BLACK SEA AND BALKAN PERSPECTIVES

A STRATEGIC REGION

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*Under the High Patronage
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BLACK SEA AND BALKAN PERSPECTIVES

A STRATEGIC REGION

Conference organised by
THE NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE FOUNDATION

UNDER THE HIGH PATRONAGE OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE ITALIAN REPUBLIC

in co-operation with
BLACK SEA TRUST FOR REGIONAL COOPERATION,
THE NATO PUBLIC DIPLOMACY DIVISION,
AND THE NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE

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Session 3

ILLICIT THREATS FROM NON-STATE ACTORS

Concluding Remarks

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

FOREWORD

This is the 27th conference organised by the NATO Foundation in 10 years of life and the 7th focus on the Balkans and southeast of Europe. A special thanks to all of you who have chosen to come here in presence. I know how difficult it is and I thank you for being here; it is a good sign of friendship.

We live in times of change and not only on climate change as everybody says, but in many other areas. The good old times when the world was easy to interpret are gone forever. We have in front of us a fluid international scenario with profound changes. A growing number of local and non-state actors of various sources, different values and competing forms of government which drive agendas. Today, parliamentary democracy and liberal western values do not represent the majority. In such a world, a good understanding of the game changers is more needed than ever.

Historically, the Atlantic Alliance has been a security provider and has grown from 12 original members to 30: more members represent a huge change with inevitable consequences. NATO has an expertise that has been proven in various occasion and has well served the international community, but time has come for a serious process of reform which should include more internal cohesion, a permanent dialogue, sharing objectives and threat perceptions. This complex process started in 2020 and it is going on until the next Summit, which is called "*NATO 2030*" and implies several objectives. The *NATO 2030* agenda has a primary objective: to improve the political dimension of the Alliance and to not give the impression that it is a military organisation. Last year, the "reflection group" has produced an important report in this direction and the work toward reform is going to continue.

On the other hand, NATO will continue to be a primary security provider and the change of administration in Washington represents a good sign in this direction. The *NATO 2030* agenda calls for a renewed approach to international security in parallel with the emerging challenges and it must be translated now into

concrete measures. As I said before, it is important to focus our attention on issues of special relevance for the future. The vast region of the Balkans and the Black Sea comes out as a priority. During the last NATO Summit in June, it was repeated that the overall presence of NATO in the Balkans has been a positive one, because it had its roots in the bloody dissolution of Yugoslavia. A NATO operation is still ongoing as well as technical assistance. The "Open Door Policy" has been a positive factor and we have seen North Macedonia becoming the last country to join the Alliance. Perhaps what we can read in the NATO Summit is that the region has regained a priority and that the Alliance is determined to project security.

The Balkans have regained visibility and priority because of their recognised significance. In fact, South Eastern Europe has been for century at the crossroads of our history, an area rich in challenges and opportunities. The Black Sea and the Balkans are connected, and we have decided to have a comprehensive approach to show the connections. Europe has a strong interest in this part of the continent where the final stage is full integration. The "Open Door Policy" remains in place and the goal is to achieve an active approach towards countries of the area. Serbia is logically an important case: it is an historical and strategic country in the Balkans, with established national institutions and a developed civil society. We all know the past and its legitimate wounds, but time has come to turn the page. The world is changing fast, and we hope Serbia will take its place in the European and Euro-Atlantic institutions; it will require time, but what is important is to take new steps in the right direction. The Serbia-Kosovo dispute is an ongoing issue since many years, and it raises emotions and remains controversial. This relationship has complexities of many sorts and there is no "magic solution". We understand that public opinion in Serbia is worried about its minority and that there are also historical roots that have to be preserved and cannot be forgotten. On the other hand, the independence of Kosovo is a fact that has to be recognised. The EU and NATO are trying both in good faith to build bridges and to support good compromises. In the end, Serbia and Kosovo should become good neighbors in a regional framework.

Regarding China's role in the Region, I do not think that today we should consider it as a serious security challenge for the Balkans. At this moment we see an increased interest in the area, an economic presence and investments in infrastructures, as shows the case of Montenegro. Countries in the region need to be careful in non-compromising strategic interests and in deciding to get loans which can pay back.

In general terms China is a competitor and, in some cases, it may be a partner. It is a process and a relationship to be followed carefully and with due attention.

In the region we are also assisting to Illicit activities which continue to be relevant and organised crime remains a widespread issue. What to do?

We should reinforce the tools at the disposal of regional governments, to increase cooperation, law implementation and reforms, to continue the development

of a civil society and its awareness. The support from the European institutions and their credibility are also important, but they have to be matched by a process of reforms. There is a need for a credible rule of law before a full integration in the European and Euro-Atlantic institutions.

As usual, our objective is to promote a high-level debate around strategic issues of permanent and common interest in a spirit of respect. The discussion is meant for the general public and not only for the specialist; the Foundation recognised as such by NATO will continue to develop its activities, focusing on the area of strategic relevance to the international security.

The first panel will focus on the influence of external powers in the region and their strategies. What kind of impact do we observe, what kind of judgement we give and how to deal with them?

The second conversation will take place around the regional security vision of the countries in the Black Sea and in the Balkans. We know the complex situation of the region and the debate will be interesting, because each country has his own history, his own values, and his own perspective.

The third panel will analyse our concern regarding the illicit trade which is an ongoing practice for criminal networks. The regional cooperation remains a primary objective to pursue in parallel with a process of reforms to face also the "grey areas" in the region.

The Honorable Piero Fassino, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Italian Chamber of Deputies, will close the conference.

Dear friends, ladies and gentlemen, we made a big effort to put together the best possible experts and today we have very high caliber personalities as moderators and speakers. I am very proud of that, and I wish to thank you all for accepting our invitation in Rome. I conclude thanking our entire staff for their enthusiasm and good work in these difficult circumstances. Special thanks for their support go to: PMI, the NATO Public Diplomacy Division, The Black Sea Trust, the NATO Defense College. I also thank you our media partner for the cooperation: Formiche, Airpress, European Western Balkans, and Most Europa.

ALESSANDRO POLITI
Director, NATO Defense College Foundation, Rome

POLITICAL SUMMARY

The academic debate about what is a region is influenced by different objective and subjective factors (geography and identity for instance), but from a practitioner's point of view the essential interest is about the effective framing of policies, avoiding the legacy of previous ad hoc arrangements. Since 1991 the two regions were sharply distinguished by the Yugoslav wars of dissolution, dominating the Balkans, and the relatively peaceful disintegration of the Soviet Union on the shores of the Black Sea, with the exception of the unruly Caucasus.

Since 2020 this neat distinction began to be irrelevant because the Balkans were becoming once again a wider concept than simply the Western Balkans, namely: a peninsula delimitated by the Adriatic, Aegean and Black seas, whose security is inevitably interconnected and interdependent. Moreover, these countries share the same strategic interests: the viability and sustainability of their economies; the demographic decline and youth emigration often due to bad governance; the urgency to recover from the pandemic-induced depression; the need to diversify energy sources, especially the more polluting and monopolistic ones; the threat by organised crime; the importance of a realistic and balanced relationship with big powers (Russia, Middle Eastern countries, China and others) and of recovering stability and security in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea.

The security landscape has been particularly affected by: a negative combination of frozen and active conflicts on the shores of all three seas (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Transnistria, Ukraine, Georgia for instance); renewed tensions among allies (also on the backdrop of some visible democratic backsliding) and by the effects of an increased global powers' competition. Russia's heavy footprint apart, China's presence will deepen from the 17+1 forum (involving several NATO Allies) to the increased ties deriving from the Belt and Road Initiative.

