then this is what democracy is and what elections are. I feel pretty good that these countries are going to make it through. Part of what we have seen in the Balkans, in the past couple of years, was an erosion of democratic institutions.

I think in part, this was a reflection of what was happening across the Europe and in my own country. If *we* can get this right at the core, I have hope that we will get this right in the Balkans as well. People going to participate in this election, participating in parliament, making the democratic institutions work, the checks and balances. It's not just all about undermining the existing institutions so that's what's unfolding in North Macedonia and in Montenegro in very different ways and it will be difficult but I'm optimistic that this is a really positive development overall for the region.

AS

We don't have much time left, but there are two things that I would like to hear more about. One concerns China: it has been touched on a bit before, but the role of China, and its increasing role in the Balkans. In particular as regards NATO, which is now beginning to focus on China. There is the idea that maybe in the future NATO will be more focused on China than on Russia. How might this play out in the Balkans?

DW

This is a very huge issue in my own country. You've seen a scene change in the debate where issue number one, two, and three is China essentially, and you see a redelegation of how the United States is going to manage relations with China. It's hugely interdependent on the economic side and raise concerns in certain industries. In a lot of areas, we have heated debates on global supply chains and Chinese goods, but we also see challenges that China presents on the political and security fronts, as well. I think that's what's at stake here, any open economy needs to be able to benefit from certain Chinese investments, but what we've seen comes with these strings attached, with their political agenda, and long-term security implications.

But the issue is not to do it, the issue is how to do it in common concert with other democracies, so we have a common approach to help engage China in a way that is ok, in a way that can help with job growth and development of infrastructure, in a way that we can protect security industries and protect secure communications on the 5G issue.

I think this is what we shouldn't expect one Balkan country will be able to manage on its own. In any negotiation with China, there must be a concerted, united approach between the United States, NATO, and the European Union. In the United States' experience, related to the Balkans, how are we going to deal with Chinese influence, not influence through the manipulation and distortion of markets, but through the acceleration of development.

This is why I think the US is showing up with the International Development Financial Corporation. DFC is putting an office in Belgrade to cover the entire region. This is a very important development to help focus on private capital and

private investments, which brings economic rule of law, which is really important to the long-term development of these economies. That is a different model than you are seeing on offer from the Chinese approach.

AS

My final question is to see if I can get you to give us an optimistic view for the years and decades ahead. There has been talk with the Abraham Accords of what the Middle East could look like sometime in the future, comparing it to Europe in the decades after World War II. What might the Balkans look like in twenty to thirty years?

DW

You know, in some respects, we can be proud on how far the Balkans have come since the bloody wars of the nineties. In other respects, we can still be disappointed when we have high standards. I think that this is important to remember, the entire European experiment, all the vision of the European Coal and Steel Community, of the European Union, of NATO itself is in a process in which former historic adversaries become partners, become intertwined economically, and then really become allies.

I think that ultimately, we will see the economic future of the Western Balkans as an integrated economic marketplace integrated in the European supply chain as part of a democratic trading regime. But it is also hard, in the sense that the region needs to come up with some historic reconciliation in some deeper political ties. Through the process of EU enlargement, through the process of building partnerships with the NATO allies, and I think that ultimately part of what we need to understand is that tectonic shifts are happening in the world and we can't lose sight that the Balkans are the place where everything is unfolding.

There is a much bigger issue at stake, and we need a free world – and the Balkans are part of this free world – to be aligned with how we can actually take on some of these greater global challenges. I think we must accelerate the process of normalization, integration, economic development, and EU accession. That's something that I hope to see the US support regardless.

# Session II

## THE BALKANS' DRIVING FORCES





Saints Clement and Panteleimon Church at Plaosnik in Ohrid, North Macedonia











ARNE SANNES BJØRNSTAD

*Special Representative for the Western Balkans, Royal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Oslo*

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## SOCIETAL PRESSURES VS. ESTABLISHMENTS' RESISTANCE IN THE BALKANS

Let me start just pointing to polls taken on the Western Balkans. They consistently show that the population lacks a belief in a better future for themselves and for their own country. Peoples are frustrated with corruption and the misuse of power by ruling political and economic elites that often seems more interested in obtaining and keeping levers of power than in changing society for the better. Instead of accepting new defeats against a system stacked against them, many go looking for a better life in Western Europe in search of a better life. They vote for change with their feet, not with the ballot paper.

Sometimes, however, they do use the ballot paper in support of change, as in the elections in North Macedonia in 2016, in Kosovo last year and in Montenegro this year.

More often, they do not: it may be partly because they do not believe the opposition has a fair chance of winning; or because they distrust the opposition, as experience shows that, when in government, former opposition parties have been quick in learning the ways of their predecessors. And we must remember that these are societies with a history of clientelism. Citizens may not be happy with their sort, but are afraid to lose their jobs or other kind of benefits, if there is a change of power.

However, I believe it is more basic explanation. Polls also confirm that these are conservative societies, often preoccupied by identity issues and the past. Many fear change and disorder, and will choose “law and order” over “the rule of law”.

If we take EU member states as an example, they resemble Poland and Hungary more than Sweden and Austria. A substantial part of the voters lives *in* the less developed part of the countries where the economy and opinions are less ready to step into the world or Western Europe than the population in the capitals and their hinterland, where the opposition usually does better. At least the more liberal opposition, because you will often see that opposition parties doing well in the countryside are of the more nationalistic and conservative or populist kind.

If we want to help the Western Balkans to achieve stability and sustainable economic progress, we need to engage both the general public, the opposition parties and the ruling elites. The general public must be put in a position where they feel sufficiently secure and well informed to vote following their conscience and long-term interest without fearing for their jobs, harassment or other forms social pressure. Although it is useful to have observers the election day, they cannot help in this respect.

We must also be consistent with the opposition and government parties alike. Some opposition parties behave constructively, but others hardly live up to the standards we should demand. And as for the ruling elite, we have to make credible the threat that it is more damaging for them to keep on to power than accept the outcome of free and fair elections.

The biggest challenges we take upon ourselves, is to speak to those that do not-necessarily agree with us already. We need to reach out beyond the classical urban civil society. The strongest societal pressures in the deep country the are often playing hand-in-hand with the elite's resistance to change. We must help Western Balkans becoming liberal, democratic societies.



REMZI LANI

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## THREE CRISES IN THE BALKANS: TRUST, CHOICE AND HOPE

I believe that Rome is the right place to have such a debate. This year marks the start of the fourth decade of the post-Communist transition that has been dominated by two main narratives.

The first narrative is the *narrative of the past*: the Communist legacy, and the wars legacies.

The second narrative is the *narrative of the future*: EU integration, EU perspective and Thessaloniki agenda.

What has been missing is the *narrative of the present*. Between past disputes and bright future, we forgot somehow the present.

Last year, in January, my good friend Ivan Krastev was writing an article on the Balkans for The New York Times. We were talking on the phone and I said to him that I had a metaphor for him (and Ivan loves metaphors). I said, with a good dose of irony, that the transition in the Balkans is over, but we did not pass from dictatorship to democracy, but we shifted *from repressive regimes to depressive regimes*.

Of course, a metaphor is only a metaphor, I understand that, but what I prefer to call *the fiction of transition* needs to be analysed and examined now. What I think is that people in our countries do not feel that they are living in transition anymore, but they feel of living in what we can call *Transitocracy*.

Let's do some mathematics. We have passed 30 years of transition since the fall of Communism, and in the best case, we will be over join the EU, being optimistic, not before 15 years. Then, in theory, the transition is over. (I also doubt very much in this theory, when looking at Poland and Hungary.) Let us keep the theory anyway, and based on some simple mathematics ( $30+15=45$ ) our transition will last 45 years, exactly the same period as Communism lasted.

I believe that half a century cannot be considered a passage or a bridge. I think somehow it is a system, *a system of Transitocracy*. Most of what we consider the transitory features actually are becoming permanent features: weak institutions

versus strong leaders, weak rule of law, a corrupt judiciary, endless political conflicts, extreme polarization and so on.