It is true that there have been different regional cooperation initiatives, like the CRM (Common Regional Market), the GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan,

Moldova) and the BSEC (Black Sea Economic Cooperation), all with their distinctive advantages, but also with their shortcomings. The CRM is a vehicle for further EU integration, but not a substitute for the determined will of Brussels to start closing the long integration saga for some candidates. The GUAM tries to revive some ideas in the past interwar period, centred on a stronger autonomy of these countries vis-à-vis bigger powers (unsurprisingly Czarist Russia and Soviet Union), but the banding of weaknesses does not imply automatically an increase in real international power.

The BSEC instead is beset by two structural problems. On the one hand, the presence of two mid-sized powers and one big power with divergent interests and goals – Greece, Turkey Russia – affects inevitably the consensus around fundamental issues. On the other, even this regional forum is no substitute for what really matters: membership in NATO and the EU.

Membership in Europe is clearly a complex, engaging and prolonged affair, lasting at least a decade in the best circumstances and with a concentrated effort by national elites or a never-ending waiting process, as it has happened with some prospective members. The fact that in several countries, including the biggest ones, democracy has actually regressed obviously does not help, whatever the political orientations in Brussels may be.

Entering NATO is a rather more straightforward affair (it took two years for Montenegro between the official invitation in 2015 and the effective accession in 2017), but in many cases there are nine-ten years collaboration periods in the Partnership for Peace, if not more as in the case of Northern Macedonia (25 years).

That said, another relevant factor in both the EU and NATO accession process is evidently Russia: Putin warned during the Munich Security Conference of 2007 that Moscow would not accept a further expansion of NATO. Ukraine was invited, as Georgia, to become in an undefined timing NATO member at the Bucharest Summit (April 2008), while in August 2008 Georgia's attempt to capture the capital of the self-proclaimed South-Ossetian de facto entity was sternly rebuffed by the Russian Army. In February 2014 the failure of an orderly transition (negotiated by France, Germany and Poland) from the Yanukovich presidency in Kiev during the Euromaidan revolt, opened the way for Putin's violation of the 1994 Budapest Protocol and the annexation of Crimea.

It is interesting to remark that, according to Dmitri Trenin, certain areas such as Crimea, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria are all areas where conflicts may resume at virtually any moment.

China instead has a more opportunistic role in the area. Through is 17+1 initiative it has cultivated Central, Eastern and South Eastern countries since 2012, reinforcing its pull through the Belt and Road Initiative, quietly trying to undermine the EU and US role in the region.

In the meantime, the soft power of both the EU and OSCE has been considerably eroded because just incentives without concrete and enforced sanctions haven

often turned Brussels into a desirable but unreliable partner when a crisis emerged, while the Vienna-based organisation has been limited to its reporting and monitoring functions, as shown in the management of the Minsk I and II processes.

The wider Balkan region is more than an unsettled area, it is the strategic arena where the Euro-Atlantic community has to act simultaneously by projecting stability, enhancing political dialogue and reinforcing a credible deterrence, if it wants to ensure continental security.

BACKGROUND POLICY PAPER

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Almost thirty years after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the wars in the Balkans and the collapse of the Albanian communist regime, followed by years of a complex multifaceted recovery, the Balkan region remains deeply divided and only partially integrated in the Western political, economic and security structures.

The integration into NATO is more of a success story than the EU integration. Currently, Slovenia, Albania, Croatia, Montenegro and the Republic of North Macedonia are part of the Alliance, while the biggest military power in the area, Serbia, upholds its policy of neutrality and is not seeking NATO membership. This is at the same time a major factor of stabilisation but also a cause for tensions, when Serbian interests are involved directly or indirectly, as shown by the turmoil in North Macedonia (then FYROM) and Montenegro before their accession. Bosnia and Herzegovina's membership remains stuck due to the anti-NATO hostility of the Bosnian Serb leadership.

Today, 19 years after Balkan countries were offered a so-called "European perspective" at the Thessaloniki Summit, only two of them managed to became full members of the EU: Slovenia and Croatia. The remaining six are currently faced with the enlargement fatigue domestically and among EU members. The process of integration of Serbia and Montenegro is stalled, also due to a lack of reforms and a deterioration of the democratic institutions. Albania and North Macedonia are still waiting for the opening of accession talks, a reason for an increased disillusion of the local population with regards to the European perspective.

In this scenario, already existing fractures were exacerbated in the past years and in particular during the pandemic, threatening the stabilizing role of the EU, the first trade and political partner of the region. Russia, as an energy superpower, and especially China, reinforced their impact in the region, in particular in Serbia, also by supplying vaccines, trying to increase an influence that was already strengthened in the last decade by supplying credits for infrastructures and energy,

a strategy widely used in the area also by Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the region remains an area of confrontation between regional and global actors, a limbo where many external actors seek influence also by nourishing ethno-nationalist sentiments.

Risks are exacerbated first of all by the economic crisis provoked by the pandemic, latching upon pre-existing fragility factors among which: the brain drain and the demographic collapse, the rise of semi-authoritarian leaders with an attendant democratic backsliding, the flourishing of organized crime and corruption and a returning nationalism.

The Kosovo issue remains unsolved, despite the renewed engagement of the EU and of the USA. Speculations about the redefinition of borders, circulated this year, confirm the existence of potentially disruptive solutions to the lack of European integration of the countries of the Western Balkans.

That said and for obvious political imperatives, regional leaders have shown some willingness to cooperate more intensively, also through common initiatives such as the so-called 'Mini-Schengen' in the 'Balkan six' and the creation of a common economic market. Nevertheless, the only long-lasting solution for the stability of the region remains the inclusion of the entire Western Balkans in the EU.

For too long perceived as utterly separated from the Balkan Six, the Black Sea is part of the historical Balkan region. It hosts vital critical infrastructure including both energy and cyber links of paramount importance for all countries in the region as well as for Europe.

That area, now considered by Moscow as a "Russian lake" after a decade of waning influence, is also affected by NATO Russia tension, further increased by the Ukraine crisis in 2014. Since then, Russian combat aircraft have periodically intercepted US reconnaissance flights, including close flight manoeuvres deemed unsafe by US officials. Although NATO has intensified its presence in the Black Sea, its initiatives are more symbolic than concrete, more political than military.

The Black Sea has witnessed frequent and close confrontation between Russian and Western military forces in recent weeks. In a major incident in late June 2021, Russia declared that a border patrol ship fired warning shots while an Su-24 bomber dropped four bombs on the path of the UK destroyer Defender, apparently to induce the ship to sail out of Russian territorial waters near illegally annexed Crimea. London denied these waters were territorial and that the ship came under warning fire.

It is evidently a way to assert sovereignty over Crimea also *vis-à-vis* powers who do not recognise it. Secondly, Russia does not want to have any NATO military presence in the Black Sea and is aggressively harassing any Western ship also in international waters. When Russians captured Crimea, they also captured a lot of oil rigs and gas drilling installations in the Black Sea, which reach up to the Romanian shore, and they are very aggressively policing them.

Given the strategic importance of Ukraine's remaining Black Sea ports, there

is a significant risk that Russia may decide to block maritime traffic in order to bring the Ukrainian economy to its knees. This is thought to be militarily feasible. Indeed, Russia already has sufficient warships in the Black Sea to attempt such an operation. Such a Russian escalation would inevitably elicit significant international condemnation. If this would entail a concrete Western blockade breaking action, remains, upon previous experience, an open issue.

The times where the Black Sea could be considered controlled mainly by the Turkish NATO ally and thus a peripheral space are clearly passed, not only for Russia's aggressive stance, but also due to the effects of Chinese investments linked to the great Belt and Road Initiative. China is promoting trade and investments to achieve significant diplomatic and political leverage in the region, besides acquiring footholds for trade, investments or scientific cooperation.

In this scenario, Turkey remains determined to be the region's pivotal power. The discovery of a 320 billion cubic meter natural gas field in the Black Sea by Ankara, as well as the construction of energy infrastructures and the creation of new Exclusive Economic Zones, are part of a strategy to become an energy hub for the Old Continent.

NATO and the European Union need to reconsider their strategic assumptions in order to guarantee their main objectives of peace, stability and prosperity in the region.

Session 1

COMPETITION FOR INFLUENCE AMONG GREAT POWERS

City Hall of Tiraspol, capital of Transnistria, a de facto entity under Russian influence.

Helena Legarda
Senior Analyst, China Security Project, Mercator Institute for China Studies, Berlin

WHAT IS BEIJING'S STRATEGY IN THE REGION? OUTCOMES AND OUTLOOKS

Beijing is still a relative newcomer to the Balkans and Black Sea region. Its footprint is still shallow, but it is rapidly expanding, which is why it is a trend worth considering it. China does not have a specific regional strategy for the Balkans and the Black Sea region because it does not consider the entire region as a single political unit. It engages with countries bilaterally or through selected pre-existing multilateral frameworks that China largely controls, such as the 16+1 initiative. Much of China's engagement in the Balkans and the Black Sea region is part of its broader foreign policy push and ambitions. In particular, it is linked to China's overall foreign policy goal under Xi Jinping, which is to achieve the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation". This goal intends to transform China into a global power by 2049, on the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the People's Republic of China.

According to the Chinese Communist Party's ideology, China was a global power and a regional hegemon for millennia. The only reason it is not one today is because of the so-called "century of humiliation", when Western powers imposed unfair treaties on China and partly colonised the country. In the CCP's view, China deserves to be a global power again because that is the natural state of affairs. It is the western dominated international order that is an anomaly that can – and must – be reversed if the current system is to survive.

Why was this push introduced now?

First of all, it is because China feels itself to be in a period of "strategic opportunity". While the West is distracted by its own internal problems Beijing feels that now it has an opportunity to push and reclaim its position as a global power, as the West is unlikely to pose any significant challenges to China's ambitions. Additionally, after decades of economic growth and military modernization, Beijing feels sufficiently confident in its own strengths and capabilities to tackle any challenges that may emerge. This view gained in importance in Beijing with the

2008 financial crisis, and continued with the refugee crisis in Europe, the rise of populism on both sides of the Atlantic, and the perceived failures of the West to effectively control the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the same time, China's new international posture must also be understood as a reflection of the CCP's threat perceptions. The party speaks today of an "increasingly challenging international environment", as Beijing sees itself surrounded by Western countries and their allies who are intent on containing China and eventually subverting the CCP's hold on power. Under Xi, the party's long-standing strategy of erecting barriers to keep threatening Western ideas and influence out of China so as to guarantee the party's survival has become more rigid. However, an outward-looking parallel strategy has also been rolled out. The party has turned from the passive or reactive defense of China's national security to a more proactive approach meant to tackle any threats to the current system and shape the international environment to make it safer for the CCP in the long run.

Therefore, China would like to shape the 21st century in the same way that the West dominated the 20th century. To this end, China needs two things: to increase China's footprint and influence globally, and to reduce and eventually replace the power and influence of the United States and Europe, plus other like-minded allies and partners.

Why does China care about the Balkans and Black Sea regions?

With this in mind, it is easy to see why the Balkans and the Black Sea regions are very attractive areas for China. On the one hand, this region is seen as a bridgehead into Europe, given its geographical proximity and the lack of requirements to abide by EU rules. This is driving Beijing's inroads into the region through economic or infrastructure projects, many under the umbrella of the Belt and Road Initiative. At the same time, this region also provides China with a chance to obtain some sort of European allyship in an increasingly hostile world. By strengthening its ties with regional countries, China hopes to obtain support in international organizations as well as increased legitimacy in Europe and its neighborhood.

The Balkans and Black Sea region has also proven to be very fertile ground for Beijing's ambitions. China's growing influence there is symptomatic of the region's troubled relationship with the EU, and closer ties with China are seen by regional countries as providing them with some degree of foreign policy flexibility. Beijing is taking advantage of this, as well as of its lack of historical baggage in the region, to expand its presence and influence in the region. Fundamentally, Beijing is trying to present itself as an alternative to the European Union or the US in the region.

What does China's presence in the Balkans and Black Sea regions look like?

China's footprint in the region is still relatively shallow and mostly focused

on the economic domain. There is an increasing number of China-financed infrastructure projects, primarily big-ticket items, under the *Belt and Road Initiative* framework. But even those are not spread out evenly throughout the region. Instead, they are largely concentrated in a small number of countries, Serbia in particular. It is important to note, however, that China's investment in the region still pales when compared to the European Union's.

China's economic footprint, however, also comes hand-in-hand with political and security engagement. This includes building close relationships with local elites and national governments to attempt to gain political influence over these countries and their decision-making processes, increased security cooperation through law enforcement cooperation agreements, tech exports and event arms sales, and efforts towards narrative control in traditional media outlets and social media.

What is the way forward?

China is proving to be a relatively attractive partner for the region, largely due to the lack of realistic alternatives and the widespread view that the EU has 'abandoned' the region. This is naturally raising concerns in Brussels and elsewhere across Europe. China's growing influence in countries that may in the future accede into the EU could have implications for European unity, the lack of transparency and low standards of many BRI projects can have an impact on the local environment and undermine the rule of law in the region, and Beijing's so-far limited presence could expand, potentially leading to collaboration with Russia on the EU's doorstep.

While these concerns may be justified and should make the EU consider why China is so popular in the region, there are still a number of complicating factors to consider. Not least is the fact that there is a growing awareness in the region that closer political ties with China do not necessarily translate into economic opportunities. As a result, many countries are trying to find a balance between the West and China economically, while the seek to remain inside the Western political sphere of influence, demonstrating the fact that accession into the EU is still the preferred option for most of the region.

This ambiguity, however, is likely to cause friction in the future, as Balkans and Black Sea countries will occasionally have to make certain concessions to Beijing, thus making ties to the West increasingly complex and potentially strained. In today's climate of increasing geopolitical competition, this is a position that is likely to prove unsustainable in the long-run. It is therefore important that countries across Europe take a closer look at China's goals in the Balkans and the Black Sea region, how they affect European interests and security, and what can be done about it.

Dmitri Trenin
Director, Carnegie Moscow Center, Moscow

A RUSSIAN OVERSTRETCH IN THE AREA?

According to the Moscow perspective, the Black Sea and the Western Balkans regions have different importance to Russia. The Black Sea is essentially a region of which Russia itself is part; frankly, it cannot overreach itself in that environment. Russian strategy aims to prevent major security threats from arising in the Black Sea region. From the perspective of the Kremlin, the most severe potential threat coming from the Black Sea region could be Ukraine joining NATO or Ukraine hosting US/NATO military bases within its territory. Even if these facts seem remote as threats, there's undoubtedly one threat that will remain: Ukraine has turned into a country that is perhaps more hostile to Russia than any other country in the world.