What we see in the Balkans today are three crises which on one hand *cause*, and the other hand *reflect* what I call depression.

*First is the crisis of trust.* Balkan societies suffer from low levels of trust. Albanians trusts 95% NATO, 94% EU, and only 15 to 25% trust our political parties or judiciary. Albanians trust the democratic system, but they do not trust the institutions of the system and we see a large gap between political elites and the public.

*Second is the crisis of choice.* Tired and disappointed by thirty years of transition, a large segment of the society thinks that they (politicians) are all the same. The lack of elites' circulation strengthens this feeling and, now me quoting Krastev, when people go to elections the choice looks like between Coca-Cola and Pepsi Cola. And, young people tweet, but they don't vote, which is another problem.

*The third is the crisis of hope.* Maybe, Albania has been changing enough fast for me but it is clear that it has not been changing fast enough for my daughter. Unfortunately, Balkans is not a hope-land these days. Here is the gap, and young people in the Balkans are simply living. The demographic decline is a serious problem for all our societies.

In this context, there are fears of *explosion* in the Balkans. We have seen this expressed also in the Western media. I am not sure that this will happen. I am not sure about politicians, but I think that people have learned the lessons of the past. What I see as more probable is the *implosion* of the fabric of society and the model of governance in Balkan countries.

The crises of trust, choice, and hope have to be put in the context of what has to be and supposed to be the main transformation driver, EU integration. Early in 2004, the Amato Commission where Ivan Vejvoda and myself have been involved somehow, concluded that the *costs of isolation of the region would have been much higher than the costs of integration*. I believe this point is still relevant.

But actually, what we have seen since then, and it is fifteen years, was a *non-coherent policy of mixing of enlargement policy with containment policy*. You come to Rome and you go back home happy (Italy has adopted an enlargement policy), and then you go to Paris and you go back home unhappy (France has adopted a containment policy). I think it is time now for sincerity and clarity, because constructive ambiguity is not constructive anymore.

We have been working very much on the assumptions that EU integration, as we have seen until now, will be an agent of change. Yes, but not always. It can also be an agent of the status quo, as it happened recently. There is a question to be raised: how happened that all the Balkan countries, during the last five years, are closer to Brussels, in their formal relationship with EU, and are now less democratic and oscillate between stagnation and decline? At least most of them are less

democratic, not to be categorical and to recognize some positive developments, especially in North Macedonia.

Since we are talking about driving forces, there are two driving forces that we cannot ignore. The first is *populism*, which is popular also in the Balkans. And the second is *new nationalism*, which not much a Balkan type of nationalism of the last century, but more a Central European type of nationalism of this century.

There is a debate on the new methodology of the EU accession for Western Balkan countries. My colleague from Sarajevo, Srêcko Latal, in an excellent paper he wrote recently, has been talking on how to reset and to re-dynamize the process after the March decision on Albania and North Macedonia, which was an important European moment for the region.

Srêcko proposed to split the process into two parts. The first part is the *immediate process*, which means investments, infrastructure, job creations, green economy, and the second is the *long-term process*, focused on the rule of law. Somehow this is a proposal which reconciles the present with the future, today with tomorrow.

Last point, on geopolitics. Recently, Pierre-Mirell wrote a paper in which he said that Balkans region is “*an exclusive geopolitical zone for a geopolitical European Commission*”, as Ursula von der Leyen described her Commission. True. This Commission is much more geopolitical than the previous one. It is not applying only an *aquis communautaire*-driven approach or a technocratic approach as the previous Commission. It has a more geopolitical approach.

Nevertheless, EU geo-strategy seems to be driven more by Russian-Chinese-Turkey fears rather than by European Union clearly defined interest. Europe has to see Balkans based on its interest, not based on the fact that it wants to stop other third parties.

The second point is that Russia, Turkey, China, Gulf countries, even the United States can afford losing in the Balkans, but Europe does not have the luxury losing on its territory. It will be a serious geo-political defeat. The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell.

Yes, geo-politics is important. But I think that it is not an argument to ask or to offer a discount on democratic standards for the Balkan countries. The EU cannot negotiate democratic values, cannot negotiate freedom of expression, for example.

But, on the other hand, the degree, the level that Balkan countries align with EU foreign and security policies, has to be an argument for more attention and not an argument for taking things for granted. If *two chairs* or *four chairs policies* of a Balkan country are somehow accepted, this might encourage the others to do the same.

Seen from the region's perspective geopolitics now has become more complex than in the past.

It used to be much easy, it was West versus the Rest (or third actors as we are used to call them). Albania, been a very pro-Western country had no problems of orientation or accommodation in this context.

Now, the region finds itself between Europe and the United States. Our trans-atlantic allies are not on the same page on many things today. This was seen clearly this year in the case of Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. Brussels and Washington DC, and especially Berlin and Washington DC were not at the same page.

Plus, sometimes we also find ourselves between different NATO or EU member states that play different games or have different interests. For example, Albania can find itself between our two neighbours, both strategic partners of my country, Greece and Turkey, who are seriously clashing not far from us.

In this complex geo-political context, it is not easy to navigate.





VALBONA ZENELI

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## STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESS OF REGIONAL ECONOMIES. HOW TO OVERCOME UNSUSTAINABILITY

I wanted to start replying to a question raised during the first panel, which I thought it was a great panel. What is the role of Italy? In my opinion, Italy is one of the most important players for the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Balkans. It has been an ally and has been an advocate of the region. It also has invested a lot in the region over the last thirty years. I am a living example, and I would speak about that kind of investment. I was among the first generation of students that came to study in Italy thanks to the scholarship of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to whom I am forever grateful.

Investment in human capital and capacity building is much more important than investment in infrastructure. So, let me bring a couple of points when it comes to challenges to economic development and integration of the region. I think that economic security is the main security challenge in the Western Balkans. It stems from a never-ending transition process in a toxic combination of poverty, weak rule of law and corruption. What we have seen, over the last few years, has been the lack of the much-promised convergence with the West.

Right now, the average income per capita in the region is only 13% of the one of the European Union. Although there has been progress and economic development in the region, the catch-up process has not been what we wished for.

According to different studies, it will take the region between seventy and a hundred years to catch up with the level of living in Western European countries. Also, we should not forget the Covid-19 recession, that will hit the region very hard, and the two previous recessions. In 2008-2009, although the region was not part of the financial system, it suffered the spill over consequences of the crisis in Europe.

Also, there was another crisis in 2012 with another economic recession in the region. So, throughout the last twelve years since the financial crisis, we have seen the stalling of the economic development of the area. Unfortunately, the numbers do not lie.

My second point will tackle the brain drain problem. It stems from what we see in terms of the economic insecurity in the region. What motivates people to leave their home and their own countries is the economic and institutional gap with the West. It is not only about economic reasons, but it is about governance reasons. They both push people out from their own countries. For a very long-time immigration has been seen as an opportunity in the region. Even now, that we are speaking thirty years after the opening of the region, remittances make up more than 10% of the regional GDP.

Of course, it was money that came into the countries to fuel consumption but also most importantly, I would say, was also used as a social valve in the region to keep economic stability. In my opinion, this massive immigration from the region exacerbates the acute shortages of skilled workers. For this reason, we should not look at that only as an opportunity, but actually, it might turn into a security challenge in the future. It has to do with the fact that we have an unstructured circular migration. We are not seeing a structured circular migration, with people coming back to the region with knowledge, education and financial resources.

The third point has to do with the challenges that hamper economic growth rates in the Balkans. Poorly functioning institutions, although were also brought up in the first panel, informal economies, low productivity levels, but also the lack of regional integration, have been the main challenges for the economic development in the region. Regional economic integration is key for the future development of the Western Balkans. I believe that you have to go through those steps to be prepared for economic integration in the EU market, and in the global economy. Right now, the countries are too weak to compete on their own in the European market or the global market. Just an example, the region attracts 0,23% (I am bringing the number on purpose) of the global stock of foreign direct investments, considering that European Union is the biggest investor in the global economy with more than 40% of the investment.