Regarding the Black Sea region, I would say that certain areas such as Crimea, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria are all areas where conflicts may resume at virtually any moment. We recently saw Russia's reaction to the passage of a British ship, just off Sebastopol, across the waters that Russia regards as its own. That is a neuralgic point for Russia, and I think that testing Moscow's red lines would lead to a predictable outcome, and frankly, I would not advise people doing that.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia look reasonably stable. Up to the present day, there has been no significant flare-up of conflict in either area since 2008. On the contrary, Transnistria is finding itself in a situation when its future is again in question. Chișinău's western orientation - confirmed in the presidential election in 2020 and the parliamentary election this year - raises questions about what to do with Transnistria. Of course, this is also an area that Russia cannot give up without the proper accommodation that is unlikely to come in the foreseeable future. In other words, the Black Sea region is an area of high importance for Russia where Moscow has been using force and, if provoked, it can give an armed response to that provocation.

Regarding the Western Balkans, there's not much to say. From a strategic perspective, today, the Western Balkans region is not an area that threatens Russia or

offers any opportunities to Moscow. It is an area where Russia can overreach itself if it pursues the policies that historically St. Petersburg and Moscow pursued in the 19th and 20th centuries.

It is an area that finds itself in the western sphere of influence and includes Serbia and Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina. That region of Europe is gravitating towards the European Union and NATO. Russia's only strategic decision concerning the Western Balkans was in 2003 when it decided to withdraw its small peacekeeping force from the KFOR mission in Kosovo.

There are tons of history behind Russia's involvement in the Western Balkans, some of it glorious, much of it unfortunate. Unfortunately, Russia's involvement in the Western Balkans was one of the prime reasons for Russia's participation in the First World War, which led to the tremendous catastrophe of the downfall of the Russian empire and everything that followed the Bolshevik revolution.

We can see that Russia is essentially using the Western Balkans, particularly Serbia, for public relations' reasons with the EU. Moscow exploits this area to show that there are partnership agreements in Europe and that some European leaders can at least verbally defy western notions about Russia's aggressiveness and be friendly toward Moscow.

Finally, let me say that historically leaders of Balkans nations have been trying to involve big powers in their disputes, and Russia fell victim to that several times. I think, and I hope, that this lesson has been learned. The Balkans are somebody else's business, not Russians, and I hope Russia will not get involved in that area anymore.

Amer Kapetanovic
Political Director, Regional Cooperation Council, Sarajevo

REGIONAL COOPERATION AND GCC COUNTRIES

INTRODUCTION: SOUTH EAST EUROPE: A GEOSTRATEGIC CHESSBOARD FOR EXTERNAL ACTORS

Throughout history, South East Europe has been a region of Great Power struggle. The means, tools and in some cases, even the motives to enhance external actor influence have changed over time and are likely to keep adapting to the new conditions and possibilities of the digital age. A sluggish process of enlargement, aggravated by the bleak socio-economic picture of the entire region, combined with some global geo-political shifts, has created a notable crack, through which it will be either the light of the EU values or that of alternative values that will enter. All public surveys show that the prevalent opinion among people in the region is still in favor of the EU accession, yet faith in the viability of this process has been falling whereas misperceptions regarding the region's real allies have been growing. Although the EU is the biggest investor and donor by far, surveys show that citizens in some economies think that Russian, Chinese and other helping hands are stronger, despite the fact that statistics contradict this. To understand this phenomenon of misperception, we should not only analyze competition of Great Powers *per se*, but also look thoroughly into what has generated the geo-political crack…In other words, we need to examine the reasons that have turned the WB region into a geo-political "soft belly" of the EU, rather than a "six pack", as it should be. I will focus on certain determining reasons, starting with socioeconomic factors, such as unemployment and brain drain and move on to parameters connected with political stability, security and external actor competition.

The reality of the WB region in its current state is marked by high levels of financial and economic insecurity, as well as skepticism regarding the security situation and doubts over the capacities of public institutions to navigate law- and rules-based societies. Youth economic inactivity in the region is double that of the

EU average, leading to two thirds of young people willing to leave their homes and live and work abroad. The region is still very much a laggard in the utilization of digital opportunities and therefore less competitive in the global economy. According to the latest SecuriMeter findings,[1] economic crisis, poverty and social exclusion are viewed by 63% of WB respondents as the greatest risk to security in the region. Only 38% of WB citizens are satisfied with the security situation in their economy, while there are high levels of concerns regarding corruption, organized crime, illegal migration, return of foreign terrorist fighters, and other challenges. As it is illustrated in the 2020 Balkan Barometer,[2] Western Balkan citizens exhibit low level of trust in democratic institutions: 61% of respondents do not trust their courts and judiciaries and parliaments, while only 38% trust their governments. Such levels of distrust and sense of insecurity render societies vulnerable to external influences seemingly providing order and stability.

As additional reason I would identify a general sense of malaise in the WB, stemming from an enlargement process that has been going on for more than 20 years now and which, at its present state, brings only limited benefits both to the region and the EU. On the one hand, the WB6, except for a few cases, do not seem to take any giant leap forward towards the acquis; whereas the EU has shown a lukewarm response to some important -if not historical- achievements of WB economies, such as North Macedonia changing its name or Albania almost bringing its entire judicial system to a halt for the sake of implementing a new EU-modelled law on vetting of judges. Despite the fact that support for EU accession has been growing over the years, currently standing at a 62% among WB6 citizens (Balkan Barometer 2021), optimism regarding the time of accession has been declining, with only one fourth of respondents expecting it to happen by 2025. Almost one fifth (22%) see absolutely no prospect of EU integration for their economy in the future. This general sentiment of hopelessness - or at least disillusionment - provides a fertile ground for disinformation to be effectively misused as a tool aimed at skewing public perceptions. According to the 2021 Securimeter findings, 76% of WB citizens see disinformation as a new way of warfare, with 77% identifying disinformation as a problem in their economy.

The findings of the 2020 survey conducted by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy[3] illustrate the impact of disinformation on public opinion. Despite the EU being the biggest financial contributor to Serbia, only 3% of the respondents

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1 https://www.rcc.int/securimeter/home
2 https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/home
3 https://bezbednost.org/en/publication/many-faces-of-serbian-foreign-policy-public-opinion-and-geopolitical-balancing/

recognize it as such; 40% of respondents believe that Russia is Serbia's greatest ally,[4] whereas three thirds believe that China had been its greatest donor during the pandemic. Especially when it comes to infrastructure, for ordinary people and even some politicians, third-country investments in this sector appear more visible than the EU's; figures, however, clearly indicate that the EU is going to invest more in infrastructure than all other countries are planning to invest altogether.

GCC COUNTRIES IN THE REGION: DYNAMICS OF INFLUENCE

One cannot speak of a frontal GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) influence in the WB6, as GCC countries are competing among themselves in their own area of influence in the Gulf. In this sense, their presence in the Western Balkans can only be seen in individual or limited categories, depending on each GCC country's interest.

For instance, financial investment has been a priority for the UAE, Kuwait and Qatar. The role of Saudi Arabia in recent history has been focused on cultural and religious influence among Muslims throughout the region, supporting an effort to minimize the influence of Iran. Turkey and Qatar have played against Saudi Arabia's cultural/religious aspiration. The attempt to ideologically instill the radical Islam values of Wahhabism in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia by building mosques and cultural centers has proven itself not strong enough to last.

Currently, GCC capacity is mostly financially motivated and evident especially in lucrative real estate business, a phenomenon which is not inherent to the WB, as there are currently active GCC sovereign wealth funds in the UK, France, Germany and across the EU. The GCC influence, however, has neither the geo-political proxy nor the financial leverage to come anywhere close to China and Russia, just like the latter do not have the capacity to come anywhere closer to the EU; GCC countries in most cases are not even among the top ten investors and trade partners to any of the six WB economies, except only partly to Serbia and Montenegro.