The fourth point has to do with the great powers competition and China. This point was discussed in the first panel. Now, I would like to see it not only from the economic perspective but also from a security perspective. In my opinion, Beijing is using easy money and soft power to gain very quickly influence in the region and we are not seeing that only in Serbia, but throughout the region. It is using its appeal of economic miracle maker, and somehow people are buying into that rhetoric. Of course, China views the Balkans as a gateway commercial platform to Western Europe. Instead, I think that Balkans are a low hanging fruit for China, for their investments, for their interests and also geopolitical ones. Beijing of course, right now is taking advantage of poor infrastructure and infrastructure gap with western Europe, lack of public procurement rules, poor labour regulation, but above all lack of transparency, that is what was pushing all these new deals. Lack of transparency and accountability and lack of public discourse about those deals.

Of course, the European Union remains the major trading partner for the re-

gion, with 72% of the total trade. The region is exporting more towards the EU than importing. China is the second trading partner for the area, with almost 6%, however, trade is heavily tilted in favour of China: they are mainly Chinese exports in the region. When it comes to investments, right now, Chinese investment makes up 20% of the foreign direct investments in the region. But, at the end of the day, they are not investments. They are loans, 80% of them are loans that create even more security and governance challenges in the region. I am not saying that the region does not need Chinese investments or from other countries. What I am concerned regards the reduction of the standards in terms of doing business and how it might affect in the long-term the EU integration.

My last point is regarding what can be some opportunities in the future. The opportunity of positive integration with the EU cannot be missed, but of course, has to be earned. So, right now I think we have a moment that as a result of Covid-19, or maybe revised production and transportation networks in Europe, the region has the chance to be considered as a destination to recalibrate the EU supply chains. But it has to be considered as a whole, and not by single countries.

Of course, the EU integration will take long-time. The West needs an interim strategy for the region. It has to focus on social and economic development. Most important, when I say the West, it is not just the European Union, is the transatlantic response to the region.





LUBOMIR IVANOV

*former Permanent Representative of Bulgaria, NATO,  
Brussels*

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## A BULGARIAN ANGLE ON THE REGION

I think that this conference is a clear indication that supports my first argument, which is about the strategic importance of the region. It goes without saying at first glance but is not so simple. If we look at the agenda from Thessaloniki in 2003, at that time it seemed that it's going to be always high on the agenda of the integration path. Instead, maybe because what we can call integration fatigue or something else, the integration process started to go through ups and downs. Bulgaria was among those that joined both NATO and EU in a reasonable time-frame. Delays do not always reflect the lack of preparation by the candidate countries. Sometimes, delays happen because of the absence of a focussed vision or flexible approach, from the EU or NATO side, capable of supporting the integration even after the change of conditions in the international environment. This has a direct impact on the positive transformation power of the integration processes.

At the time when I was visiting Western Balkans countries as Permanent Representative of Bulgaria to NATO, question number one was always: how they could benefit from NATO or EU membership? Even about the EU, there were some second thoughts. I was giving an example that was also absolutely true. When we received the invitation in Prague to join NATO in 2002, we immediately had significant growth in foreign direct investments levels, that was a direct result of the increased trust in our credibility. Of course, that was a time of booming economy all over the world. In Bulgaria, the growth was about 6-6,5% of the GDP. Unfortunately, such an effect cannot be guaranteed anymore today. Nowadays, we must remain committed to keeping a focussed approach in the region, maintaining a significant influence in the Balkans and promoting a positive attitude towards the integration process in those countries that are still pending in this respect.

This is why, when we held the Presidency of the EU Council in 2018, our primary focus was in giving a renewed impulse to support the Thessaloniki agenda. Partially we succeeded. Some of the positive result achieved at the Sofia Summit had a follow up in Zagreb, but events we could not foresee, like the Covid-19

crisis, are not helpful. Now, we must react to the current situation to strengthen the attractiveness of the integration process. Maybe, I will come back to this later, when we will talk about the Berlin Process where we are in the chair together with the Republic of North Macedonia.

Many Western Balkans countries think that the above-mentioned delay is pointing out that the integration process will slow-down for a long-time and their efforts and reforms do not make a difference. I want to stress that it is vital to persuade Western Balkans countries to go ahead with their reform process. It is crucial because the more they will implement reforms, the faster these countries will be invited and integrated both in the European Union and NATO. So, it is essential to keep the bar high: lowering it will not have a positive impact on the reform agenda in these countries.

Of course, NATO and the EU should do their part and use all the means at their disposal to foster the enlargement process, and finally meet the expectation of the Western Balkans countries and their citizens. Also, it is crucial to avoid bringing regional tension and unresolved bilateral problems into the EU and NATO. It is a matter of good neighbourliness. We cannot keep our eyes shut about that, maintaining it at the top of our agenda: doing differently would be counterproductive; the same applies to international law, international obligations or bilateral treaties. This obligation has to be clearly understood by those countries that maybe consider that this is not a must.

I want to add just a couple of words about the destabilising influence of third states whose values are quite different from ours. Russian influence remains a concern and a serious problem, but their instruments are limited, they tend to overestimate their own capacity if you want. Of course, also in military terms, they don't match NATO capabilities. Progress has also been made in the region in terms of energy security, affecting a powerful pressure means by Russia.

For China, it's much more complicated because they are trying to beat us on our turf in terms of competitiveness and, if you want, market mechanisms. Do not forget that in 2008 they did not do bailouts, the West did. It is something that is increasing the problem for us because it makes their economy more competitive. So, this requires a very in-depth analysis and a much more comprehensive strategy; it will not work through political unity only. The problem is rather basic and related to the proper functioning of the financial and economic mechanisms.

We are paying close attention to how things are developing between Belgrade and Pristina, and I'm rather optimistic about that. Latest results achieved through the deal signed in Washington, which Damon Wilson mentioned during his interview, are good, but we need to remain vigilant: tensions lie beneath the surface.

Finally, I want to stress the current Berlin Process Presidency which was already mentioned. In November, we are going to have a summit of the Berlin process in Sofia, where tangible results will be the focus of our efforts so that they are visible and truly felt in the region, including the idea for a regional economic zone, also

an action plan for the integration of the Roma populations, a system of possibly open the borders with ID cards. These things are going to revitalize a new hope, giving an impulse to a renewed economic development.

All that I said so far gives a clear answer to one comment made during the first session about the so-called Bulgarian attempt to block the integration process of the Republic of North Macedonia. In my opinion, all the efforts that I mentioned do not allow absolutely such an assessment. Clearly, we want the treaties to be observed. Otherwise, we are the most active proponents of the integration including of the Republic of North Macedonia. This was underscored also by the bilateral treaty that was reached between our two countries before the Prespa agreement, so I believe that this comment was absolutely unfounded.





# Special Intervention



The Monastery of Visoki Dečani is secured by NATO troops with the significant participation of the Italian Army.









MICHELE RISI

*Commander, Kosovo Force (KFOR), NATO, Pristina*

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## SPECIAL INTERVENTION

First of all, thank you for the welcoming words, let me thank Ambassador Minuto-Rizzo for this invitation and for your attention to the KFOR mission and its role in the Western Balkans. Before getting to the core tasks of the military mission, I would like to frame the context of the operation by tracing briefly its history from its birth till today.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> June 1999, following the Kumanovo Military Technical Agreement that sanctioned the end of the 78-days NATO intervention and putting an end to the massacres, KFOR entered Kosovo. By deploying 50.000 soldiers, NATO worked to monitor the withdrawal of Serbian forces and stabilise the area.

Endorsed by Resolution 1244 of the United Nations Security Council, KFOR carried out with effectiveness and impartiality the plans of the Atlantic Council. First of all, incursions and threats by the Belgrade forces were avoided, and together with the UN Police, order and security were preserved.