Turkish influence activities are nowadays often portrayed with similarly negative connotations as the Russian ones, mainly due to the increasingly poor relations between Turkey and the West. In the long run, however, the Turkish agenda is far less contradictory to the Western interests in the region. Turkish strategic goals (contrary to the Russian ones) can still be best served if the Western Balkan economies join the EU, as accession would stabilize the region with which Turkey has extensive economic, political and cultural ties. It would also facilitate export to the EU, its main trading partner and increase Turkish leverage with the EU.

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4 Only 6.6% of foreign direct investment in the region comes from Russia. Russia's share of regional foreign trade is 3.9% for exports and 5.3% for imports. The region, however, is dependent on Russia for its energy supply, though this dependence is waning.

The only way to ensure that the Western Balkans are a six-pack rather than a soft belly is by strengthening its economy; enhancing its security; and advancing in real terms EU principles, values and worldview. The pandemic and post-pandemic period will be particularly challenging in that regard, but it must remain clear to everyone that following the aforementioned path is a priority, not an option.

The Common Regional Market, adopted at the Sofia Summit of the Berlin Process in 2020, provides an excellent framework for the diffusion of EU principles and modus operandi in the Western Balkans. With its capacity to generate an additional 6.4% GDP growth and create a regional area in trade, investments, digital economy, industry and innovation, CRM promises a vision of a prosperous and sustainable future, allowing for a smoother accession of the region to the EU. The RCC is together with CEFTA the coordinator of this process,while the RCC is also implementing non-CRM agendas which strengthen CRM goals: promoting regional security cooperation, increasing participation of youth in decision-making, supporting economic empowerment of women, improving employment policies and advancing social inclusivity of the Roma population. In technical terms, the CRM and the agendas mentioned are set perfectly to accelerate socio-economic development.

These processes are never purely technical; they are even more so political. Without political will and sincere commitment, we cannot get far. The following is therefore critical: to make sure that leaders and politics in each of the Western Balkan economies understand that regional cooperation agenda is in their best – indeed only – interest, and that it will bring them much more than fostering disputes. At the same time, it is crucial to make EU citizens and Member States aware of the fact that a credible commitment of the EU to the region advances and protects their own interests and future. At this point, I would like to note the incredibly positive example of EU's in-kind and financial assistance during the pandemic and the financial package of the Economic and Investment Plan, mobilizing some 9bn EUR for the region's socio-economic development. This has been a real manifestation of EU commitment to the region, with a very real echo throughout the Western Balkans.

Session 2

THE CHALLENGE OF REGIONAL SECURITY AND INCLUSION

NATO naval exercise in the Black Sea, 2018. Source: www.mc.nato.int

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NATO'S OPTIONS AND DILEMMAS BETWEEN BALKANS AND BLACK SEA. A BULGARIAN VIEW

The title of this conference says that the Balkans and the Black Sea are strategic regions, and I cannot agree more. Uniting the Balkans and the Black Sea is a logical step, but I will focus only on the Balkans because, as Dmitri Trenin previously said, there are different solutions or approaches by Russia and other global actors as well on both regions, the Balkans and the Black Sea.

It is essential to bear in mind some figures and facts regarding the Balkans. The Balkans have some 55 million people population, which is more or less the size of Italy or the size of England, and the Balkans together have something like half a million square kilometres area, which is more or less the area of France.

How to materialize this considerable potential? The solution is simple and is enclosed in three letters: USB. Of course, I am not talking about the standard connection socket on our computers. USB is an acronym that stands for the *United States of the Balkans*. Not all the Balkan countries are part of NATO nor the EU, but those two shields that protect the region give us enough freedom to improve regional cohesion and coordination in terms of economy and a better unification in terms of economy, defence sports and culture.

As mentioned above, USB is a simple idea but with great potential. Let's suppose a telecom operator wants to invest in Bulgaria, a market of 7 million people. What would be his interest to invest in such a market? Now, try to think about the same telecom operator who invests in a market of 55 million people. It is a big difference, both from his and the consumer side. Of course, we could apply this perspective to many other areas such as energy, defence, infrastructures, culture, etc.

The United States of Balkans couldn't be a major power such as the EU or USA, but they would be a relevant actor on the global scene. Let me give you an example to make my point clear. It is the case of a Bulgarian infrastructural project. As many experts know, there is tremendous competition in terms of maritime trade between the Northern Sea route (goes from Korea, pass through the North Pole, and goes to Rotterdam) and the Southern Sea route (starts from Korea, goes

through India, Suez Canal, Gibraltar, and goes again to Rotterdam).

This Bulgarian constructor suggests building a *USB* shortcut by passing all the cargo coming from the Suez Canal to Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, and finally to Rotterdam. It is a fantastic project which shortens the distance by some 3000 kilometres, or 11 days, for the cargo, making the transportation about 100 euro cheaper per ton and saving something like 500,000 tons of CO2 (Carbon Dioxide) emissions per year.

We have some challenges in this project which are manageable. For example, one of them is the discussion between North Macedonia and Bulgaria; this dispute is solvable. Another manageable argument is represented by the controversy regarding the influence of China and Russia in the region. I disagree with that Dimitri Trenin about Serbia- Russia relationship. I cannot agree that a spy centre in Niš, only 30 kilometres from Bulgaria, is a pr exercise.

Of course, in addition to the manageable challenges, we also have significant challenges represented by the lack of regional leadership and mutual suspicions among the Balkan countries. The latter is the main challenge to overcome, but we have good news, and this is a very well-kept Balkan secret. Maybe not everybody knows, but one of the most interesting Balkan countries is Italy, as Trieste geographically belongs to the Balkans. Let me remind you that Italy was one of the leading campaigners of the *Exercise Sea Breeze* in the nineties and the promoter of the NATO-Russia council. The Italian leadership could make miracles on the Balkan peninsula. Small but concrete steps are needed, and to start with, let me suggest a *USB* unified time zone. The Western Balkans are Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) +1, while the Eastern Balkans, where Bulgaria belongs, are GMT +2. Let's imagine a *USB* time that could unite the region, and that time would be a GMT + 1.30. Of course, I do not see that this solution will fit the Black Sea region; there are other ideas for that area that we can discuss on another occasion.

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FINGERPRINTS OF COVID-19 DISINFORMATION AND INFORMATION OPERATIONS

Being placed at a geopolitical crossroads, the Black Sea and Western Balkans region has become a true battlefield during the pandemic, with a medical crisis and everything related to it being weaponised for commercial, political and increasingly geopolitical purposes. In this context, I will touch upon the issue of infodemic and some of the related global narratives. Then I will discuss how these global/transnational narratives have circulated, either by mere translation or in culturally adapted forms, across the Black Sea and Western Balkans region, with a view to identifying relevant similarities in terms of both content and purposes.

You are probably familiar with the term "infodemic" and with the idea that the COVID-19 infodemic closely couples, amplifies, and even transforms the actual global pandemic. During those difficult times, we have seen the emergence of a whole disinformation ecosystem in which stand-alone fake news stories, half-truths, hyper partisan views, rumours, hoaxes, conspiracies, coordinated disinformation campaigns, and even elements of information warfare have combined in order to sow mistrust, create cynicism, polarise societies, and amplify scepticism towards science, technology, medical authorities and other authoritative sources.

According to my research, which is consistent with the emerging knowledge in the field, the themes and narratives that have constituted the content of disinformation have been mostly transnational/global in nature; this is why I am sure that some of them will sound very familiar to you, since they circulated in your countries, too.