It started the demilitarisation of the Kosovo Liberation Army guerrillas; assistance was provided for the return of refugees and displaced persons from North Macedonia as well as for the neutralising of 23.000 landmines and 7.500 other unexploded ordnance and the safety of historical and artistic heritage, including 26 monasteries and many churches; it supported the creation of civil institutions in close coordination with other international partners.

Following the 2008 unilateral declaration of independence, KFOR (both since its presence derives from Resolution 1244 and due to the fact that four NATO members do not recognize Kosovo) has maintained what we refer to as a *neutral status*, i.e., we do not take a position on the sovereignty issue.

As a result, our *modus operandi vis-à-vis* the Institutions in Kosovo and the non-recognizers can be challenging considering that, among the non-recognizers, Greece, Romania and Slovakia are Troop Contributing Nations and Spain is not.

Over the years, international partners (UN, OSCE and the EU) have reduced their presence and competencies, relinquishing many of them to the Institutions



in Kosovo. KFOR, while also duly showing a reduction of its military force (currently around 3.500 soldiers from 26 countries including 18 NATO members) has kept intact its role as the only security force unanimously recognized. But this can be explained by the fact that now we are complemented by the Kosovo Police and the Kosovo Security Force in assuring security and freedom of movement.

Today KFOR has the mission of maintaining the security of Kosovo as 3rd responder in order to facilitate the normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo. Since its establishment, KFOR has had to deal with a much-compromised security situation. On the one hand, there were the Albanian communities whose human rights were violated by the Belgrade regime; on the other are the Serbs and other minorities who suffered violent retaliations by the Albanian Kosovars.

In this spiral of inter-ethnic hatred, KFOR has worked to protect the Kosovar Serbian communities trying to dissuade the Albanians from the desire for revenge. Ending the violence reassured the population and laid the foundations for Kosovo's future stability.

Today there are six security challenges in Kosovo, the first of which I have already introduced: the inter-ethnic tensions and then five other knots. These are primarily the shortcomings of the young Kosovar institutions, that certainly need to be strengthened.

During my ten months of duty, the first three were characterized by the resigning of Ramush Haradinaj executive; the following two by the government of the Self Determination Party (led by Albin Kurti) and then, after a decision by the Constitutional Court, by the government of Avdullah Hoti; this coalition of various parties, led by the Democratic League of Kosovo, obtained a majority in an extraordinary session of the Kosovo Assembly by just one vote.

Then, the long-standing dispute between the monastic authority of Decane and, more generally, the Serbian-Orthodox Church with the Kosovar administration at various levels, whose harsh outcome has been a sheer violation of the rule of law.

A case in point is the current issue of Decane in which we witness the persistent municipal opposition to proceed with the cadastral registration of 24 hectares adjacent to the monastery, in execution of a sentence of the Constitutional Court, or the attempt of a company appointed by the Municipality to rebuild the road surface within the Special Protective Zone without the consent of the Implementation Monitoring Council that is made by the EU, the OSCE, the Serbian Orthodox Church authorities, as well as other Institutions in Kosovo, in particular the Ministry of the Environment and Special Planning. The event elicited strong protests from the International Community and the Quint ambassadors as well as other international organizations, strongly condemning the act that could have triggered a dangerous escalation in the security situation.

It is worth noting that an apparently nonviolent and local incident has produced a reverberation that led the Serbian President Vucic to ask for this topic to be in-

cluded in the upcoming sessions of the Dialogue, that was also mentioned in the document that was signed in Washington on the 4<sup>th</sup> of September.

As COMKFOR (Commander of the KFOR) I practically travelled back and forth to the Monastery for several days and with the help of my forces stationed in Peja-Pec we avoided an escalation of tensions during the most acute crisis period in mid-August. The safeguarding role of KFOR was recognized not only by Bishop Teodosije and Abbot Sava, but by Prime Minister Hoti himself who instructed, upon my request, the KP (Kosovo Police) to stop all construction works of the road within the Special Protective Zone.

This event unfortunately has warned once more that corruption and an illegal approach to public goods is part of the weakness of the young institutions. I see this as a factor that risks compromising the credibility of the local institutions also on the international level, which Serbia exploits in fact in its narrative aimed at discrediting the Kosovar establishment.

To these ones, we add the fourth factor: Wahhabi religious fundamentalism, against which the authorities of Pristina have started a very ambitious program of recovery and reintegration with the International Organization for Migration and the United States, especially in favour of foreign fighters returning from Syria and Iraq. Let me repeat that 387 foreign fighters left Kosovo from 2014 to 2018: it is a lot for a small country.

The fifth factor is linked to immigration and is known to be a phenomenon that does not only concern the Mediterranean region – actually one of the Balkan routes used by migrants passes through Kosovo – favouring the trafficking of human lives and other episodes of organized crime. Illegal immigration is a further source of tension as Belgrade accuses Pristina's authorities of not adequately tackling this issue.

Last year in Kosovo the number of registered migrants amounted to about 1.200 people, of which about 250 were asylum-seekers. Although numerically it may not be alarming, arrivals have more than doubled compared to 2018.

Last but not least, the request of indictment for war crimes against President Thaci, the former President of the Assembly and current leader of the PDK, Kadri Veseli, and other former UCK fighters, issued in June by the Specialist Court in The Hague.

The reviewing judge has not yet deliberated on the case that remains Damocles' sword on the old establishment still in prominent positions within the public administration. Likewise, last week the Kosovo Specialist Court carried out the first arrests of three Kosovo Liberation Army veterans for war crimes. In light of the security situation outlined above, we can better understand the great importance that the presence of KFOR assumes in terms of deterrence.

This presence, firstly denies Serbia any options for using conventional and non-conventional forces, which would find themselves in contact with KFOR and therefore with NATO if they would be crossing the Administrative Boundary

Line to bring support against any alleged attack to the Serbian communities in Kosovo. Secondly, it limits the external influence factors that risk destabilizing Kosovo and the Western Balkans.

To understand this last statement and the strategic importance of Kosovo, we need to look at this small entity as the “Gordian knot” of the Balkans, not to be cut by unilateral acts but to be carefully untied through the combination of deterrence and facilitated dialogue by the international diplomacy.

Besides the above-mentioned situation KFOR’s security umbrella allows the perpetuation of the dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade facilitated by the EU, a process that, as you well know, is extremely complex and that can be negatively influenced by any disruption to the Safe and Security Environment or Freedom of Movement, the two milestones of our mandate.

With the arrival of Prime Minister Hoti and the consequent removal of duties on goods at the end of June 2020, the Dialogue facilitated by the EU resumed in Brussels under the supervision of the Special Envoy Miroslav Lajcak, both at high level – President Vucic and Prime Minister Hoti – and at expert level.

A very controversial point in the Dialogue is the one relating to the creation of the Association/Community of Serb Majority Municipalities. and, above all, what functions/executive powers will eventually be attributed to it. More than a few in the Kosovar-Albanian milieu warn about the risks of a Bosnianization of Kosovo, something that risks poisoning the seed of Kosovo state entity.

In addition to this, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of September the mentioned Serbian and Kosovar leaders met in Washington and signed a document in the presence of President Trump. The agreement is about 16 points in different areas that have certainly represented a step forward in the normalization of economic and trade relations and a stimulus for EU action. We are doing our best to make steps forward and prevent Kosovo from becoming a frozen Conflict, but the risk, impossible to deny it, still exists.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to illustrate the status of our mission as the period ahead of us promises to be of particular interest. This concludes my briefing and of course, I remain available for any question you might have.

# Concluding Remarks



Brussels, 16 February 2020. EU leaders and the leaders of the Western Balkans nations preparing for a family picture after an informal summit at the EC headquarters.











PIERO FASSINO

*President, Foreign Affairs Committee, Chamber of Deputies, Rome*

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## CONCLUDING REMARKS

**T**he well-documented, in-depth remarks we have heard so far paint a picture of this significant portion of the Balkan peninsula that we call Western Balkans as a restless land yearning for recognition, stability and a future.

Six countries, with undeniable reciprocal bonds, overlapping traditions, ethnicities, languages and religions. Each country has something of its neighbours', but they are all individually unique. This distinctive originality does not lie in ethnic purity, but rather in a plurality of populations, languages, and religions, as shown by the fact that while the co-existence of different religions and ethnicities was ferociously attacked in the 1990s, it remains today as an inescapable fact and characteristic.

While so far, the Western Balkans have been a region of forced co-existence, they must become the land of accepted co-existence: not imposed, but acknowledged as a distinctive, historical trait of regional identity. A value, in other words. In fact, multi-ethnic and multi-religious coexistence should be considered the genius loci of the Balkans.

For this awareness to be widely shared, the region's neighbours have a role to play. Over and above helping safeguard co-existence, they must make an additional effort: assisting these countries in strengthening integration and cooperation, both with one another and with the international bodies that aim to promote their development, stability and peace. The Balkans must be approached with great prudence. This prudence was lacking in the aftermath of the break-up of Yugoslavia, with the consequences we all know. We must learn from history instead of repeating its mistakes. We cannot afford to be superficial.

And history tells us that this region has been characterized by strong ethnic identities but weak statehood. If we look back through historical maps, we will only find nation states in the Balkans in the last 100-150 years. Apart from the short-lived experiences of the Bulgarian and Serbian nations in the Middle Ages, the region moved almost seamlessly from the Roman to the Byzantine, Ottoman

and Austro-Hungarian empires, the last of which broke up just over a hundred years ago. This history of nations and empires is what shaped the present-day peninsula, a mosaic of ethnicities, religions, cultures and alphabets, a frontier land between East and West, Europe and Asia, Christianity and Islam, the Catholic and Orthodox churches.

It is this history that explains the return of a growing, active presence of Russia and Turkey in the region, as if harking back to 19th century geopolitics, when the small Balkan nations sought protection and security from one regional power or the other. This geopolitical setup would bring back ghosts and nightmares we want to banish forever. The Western Balkans – the entire Balkans, I would say – should instead be considered as a whole. Carving them into spheres of influence, as if we were back in the 19th century, would be a harbinger of constant instability.

Geography, too, explains the Balkans' renewed strategic centrality. While in the 19th century this centrality was born out of the dream of a great Berlin to Baghdad railway project, today the region is home to other ambitious infrastructure projects: the pan-European mobility corridors promoted by the European Union; and the New Silk Road linking China with Europe, whose land route runs through Istanbul and whose sea route runs through the Chinese-owned port of Piraeus. Turkey's and Russia's projects in the region are also increasing.

While China's role in the Balkans is not historically comparable to that of Russia and Turkey, we must not forget the People's Republic of China's strategic, political and commercial links with Enver Hoxha's Republic of Albania. In all likelihood, China has today once again developed its own Balkan strategy.

And while considering the strategic importance of the Balkans, that arises out of their geographical position, we must not forget that while the physical border of the Western Balkans is the Adriatic Sea, its geopolitical border is the Eastern Mediterranean, the most bitterly fought-over body of water of our time, due to the discovery of huge deposits of natural gas. Heightened tensions between Greece and Cyprus on the one hand, and Turkey on the other, cannot but resonate across the Balkans: one need only think of the historical and religious ties between Serbia and Greece.

These are the many reasons underscoring the strategic importance of integrating the Western Balkans into Euro-Atlantic institutions. This goal was indicated as early as the Dayton Accords as the way to overcome the many conflicts that have affected the region historically, and to guarantee stability and security for the Balkans and the continent as a whole. And while NATO has sped up integration, the European process launched in Thessaloniki in 2003 has been far slower.

This has caused frustration and disappointment in Balkan public opinion and threatens to re-awake nationalist impulses and nostalgia. For this reason, the launch of negotiations with Serbia and Montenegro – and Albania and the Republic of North Macedonia in the months to come – is a positive development,

and it is important that negotiations can be accelerated thus demonstrating that the European Union really wants the entry of the Balkans into the European family. By the same token, normalized relations between Serbia and Kosovo are desirable, together with a more cohesive Bosnia. These are both necessary conditions to boost prospects of integration in Pristina and Sarajevo.

To put it simply, the strategic importance of the Western Balkans has five main drivers, all of which fall under the heading of security.

The first, as I hinted at, concerns energy. The stability of the Western Balkans is essential in order to ensure a plurality of energy suppliers, which in turn is crucial for the energy security of Europe and Italy. This includes both the issue of gas pipelines and that of the extraction of natural gas from the Eastern Mediterranean, which could be liquefied in the ports of the Adriatic and shipped all over Europe.

The second driver concerns military security. Now that Montenegro and Albania have joined NATO, the chances of other regional powers establishing military bases on the Adriatic Sea and jeopardizing Europe's and Italy's security space have been averted. It must however be acknowledged that these new members require constant care and attention in political terms. History teaches us that in the Balkans nothing can be taken for granted, and more importantly, nothing is irreversible.

The third driver concerns security against threats of religious terrorism. We know that in the recent past the Western Balkans have seen instances of Islamic radicalization that have led to the emergence of terrorist cells and the recruitment of Islamic State fighters. This region, which has lived through years of wars and tensions, risks becoming a hotbed of rampant extremist and anti-Western organizations, unless it is adequately supported and accompanied by international organisations in its process of rebirth.

An additional and more recent strategic driver regards what we might call migratory security. Indeed, the "Balkan route" has been one of the main routes for refugees fleeing Middle Eastern wars in recent years, generating significant tensions. In the current geopolitical climate, migration can be used by regional powers to pressure neighbouring countries with a view to destabilising them. Given the weakness of their statehood, as discussed earlier, the Western Balkans are particularly vulnerable to such pressure.

The final geopolitical and geostrategic challenge posed by the Western Balkans is that of democratic security. It reflects the fragility of regimes that are formally democratic but tend to constrain the rule of law to become autocratic regimes with little regard for political opposition and the independence of the media and the judiciary. Such an outcome would not only jeopardize the hoped-for entry of the six countries of the Western Balkans into the Atlantic Alliance and the European Union, it would indeed further destabilise Europe as a whole.

Finally, I will touch upon Italy's role. With its history of credibility and friend-

ship, Italy must be able to leverage its significant economic role in the region to help meet those demands for recognition, stability, and an assured future I referred to at the beginning of my remarks.

Italy must consider the entire Balkans, and the Western Balkans especially, as an area of priority strategic interest to be fostered both through bilateral relations and with an outlook 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. The Italian Republic has no hegemonic ambitions in the Balkans, and most importantly it has no enemies there. 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 stability and peace in the region.

If the stability of the Balkans is a key strategic interest for Italy, it must also strengthen the instruments that support its economic projection – from the Italian Trade Agency to national and bilateral chambers of commerce and encompassing public bodies such as SACE and SIMEST – to facilitate that qualitative leap in trade and direct investment. At the same time, it must aim for greater integration between Italy's and the Western Balkans' respective markets and economic systems, in the awareness of the need for a common destiny.

There is no doubt that the heart of the matter lies in the still unresolved diplomatic and political issues. In addition to the well-known Berlin process to bring the six countries of the Western Balkans into the European Union (in which process Italy is involved together with Germany, France, Austria, the United Kingdom, Slovenia, and Croatia), Italy can also play a leading role in fostering fuller cooperation between the CEI (Central European Initiative) and the AII (Adriatic and Ionian Initiative).

Both initiatives should be centred more decisively on the Western Balkans, with the aim of buttressing the accession path for these countries to the European Union and NATO.

We must be confident. The agreement that led to Greece's recognition of North Macedonia is a step towards détente in the Balkans, the pre-condition for any initiative aiming to stabilize and integrate the Western Balkans.

Of course, the current pandemic will unfortunately have severe economic, financial, and social consequences that risk slowing down the integration process for the six Western Balkan countries.

This should not, however, distract us from our goal, in the awareness that there will not be full security in Europe until we achieve full integration in the Balkans. A century after the assassination in Sarajevo, it is high time for the Balkans to be and feel like a full-fledged member of the European family.