The 5G conspiracy is a classic case of a disinformation narrative that has emerged over the last two years. Most of us been exposed to stories according to which the 5G technology spreads the virus, that the lockdowns were a mere pretext to keep people inside their homes while this technology was secretly installed, or that the COVID-19 vaccines are a means to "infect" people with the 5G technology, to install 5G devices under their skin (microchipping agenda). Another narrative

spread the idea that there are miracle cures against COVID-19 (such as using vitamin C or essential oils, keeping your throat moist with lukewarm water), with the extra twist that these cures are "hidden" by the "corrupt" authorities in order to infect/ kill people or allow for the purchase of expensive treatments. One global narrative that, somehow understandably, has circulated right from the beginning of the pandemic concerns its origin. This provides an interesting case of local adaptation. The global narrative that "the origin of the pandemic is shaky" was "translated" for the Black Sea and Balkan region, suggesting that NATO/ US militaries brought the virus into this part of the world, or that the virus is a bioweapon engineered in a laboratory located in the US/NATO country.

These are just some examples of the narratives circulated transnationally and, with due adaptations, in the Black Sea and Western Balkans region.

Apart from COVID-19 tailored narratives, disinformation actors have also exploited the public anxiety created by the pandemic in order to recycle and re-circulate narratives that are genuinely geopolitical in nature. One such widespread narrative has the EU enlargement process at its core and, building on the actual hesitancy from Western actors, amplified the interpretation that the EU is not seriously interested in finalising the process, that EU enlargement will never happen. Disinformation narratives specifically tailored for NATO members from the Eastern flank (such as Romania and Bulgaria) emphasised the idea that, in case of aggression/military clash, none of the Western members of the Alliance would be prone to help or protect these Eastern allies, thus raising doubts and encouraging suspicions about NATO's posture, ability or willingness to defend its member states ("country x … left alone", "sitting ducks" narratives).

Other fingerprints of disinformation in the Black Sea and Western Balkans regions include: using negative stereotypes about one country to influence perception or emotions in another; overemphasising values such as identity, ethnicity, religious faith, tradition, history or culture; scapegoating the foreigner, the immigrant, the "global occult" and their "local puppets", and the globalization/ European integration processes. In general, these interpretations with a heavy anti-Western tinge have been narrated in binary, exclusionary frames: "good vs. bad", "us vs. them".

As I have already underlined, research is emerging that COVID-19 disinformation campaigns and information operations have followed some common patterns. There are different explanations for such commonalities. One such explanation is that they have been an externality created by the global reach of digital platforms, which are transnational in nature. Another one is that they have provided a common psychological comfort for common, universal fears and anxieties.

These possible explanations notwithstanding, COVID-19 narratives and twisted interpretations of medical, scientific realities have also been geopolitical in nature, targeting the Western liberal space overall, its political model and security architecture. They have also reflected an anti-science, anti-authority, anti-estab-

lishment ethos and, while building on legitimate concerns regarding, for example, possible government overreach, lack of transparency, digital surveillance, invasion of privacy, they provided a twisted interpretation of foundational concepts of liberal democracy, such as "liberty", "fundamental rights", "freedom of expression/speech". By stoking these legitimate concerns, COVID-19 disinformation sought to spread panic, polarize societies, create distrust, and amplify scepticism toward authorities, democratic institutions and processes.

My final point is related to another remarkable commonality of these disinformation campaigns or information operations in the Black Sea and Western Balkans region, and in other regions across the Western world, for that matter. Namely, they have exploited structural weaknesses, even dysfunctionalities of the respective societies, of their public spaces and information ecosystems. Among such weaknesses and dysfunctionalities, let me mention: fragmentation, polarisation, radicalisation of opinions, poor leadership, lack of solidarity, underdeveloped media systems, unsolved public controversies and outcries, an emotion-driven approach to public debates.

In conclusion, I have identified several similarities of disinformation and information operations in the Black Sea and Western Balkans region. Similarities in terms of narratives (new and recycled), patterns, objectives, and exploitation of pre-existing structural weaknesses. I think that exposing these similarities has the potential to create pan-regional awareness, build solidarity and provide us with a very persuasive means of tackling disinformation, containing its spread and mitigating its effects.

AHMET EVIN
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EXTERNAL CHALLENGES TO REGIONAL STABILITY AND COHERENCE

At several earlier conferences organised by the NATO Foundation, I emphasised the predominance of centrifugal forces in the Balkans that have detracted, if not outright prevented, convergence and cooperation among the states and peoples in that region.[1] Competing identities in the Balkans—those of strongly-bonded ethnic, linguistic, and confessional groupings—have historically reinforced those centrifugal forces.

Several external actors have played on these existing differences within the region, amplifying the centrifugal tendencies. They continue to extend their influence through political alliances based on ethno-cultural affinities. Russia, for example, has been actively seeking to extend its influence into western Balkans by means of building on its cultural and confessional links to Serbia as well as to the Serbian population in the region, for example, the Republika Srpska. Others, such as China, offer financial or technical assistance to the region according to their own interests, which also has the effect of widening economic differences and infrastructural disparities among the neighbouring countries, thus deepening the existing cleavages.

The Black Sea region bears some similarities with the western Balkans. For example, a common characteristic of these two overlapping regions is frozen conflicts, with Russia involved in all of them.[2] Unlike the Balkans, however, the Black Sea region is confronted with a single major challenge. It borders directly on Russia, which is keen to maintain its own security interests across the region even to the extent irredentist expansion.[3]

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1 *Balkan Perspectives: Adapting the Partnership and its Integration Paths*, Rome (NDCF, 2019) and *Balkan Perspectives 2020: The Fight for a Timely Inclusion*, Rome (NDCF, 2019).
2 See for example, Thomas de Waal and Nikolaus von Twickel, *Beyond Frozen Conflict Scenarios for the Separatist Disputes of Eastern Europe,* Brussels (CEPS, 2020) and Maxim Samorukov, *A Spoiler in the Balkans? Russia and the Final Resolution of the Kosovo Conflict,* Washington, DC (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019).
3 Steven Keil, Heinrich Brauß, and Elisabeth Braw, *Next Steps in NATO Deterrence and Resilience,* Wash-

Against this roughly sketched background let me briefly dwell on the role of external actors in these two regions. Russian policy demonstrates a remarkable continuity since the seventeenth century in the last decade of which Peter the Great, after repeated attempts, conquered Azov (1696), with the aim of reaching the Black Sea. Several decades later, Catherine the Great would pursue the same policy with greater vigour; she waged two wars on the Ottomans, annexed Crimea, and established the Black Sea fleet (1768-74; 1787-91). Since then, reaching the Mediterranean via the Black Sea and through Turkish territories has been a key policy goal for Moscow.

In the post-Soviet era, Russian involvement in the Black Sea region has taken more of an aggressive turn, aiming to deter or prevent any Western orientation in the area. Russia's exclusive claims on its "Near Abroad" is an integral part of its policy to cultivate client states to serve as a border against what Moscow considers as encroachment by Western powers. How far Moscow would go to stake its claim in that regard is vividly illustrated by to blatant examples: the Russia-Georgia war (2008) and the annexation of Crimea (2014).