# SPEAKERS BIOGRAPHIES

## WELCOME REMARKS

### **Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo**

*President, NATO Defense College Foundation, Rome*

After having served at the Italian Embassy in Washington D.C. and as Commercial Counsellor at the Embassy of Italy in Prague, Amb. Minuto-Rizzo worked as Head of the External Relations Office of the EEC from 1981 to 1986. In the next years, his career focussed on Europe and Space Policy. In 1997 he was appointed Diplomatic Counsellor of the Minister of Defence Nino Andreatta, then of his successors Carlo Scognamiglio and Sergio Mattarella. In 2000, Minuto-Rizzo held the position of Italian Ambassador to the Western European Union and to the Political and Security Committee of the EU, of which he was among the founding members. He was Deputy Secretary-General of the Atlantic Alliance between 2001 and 2007. His mandate was mostly carried out in the strategic-political industrial area, in the relations with sensitive countries such as those in the Gulf and the Southern Mediterranean. He is the author of the books: “The road to Kabul” (Il Mulino-Arel, 2009); “A political journey without maps, diversity and future in the Greater Middle East” (Rubbettino, 2013), and “NATO and the Middle East: The Making of a Partnership” (New Academia Publishing, 2018).

### **Stephen J. Mariano**

*Dean, NATO Defense College, Rome*

Stephen J. Mariano was appointed Dean of the NATO Defense College in January 2019. Prior he was Professor of National Security Studies at the National Defense University’s National War College. Dr. Mariano taught military strategy and comparative military systems at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, as well as politics and U.S. foreign policy at the Royal Military College of Canada. Formerly, he was U.S. Army War College Visiting Defense Fellow at Queen’s

University's Center for International Relations, U.S. Army's Senior Fellow at Harvard University's Weatherhead Center for International Affairs and M.I.T. Seminar XXI Fellow. He acted as Deputy Director of Strategy, Plans, and Assessments at the Multinational Security Transition Command-Iraq, where he liaised with the NATO Training Mission in Iraq, and as Military Advisor to NATO's Senior Civilian Representative in Afghanistan. He also served as Strategic Plans and Policy Officer within NATO's International Military Staff in Brussels and at the U.S. European Command in Stuttgart.

### **Alessandro Politi**

*Director, NATO Defense College Foundation, Rome*

Alessandro Politi is the director of the NATO Defense College Foundation, the only NATO-affiliated NGO think tank. A political and strategic analyst with 30 years of experience, he was political advisor of two KFOR Commanders. He was senior researcher for the Italian MoD (CeMiSS-Centre for Military and Strategic Studies) responsible for the strategic monitoring of Latin America. He also created and has led the Global Outlook project within CeMiSS, published in Italian and English (third edition, 2015). He has contributed to the Italian Defence White Paper. He has directed the CEMRES research on CBMs in the framework of the 5+5 Defence Initiative, presenting the conclusions to the Ministers in Granada. He teaches geopolitics and intelligence at the SIOI. He teaches conflict management, Crisis, peace-making and analysis at different governmental centres. He has been acting director of the School of Intelligence Analysis at a private establishment in Rome. He has been advisor in Italy and abroad to four Defence ministers (among which the actual President of the Italian Republic, Hon. Mattarella), one National Armaments Director, one Intelligence Co-ordinator, one Chairman of the Oversight Intelligence Committee, one Head of the Italian delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly (former EU HR, on. Federica Mogherini). Born in Germany, lives in Rome. He has published as author or co-author 37 books on strategic and security matters. His most recent publications are on the Belt and Road Initiative. His most recent book is the NDCF Shaping Security Horizons – Strategic Trends 2012-2019 volume, a global predictive analysis tailored to the needs of decision shapers.

### **Matteo Tacconi**

*NDCF, Western Balkans Chief Analyst*

Matteo Tacconi is an Italian professional journalist. Since 2005, he has been covering the Balkans and Central Europe for a wide range of printed and online magazines. He reports for radio-tv networks, too, especially for the Swiss public broadcaster in Italian language (RSI). He is a regular NDCF contributor, producing analysis on the Western Balkans political and diplomatic affairs in the framework of the Strategic Balkans project. Over the years, he has taken part to several

OSCE electoral observation missions in the Western Balkans and in the former USSR countries as a short-term observer. As a journalist, he is currently involved in a long-term project investigating political, cultural, historical and social issues shaping the Adriatic identity.

#### INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

##### **Nicola de Santis**

*Head, Engagements Section, Public Diplomacy Division, NATO Headquarters, Brussels*

Head of the Engagements Section of NATO Public Diplomacy Division since 2019, Nicola de Santis was the Head of the Middle East and North Africa Section of the Political Affairs and Security Policy Division at NATO HQ. In this capacity, he was responsible for developing and promoting NATO policy, political relations, individual practical cooperation programs and better public understanding in Middle Eastern and North African countries - especially those participating in NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and in the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI). He also ensured the coordination with all the other Divisions of NATO's International Staff, International Military Staff and relevant NATO Military Authorities for all aspects of the Alliance cooperation with countries in the Middle East and in North Africa. Prior to that, he was the Head of the MD and ICI Countries Section within the Political Affairs and Security Policy Division.

#### SESSION I

##### **Ivan Vejvoda**

*Permanent Fellow, Institute for Human Sciences, Vienna*

Before joining the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna as Permanent Fellow in 2017, Ivan Vejvoda was Senior Vice President for Programs at the German Marshall Fund (GMF) of the United States. From 2003 until 2010, he served as Executive Director of GMF's Balkan Trust for Democracy, a project dedicated to strengthening democratic institutions in South-Eastern Europe. Vejvoda came to GMF in 2003 after distinguished service in the Serbian Government as a Senior Advisor on foreign policy and European integration to Prime Ministers Zoran Djindjic and Zoran Zivkovic. Prior to that, he served as Executive Director of the Belgrade-based Fund for an Open Society. During the mid-1990s, Vejvoda held various academic posts in the United States and in the U.K., including the Smith College in Massachusetts, Macalester College in Minnesota and the University of Sussex in England.



### **Maciej Popowski**

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

Ambassador Popowski is a Polish diplomat with 25 years of professional experience. He was Director for EU Affairs at the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the time of Poland's accession negotiations. In 2001-2008 he was Deputy Head of the Permanent Representation of the Republic of Poland to the European Union. In 2003-2008 he was Poland's first Permanent Representative in the EU's Political and Security Committee. He then joined the European Commission as Director of DG Development focussing on policy coherence, aid effectiveness, financing, relations with other donors, and public information. In 2009 he was seconded from the European Commission to become Head of Cabinet of Jerzy Buzek, President of the European Parliament. From 2011 until 2015, he was Deputy Secretary-General of the European External Action Service.

### **Valerie Hopkins**

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

Valerie is the Financial Times' South-East Europe correspondent, covering Hungary, Romania, the former Yugoslavia and Albania. Before moving to Budapest, she worked extensively in the Balkans, with the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project and as a freelance journalist. Her writing has appeared in The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Atlantic, Politico, Foreign Policy, Al Jazeera, the Guardian, Reuters, OpenDemocracy, Mother Jones, and more. Valerie has a Master of Arts in Political Journalism from Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, and a B.A. in International Relations (focus on Russian and Post-Soviet Studies) from the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia.

### **Ahmet Evin**

*Founding Dean, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Sabancı University, Istanbul*

Professor Evin had received his B.A. and PhD degrees at the Columbia University. He is currently founding Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Professor Emeritus at Sabancı University, serving as Senior Scholar and Board Member of the Istanbul Policy Center. He has previously taught at Harvard, New York University, the University of Pennsylvania (where he was Director of the Middle East Center), the University of Hamburg and Bilkent University (heading the Political Science department). He has authored and edited several volumes on politics, culture, and development.

### **Andrea Orizio**

*Head of Mission, OSCE Mission to Serbia, Belgrade*

Ambassador Orizio, an Italian career diplomat, has been heading the OSCE Mis-

sion to Serbia since the 1<sup>st</sup> of October 2016. He arrived in Belgrade from Rome where he served as Balkans Director at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Co-operation. Between 2013 and 2014, he was Head of the Counter-Terrorism and Organized Crime/G7 Unit at the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. From 2008 to 2012, he was Deputy Head of Mission at the Italian Embassy to Egypt. Between 2005 and 2008, he served as First Counsellor at the Italian Permanent Delegation to NATO in Brussels. Earlier in his career, he held diplomatic posts in Zagreb as Deputy Head of Mission and Prague, and served on the Africa Desk, the Defence Minister's Diplomatic Counsellor office, the Armaments Authorization and Control Authority. He is a member of the International Institute of Humanitarian Law and "*Cavaliere Ufficiale*" of the "*Ordine al Merito della Repubblica Italiana*".

### **Laris Gaiser**

*Visiting Lecturer, Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, Vienna*

Ass. Prof. Laris Gaiser is a member of ITSTIME – Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues and Managing Emergencies – at Catholic University of Milan (Italy), visiting professor at Società Italiana per le Organizzazioni Internazionali (SIOSI), Univeristà di Firenze and lecturer at Diplomatic Academy of Vienna. He regularly teaches geopolitics, geo-economy and intelligence issues. Senior Scholar at Centre for the Study of Global Issues at University of Georgia (USA), from 2012 to 2014 he was Vice President, acting President, of Euro Mediterranean University – EMUNI. During the same period the Slovenian Ministry of foreign affairs appointed Laris Gaiser as member of his Strategic Council. In Slovenia, since 2017, Laris Gaiser is Head of Department of Macroeconomics at Faculty of Law and Economic Science in Ljubljana and teaches security studies at Faculty of Government and European studies at Nova Univerza. He is involved in business and strategic advising activities. Several times he has been appointed as adviser of foreign governments as well as board member of private owned companies. As appreciated columnist Laris Gaiser actively analyses social issues writing for national and foreign newspapers.

### **QUESTION TIME WITH**

### **Damon Wilson**

*Executive Vice President, Atlantic Council, Washington D.C.*

Damon Wilson is Executive Vice President of the Atlantic Council. His areas of expertise include NATO, Transatlantic relations, Central and Eastern Europe, and national security issues. From 2007 to 2009, he acted as Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for European affairs at the National Security Council. Previously, he served at the US Embassy in Baghdad as Executive Secretary and Chief of Staff and as Director for Central, Eastern, and Northern Eu-

ropean affairs at the National Security Council (2004–2006). Between 2001 and 2004, Damon Wilson held the position of Deputy Director of the Private Office of the NATO Secretary General, assisting Lord George Robertson of Port Ellen in his drive to transform the Alliance by enlarging NATO membership, conducting operations beyond Europe, and adapting Allied capabilities to face modern threats. Prior to serving in Brussels, he worked in the US Department of State's Office of European Security and Political Affairs, in the State Department's China desk, and at the US Embassy in Beijing as a presidential management fellow.

### **Andrew Spannaus**

*Journalist and Political Commentator, Milan*

Andrew Spannaus is a American journalist and political commentator based in Italy, known in particular for his analysis of the populist revolt in the United States and Europe. His commentary on US and international politics appears on Rainews24, Swiss Italian Radio, Aspenia, and various other media outlets. He is the founder of the Transatlantico.info newsletter, which provides news and analysis of geopolitics and economics to institutions and businesses. Spannaus is a Lecturer at the ASERI Graduate School of the Catholic University of Milan, where he teaches a seminar on US economic history. He has studied economic nationalism and the War of 1812. He served as the Chairman of the Milan Foreign Press Association from 2017 to 2020.

## SESSION II

### **Jan Kickert**

*Ambassador of the Republic of Austria to Italy, Rome*

Ambassador Jan Kickert became Head of the Austrian Embassy in Rome in July 2020. Prior to his appointment, he acted as Permanent Representative of Austria to the United Nations (2015–2020). Since November 2011, he was Director General for Political Affairs at the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. From 2009 to 2011, Amb. Kickert served as Austrian Ambassador to Croatia. Since 2005, he also served in a number of other Government positions at the Cabinet of the Minister for Foreign Affairs, with two years as Deputy Head of the Cabinet (2007–2009). In the autumn of 2004, he acted as the Personal Representative to Kosovo of Javier Solana, the European Union's High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy. Prior to that, from 1999 to 2000, he was political adviser to the UN Special Representative to Kosovo.

### **Arne Sannes Bjørnstad**

*Special Representative for Western Balkans, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Oslo*

He joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as desk officer (legal affairs) in the Shipping Department in 1990. After postings to Ankara (1994–97), Rabat (1997) and

Paris (1998-2001), he was Coordinator for Norway's Foreign Policy and Justice/Home Affairs cooperation with the European Union 2001-2003. From February 2003 through September 2006 he was Senior Adviser at the Office of the Prime Minister and Secretary to the Government Security Council. Minister Counsellor for European and Economic Affairs at the Norwegian Embassy in London 2006-08, then Deputy Head of Mission in London 2008-11. Senior Adviser attached to the Foreign Service Control Unit from 2011, becoming Inspector General of the Foreign Service in 2013. Ambassador of the Kingdom of Norway to the Republic of Serbia from September 2015, to the Republic of Montenegro from November 2015 and to the Republic of North Macedonia from December 2015.

### **Remzi Lani**

*Executive Director, Albanian Media Institute, Tirana*

Remzi Lani is the Executive Director of the Albanian Media Institute. He has a long career in journalism, and he is author of articles on Balkan affairs for different local and foreign papers and magazines such as *El Mundo* (Madrid), *The Guardian* (London), *Quimera* (Barcelona), *The International Spectator* (Rome), etc. Lani has been also an expert for the International Commission on the Balkans (Amato Commission). He is member of the Board of OSIFE (Open Society Foundation for Europe), of the Steering Committee of GFMD (Global Forum for Media Development) and of the European Council of Foreign Relations. He has been working on media projects in Africa, Central Asia and the Balkans. Collaborator of the Aspen Institute (Berlin), CESPI (Rome), Center for International and Strategic Studies (Washington), Carter Center (Atlanta), Hellenic Foundation (Athens), CIDOB (Barcelona) in different projects on Balkan issues.

### **Valbona Zeneli**

*Chair, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, Garmisch-Partenkirchen*

Dr. Zeneli joined the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies in August 2011 as a professor of national security studies. She is also Chair of the Strategic Initiatives Department. Previously, she served as the Black Sea and Eurasia Program Director and Deputy Director for the Central and South-East Europe program. Valbona Zeneli is member of the teaching faculty for the Program in Applied Security Studies (PASS), the Program on Countering Narcotics and Illicit Trafficking (CNIT), the Program on Cyber Security Studies (PCSS), the Senior Executive Seminar (SES) and the Seminar on Regional Security (SRS). From 2003-2005, Dr. Zeneli has served as chief of protocol and later economic adviser to the Albanian Prime Minister. Prior to that, she worked as adviser to the Minister of Economy of Albania from 2002-2003. Dr. Zeneli holds a Doctor of science degree (PhD) in political economy from the University of Studies "Aldo Moro", Bari, Italy (2011), as well as a postgraduate studies degree on international marketing from Georgetown University, Washington D.C (2006).

## **Lubomir Ivanov**

*Former Permanent Representative of Bulgaria, NATO, Brussels*

Bulgarian Permanent Representative to FAO, Ambassador Lubomir Ivanov has been Chairman of the FAO Committee on Constitutional and Legal Matters between 2015 and 2017. He has a long-standing career in international and Euro-Atlantic organisations. In 1995 he worked with security organisations as Deputy Chief of Mission at the Embassy of Bulgaria to Belgium, Luxembourg and the Mission of Bulgaria to WEU (Western European Union) and NATO. Between 1998 and 2001 he was the Deputy Director of the NATO and Security Issues Directorate at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Sofia. Lubomir Ivanov has been leading the negotiation for the accession of Bulgaria to NATO between 2001 and 2004. After that experience, he has been appointed as Permanent Representative of Bulgaria to NATO from 2004 to 2009. Between 2012 and 2016 he ran his first mandate as Permanent Representative of Bulgaria to FAO. Since May 2017 Ambassador Ivanov is Ambassador-at-Large on security matters.