By virtue of its emphasis on cultural and confessional (in Turkey's case also ethnic) affinities, Turkey's role in the Balkans appears in these respects to be similar to that of Russia. However, there are significant differences in the way in which Russia and Turkey pursue their respective geopolitical interests. For Russia, keeping the western Balkans divided serves a single major goal, that of detracting from the region's EU accession and driving a wedge between pro-Western actors and others. Although Turkey's policy appears to be directed exclusively to enhance Muslim identity in the region, it also aims to extend Turkey's reach into the Balkans as a competing regional power. Turkey's involvement in the Balkans ironically began as part of its cooperation with the Western Alliance, responding to the civil wars in former Yugoslavia. After the AKP government was formed in the late 2002, it gradually took the form of soft power diplomacy to promote Islamic culture and identity in Bosnia and other parts of the Balkans. The former Foreign and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, who formulated his thesis, "Strategic Depth,"[4] after Sir Halford Mackinder's Heartland Theory,[5] argued that, since the Ottoman empire extended to three continents from the Danubian Europe to the Middle East and North Africa, its heir, Turkey, would be more capable than Western Europeans and Americans of playing a mediating and leadership role in that geography. As foreign minister he announced a policy of "Zero problems with neighbours," which attracted enthusiastic international support.

A regional policy, naïve as it was, thus begun was later transformed into one

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of neo-Ottomanism policy that claimed a leadership role for Turkey throughout the former Ottoman lands. Ankara's current neo-Ottomanist ambitions, however, unlike Russia's tightly focused foreign policy, is as much motivated by domestic political goals as it is by a drive to prove Turkey's credentials as a regional power. Again, unlike Putin's single-minded foreign policy objectives, Ankara's interventions in different regions may point in different directions, as they often do, because of the Ankara's tactical and transactional approach.

In the Black Sea region, for example, Ankara can easily purchase Russian S-400 missile defense systems over the objection of its NATO Allies but also it can as easily risk Russia's displeasure by supplying unmanned air vehicles (UAVs) to Ukraine. Examples can be multiplied. The point I wish to make here is that all these examples of standing up to other powers (regional or global) are investments in domestic politics with the expectation of high returns in the ballot box.

Raising the stakes by increasing tensions domestically or internationally did serve Mr. Erdogan well for nearly a decade and a half. Whether that strategy will continue to serve his political goals is not certain now, given Turkey's current fiscal and economic situation. Moreover, the present disagreement about the future of Cyprus and the looming new uncertainties in the Eastern Mediterranean are likely to attract greater regional and international attention not least because of Ankara's adamant insistence on a two-state solution to resolve the Cyprus crisis. The division of the island into two separate sovereign states is not only against the whole range of Turkey's Western allies but also against UNSC resolutions and the consensus among the world community at large. The EU declared recently that it was ready to apply any means possible to make Turkey reverse its decision to re-open parts of Varosha.

The current developments in the Eastern Mediterranean may temporarily eclipse Turkey's other regional actions but none of these actions – be they in the Balkans, the Black Sea region or eastern Mediterranean – should be viewed as mutually exclusive.

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UKRAINE AT THE CROSSROADS OF DEMOCRATIC REFORM AND STRATEGIC RECOVERY

Before starting my brief presentation about Ukraine's reform progress, I want to use this conference, organised by the NATO Defense College Foundation, for acknowledging NATO's crucial role in supporting Ukraine path towards defending its independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity and in conducting a more comprehensive range of reforms.

Ukraine still suffers from a lack of comprehensive media coverage, and the poor information about the country usually refers to its conflict with Moscow. Let me give you an example of that. Ten years ago when I was in Rome to hold a seminar at the NATO Defense College, I made a short quiz to understand what well-educated high-ranking military officers in my class knew about Ukraine. Two main results emerged from that quiz: Chernobyl, the nuclear disaster, and Andriy Shevchenko, the football player.

It is happening today: most of the news in the European media is about the so-called "Ukrainian crisis" and Ukraine's corruption. Unfortunately, positive information about Ukraine usually do not attract media attention. It means that midsize countries like Ukraine appear more frequently on TV when something terrible happens. Ukraine found itself in an epicentre of the global struggle of extraordinary powers, in particular, the Russian competition against the West, particularly NATO, to compete for Eastern Europe space that Moscow sees as its own.

Sometimes it's possible to hear that Ukraine has been governed and used as a weapon against Russia, but that's not true: Kyiv is fighting its war for its independence, sovereignty, and right to choose a different way of life.

As we all know, Ukraine has been going through difficult times during the last 7 years. Back in February 2014, when the country was just about to start a recovery from the deep internal political crisis, it came under the Russian attack conducted by both conventional and the so-called hybrid warfare. At that time, Ukraine's government had to address an enormous challenge of fighting the hybrid war and responding to the strong internal demand for democratic reforms simultaneously.

Seven years after, we should admit that Ukraine has not just survived, but also has made a remarkable progress in conducting numerous transformations and especially in reforming its national security sector including both the national defense and the so-called civilian security sector (police, border guard, intelligence services etc.). Obviously, this is not an entirely success story, but at least the defense reform might be considered as a rather effective one.

In 2020, Ukraine completed the next stage of the defense reform, initiated in 2016. The reform was quite notable regarding both its ambitions and a level of systemic approach to the reform planning and implementation. Out of the long list of objectives achieved and transformations that are still under way, I would highlight just two of them. First, the capability of keeping almost 400 km long frontline for years with 40.000 troops being permanently deployed against the Russian proxies with modern weapons and the newest military requirements. Second, the progress towards NATO standards. This is not only about force interoperability, but also regarding the defense budget (2.5% GDP) and the firmly established strategic course towards European and Euro Atlantic integration in the national Constitution. By the way, the level of public support for Ukraine's possible membership in NATO has increased over the last seven years from 15-20 to more than 50% and remains stable.

NATO for Ukraine has been a model and a great supporter. The Alliance and some individual members are actively involved in the Ukrainian reforms by providing training missions, strategic advisory, trust funds etc. Recently granting Ukraine with a status of an Enhanced Opportunity Partner provides ever more opportunities for both Ukraine and the Alliance.

What Ukraine is still lacking the most is directly related to the topic of today's conference, and this is the deficiency of maritime security capabilities. The previous speakers were talking about the importance of making the Black Sea area a space of cooperation and not a space of conflict. With very limited national capabilities to oppose the Russian aggressive actions (restrictions for a freedom for navigation, creeping annexation etc.) in the Black Sea, Ukraine counts on a greater support and cooperation with NATO partners.

To conclude, I would like to emphasise that Ukraine has been not just a recipient, but also a valuable security contributor. Therefore, NATO's support for Ukraine should be perceived not as a charity, but as an investment in our common security.

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UNRESOLVED STATUS DISPUTES IN THE BALKANS AND THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY IN THE WEST

Differently from what has been said by my colleague in the first session, I insist that today the main threat to security, democracy and stability in the Western Balkans does not come from major external powers or non-state actors, but from the West itself and its crisis of democracy. Since 2015 there have been three major crises: the European refugee crisis, Brexit and the victory of Donald Trump in the US presidential elections, and a u-turn in Western policy towards the Western Balkans. In the latter case, the EU watered down its leading role in the region. Indeed, the lack of political will to engage with local governments brought a sort of instability into the area. It can be best observed and analysed in two policy areas.

The first area is the EU-US led post-2016 negotiations on some of the unresolved disputes in the Balkans. The first episode is the Kosovo-Serbia issue and the 2017-2020 EU-US led negotiations, in what was once the political dialogue on a so-called final and comprehensive agreement and towards between the two western Balkans countries based on the idea of a complete agreement, towards a dangerous idea and push for the so-called *land swap agreement*.

This dialogue had two phases. From 2017 to 2019, the first phase has been played out under the EU leadership, specifically by the EU HRVP, Federica Mogherini and her team, in what has to be considered a unique episode in the history of the *common foreign and security policy*. A policy of high checking and privatising the EU policy for a dangerous *land swap policy* by the HRVP and her team, colluding with two presidents: the former EU ally turned autocrat Serbian president Vučić and the former Kosovo President Hashim Thaçi, who was ready to trade parts of the territory of his state to avoid war crimes prosecution.