## **SPECIAL INTERVENTION**

## **Michele Risi**

*Commander, Kosovo Force (KFOR), NATO, Pristina*

Major General Risi has been the Defence Advisor to the Italian Permanent Representative to the North Atlantic Council since 21 July 2016. Before being assigned to NATO, he was the Commander of the Julia Alpine Brigade and the Multi-National Land Forces Command located in Udine, Italy. While deployed with the Julia Brigade in 2015, he was also the Commander of the Train and Advise Command-West (TAAC-West) Operation Resolute Support, Herat, Afghanistan. A career Mountain Infantry Officer (Alpini), Major General Risi has served in key leadership positions at the tactical, operational and strategic levels of the Italian military, NATO and the United Nations including posts as Commander of ITALFOR XVII and RC-Capital Battle Group 3, Operation ISAF in Afghanistan (2008); Chief Plans of the Strategic Military Cell - Department for Peace Keeping Operations, New York - during the Lebanese crisis of 2006; Chief of Staff of the Kabul Multinational Brigade (2005), Operation ISAF in Afghanistan.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

## **Piero Fassino**

*President, Foreign Affairs Committee, Chamber of Deputies, Rome*

Piero Fassino is the President of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Italian Chamber of Deputies. Elected for the first time in 1994, re-elected in all the following legislatures until 2011 - when he became mayor of Turin (2011-2016)

- and elected again to Parliament in 2018. Currently he is also a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and Vice-President of the Political Commission, President of the Italy-France friendship section of the Inter Parliamentary Union. Under-Secretary of State for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1996-1998 in the PM Prodi government) and, in the same period, Under-Secretary for European Union Policies to the Prime Minister; Minister of Foreign Trade (1998-2000 in the PM D'Alema government); Minister of Justice (2000-2001 in the PM Amato government). From 1991 to 1996 he held the role of International Secretary of the PDS, leading it in the joining to the Socialist International and in the foundation of the European Socialist Party. From 2016 to March 2020, President of the Socialist Group and spokesman for the Mediterranean at the Congress of Local Authorities of the Council of Europe.





NATO Foundation  
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# BALKAN PERSPECTIVES 2020

## THE FIGHT FOR A TIMELY INCLUSION

CONFERENCE ORGANISED BY

*The NATO Defense College Foundation*

*In co-operation with the NATO Public Diplomacy Division,*

*the Balkan Trust for Democracy,*

*the European Union and the NATO Defense College*

*We want to thank European Western Balkans for its media partnership*

*Special thanks to*

PHILIP MORRIS INTERNATIONAL

ROME, THE 28<sup>TH</sup> OF SEPTEMBER 2020

Venue: Centro Congressi Roma Eventi - Piazza di Spagna, Via Alibert, 5/a, Rome

- 14,00-14,30      Participants Registration
- 14,30-14,45      **Welcome Remarks**
- Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo, President, NATO Defense College Foundation, Rome \*
  - Stephen J. Mariano, Dean, NATO Defense College, Rome \*
- 14,45-15,00      **Opening Remarks**
- Nicola de Santis, Head, Engagements Section, Public Diplomacy Division, NATO Headquarters, Brussels (Virtual) \*

## Session I

### WAYS AND MEANS FOR A CREDIBLE INCLUSION

*Since the Dayton Agreement the Balkans have been a success story in terms of peace-building and stability. Nevertheless, both domestic difficulties and the constant crises in the international environment affecting the Balkan Six have made the integration path particularly difficult, in addition to a global pandemic with unprecedented effects. The EU presidency is committed to continue negotiations at different levels with Serbia, Montenegro, Albania and North Macedonia. Half of the region is still in a limbo concerning NATO membership. What are the best paths and instruments towards a credible inclusion? How can we forestall regional enlargement fatigue?*

- 15,00-16,15      Chair: Ivan Vejvoda, Permanent Fellow, Institute for Human Sciences, Vienna \*
- Maciej Popowski, Acting Director-General, Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, European Commission, European Union, Brussels (Virtual)\*
  - Valerie Hopkins, Financial Times, South-East Europe Correspondent, Budapest
  - Ahmet Evin, Founding Dean, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Sabanci University, Istanbul \*
  - Andrea Orizio, Head of Mission, OSCE Mission to Serbia, Belgrade \*
  - Laris Gaiser, Visiting Lecturer, Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, Vienna\*

## Q&A

16,45 -17,00

**Question Time with**

- Damon Wilson, Executive Vice President, Atlantic Council, Washington D.C. (Virtual)
- Interviewer: Andrew Spannaus, Journalist and Political Commentator, Milan

Session II

**THE BALKANS' DRIVING FORCES**

*The Balkans are fighting for their future. The intertwining between domestic policies still hostage to old and new factionalisms, extremely fragile economies and societal tensions towards more freedom, is common to all countries but it presents also local peculiarities that need a tailored approach. How can societies break the political depression-repression cycle that erodes public confidence and pushes towards emigration and depopulation?*

17,00 -18,15

Chair: Jan Kickert, Ambassador of the Republic of Austria to Italy, Rome \*

- Arne Sannes Bjørnstad, Special Representative for the Western Balkans, Royal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Oslo (Virtual) \*
- Remzi Lani, Executive Director, Albanian Media Institute, Tirana \*
- Valbona Zeneli, Chair, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, Garmisch-Partenkirchen \*
- Lubomir Ivanov, former Permanent Representative of Bulgaria, NATO, Brussels \*

**Q&A**

18,15-18,25

**Special Intervention**

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

18,25-18,35

**Concluding Remarks**

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





Graphic of the Western Balkans within Europe, published by the European Commission









In 2020 two important anniversaries will be remembered in all Balkan capitals: exactly 25 years ago the Dayton Peace Agreement was signed (ending the long cycle of the wars of Yugoslav dissolution) and 16 years ago EUFOR Operation Althea was launched in Bosnia-Herzegovina, relaying the previous NATO-led SFOR (Stabilization Force).

Many achievements were reached, with almost all Balkan Six countries being either NATO or EU members, or engaged into accession negotiations, but it is increasingly clear that the overall integration process is and continues to be unacceptably long, because a target of 45-50 years is too much for a youth whose wings were clipped, societies that are trapped in unsustainable economies and unending transitions and donors that have lost sight of their initial and final objectives.

The new President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, announced negotiations at different levels with Serbia, Montenegro, Albania and North Macedonia, while a new enlargement process has been set up in order to make it more credible and predictable.

In this context, NATO operates or co-operates with the EU as a security and stability provider. For over two decades, KFOR has been a success story, making a major contribution to the stability and security in Kosovo and indirectly the Western Balkans region. NATO fully supports the continuation of the EU-facilitated dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina as the only lasting solution for Kosovo and for the Western Balkans.

A very important strategic link is now being forged between the Balkans and the Mediterranean by China's Belt and Road Initiative, while Russia still continues to exploit the Slavic brotherhood card, particularly in Serbia and in the Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina). For its part, Ankara has been keen to cultivate its own strategic links in a visible neo-Ottoman mode.

To bring more real progress and stability, the full normalization between Serbia and Kosovo is an indispensable step. In the meantime, still three capitals are still unwilling or unable to join NATO, a difficult objective due essentially to the slow pace of substantial reforms in the region. On the other hand, Europe has to find a more flexible enlargement strategy to overcome the rapprochement fatigue within the Balkan Six, while allaying doubts that bolster the EU members states fatigue.

NATO and EU have surely to deepen their political cooperation because the Balkans are not a backwater, but a waterfront for Europe, the Mediterranean and the whole Atlantic region.

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