Past experiences from the Nineties taught us that so-called ethno-territorial states solutions are "a path to hell" in the Balkans. Had this line been passed, our liberal democratic values and the lessons learned would have been replaced by a transactional approach of a quick fake fixed deal, a kind of any deal is a good

deal policy approach. Thankfully, EU negotiators threw away this policy. While Mogherini's team left its office in 2019, without succeeding with this dangerous policy, the Trump administration leadership replaced the EU awkward leadership under the special Special Envoy to Balkans, and former US ambassador to Germany, Richard Grenell.

The continuation of that dangerous endeavour towards the land swap agreement brought to the toppling of the Kurti government in Kosovo that was the first and uniques, and I must stress this point, toppling of a democratically elected government on European soil by the US after 1989. That US endeavour failed and ended up in a mere *photo-op* Washington agreement in the summer of 2020 with the exiting Trump administration. However, how close those negotiations were to strike such a dangerous deal is not publicly known. Had that deal come through, either through EU negotiator leadership or under US leadership, it would have jeopardised three decades of efforts and heavily fought achievements of stabilising the region, throwing us back in the 1990s and setting the entire area, not only Kosovo and Serbia, on fire.

The second episode has been unfolding in Bosnia Herzegovina since 2020. It is one of the prominent unsolved status disputes, the unresolved issue of removing the Dayton agreement ceasefire Constitution that leaves Bosnia and Herzegovina dominated by ethnopolitics, with a dysfunctional state, and replacing it with a functional constitutional order.

In June 2020, in an attempt that did not have any strategic basis for handling this structural problem in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the EU and US negotiators struck a deal on Mostar, removing but not solving a one-decade impasse that left the city without an elected government and local elections, by striking an agreement with the two main ethno-political parties. To resolve the deadlock and enable local elections, which took place in December last year, the parties agreed on an ethno-territorial division of the city. They threw away two and a half decades of Western efforts in a bid to reunify the city.

In the aftermath of this policy, surviving the end of the Trump administration, EU-US negotiators, during the last months, tried to agree on a so-called "negotiated deal on election law reform". This agreement, while being allegedly about removing discriminatory provisions of the electoral system, on the surface, was following the same transactional quick fixed deal of "any deal is a good deal" approach that subscribes to accommodating ethno-political leaders' interest. It would have led, if successful, to further ethnic division of Bosnia that would threaten the integrity of the state and the security of the wider region.

The second area, and cannot be avoided that today by coincidence we are celebrating the 17th anniversary of the adoption of the Geneva refugee convention, is the implication of the crisis of western, and in this case, EU asylum and migration policy on the Western Balkans. The 2016 post-European refugee crisis policy of "*fortress Europe*" and outsourcing aimed to keep migrants away from the EU, not

having to face that European disunity and the implosion of a joint EU asylum policy, has profound implications on the Western Balkans.

It is undeniable that the suspension of the rule of law and human rights at the external border of the European Union, enforced by EU member states on the border of the neighbouring countries, has a profound destructive impact on democracy and the rule of law of the Western Balkans. Moreover, this suspension also hits the democracy and the rule of law inside the EU.

Finally, from a security point of view, the operational side of this illegal policy of systematic violent pushbacks of migrants, which is an EU top-down criminalisation of the police outside the European border, will have severe long-term security implications that have not yet been addressed and even not yet understood among policymakers and analysts within the EU.

Session 3

ILLICIT THREATS FROM NON-STATE ACTORS

Albanian border policemen check the border with Greece and North Macedonia

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ILLICIT THREATS FROM NON-STATE ACTORS IN SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE

Western Balkans, in general, and North Macedonia, in particular, continue to face serious challenges from criminal networks engaged in the smuggling of drugs, persons, migrants, corruption, terrorism, and other related issues.

North Macedonia is part of a region that represents the shortest passage between the Middle East, a region experiencing war and prolonged instabilities, and Europe, a destination that offers international protection. The stability and security of this corridor affect the safety of the entire European continent and then the security of all NATO member countries. Threats from non-state actors in the Balkans are interconnected and interdependent. Most of the crimes causing such instabilities are perpetrated by indigenous organised crime groups.

Terrorists and organised crime groups (OCGs) have similar organisational structures and use almost same tactics to realise their goals. Their relationship has developed progressively in recent years. The coordination and cooperation between those two entities have increased their technical, financial, and operational capabilities, making it even harder for state institutions to fight against them.

The cooperation between OCGs and terrorist groups may take many forms. For instance, OCGs facilitate the issuance of legitimate IDs and passports to terrorist groups, enabling their movement in and out of the region. Furthermore, through financing terrorist groups, OCGs benefit from their protection and the protection of their illegal activities inside and outside Europe.

I want to mention a couple of examples involving North Macedonia. The first, where Police officers were arrested in Skopje as part of a criminal gang supplying passports and identity documents to internationally wanted criminals. Those Police officers have issued more than 200 passports to foreign nationals, including members of international crime groups and drug cartels.

Thanks to international police cooperation, through US regional security office and Interpol, the true identity of the individuals who obtained the passports

with stolen identities was revealed. Those individuals are with high-risk profiles, involved in serious international crimes and wanted under international warrants. According to a report published by "the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime", one of the criminals is the head of the "Skaljari" gang, one of the biggest drug cartels in the Balkan region. He has been using a passport issued from North Macedonia because Montenegrin Police supplied information about him to other criminals.

When international criminals succeed in issuing passports with a different identity in a legal way, they can travel, open bank accounts abroad, do money laundering, and represent serious obstruction for regional policies fighting against organised crime, like Interpol and the American "DEA". When the Ministry of Interior issues such passports with a stolen identity from someone else, this means that criminals were able to go to a police station, get photographed, submit biometric data, and much more.

The second example I want to mention, it is about the illegal immigrants passing through the Balkan route. It is a smuggling ring that includes Police officers who were arrested earlier. They were involved in smuggling migrants for money and are responsible for the entry of thousands of migrants to Europe.

Organised Crime Prosecution claims that this ring has smuggled migrants from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Bangladesh, and Middle Eastern countries through North Macedonia and had been charging from 500 to 700 euros per person. They were using some illegal border crossings near the southern borders to smuggle illegal migrants from Greece, transporting them through the country, then transferring them illegally to Serbia in the north, a one step closer toward their final destination in the European countries.

Throughout the years, OCGs in the Balkans have acquired very intimidating powers. Criminal organisations' capabilities and the threats posed to the democratic processes, including elections, arise from the exhaustive use of their resources, including large amounts of money to influence government officials at multiple levels. There is a strong correlation between the robust presence of OCGs and the weak judicial system, which lack both independence and integrity.

According to Briscoe and Goff[1], established criminal organisations are likely to have long-standing relationships with certain political actors, especially in local contexts. When they set out to influence the electoral process, criminal organisations—as separate entities from networks of political corruption—are most likely to exert influence on election campaigns and during voting on election day. Furthermore, OCG tend to use the process to legitimate their activities or to extend their influence far beyond the crime.

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1 Catalina Uribe Burcher (editor), Ivan Briscoe, Diana Goff, Protecting Politics: Deterring the Influence Of Organized Crime On Political Parties, Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), Clingendael Institute, (2016). https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/protecting-politics-deterring-influence-organized-crime-political-parties

Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters (RFTF) experience in Europe and particularly in the Balkans was unique since the participation of adult fighters from the Balkans with ISIS was a voluntary-based involvement and not a recruitment-based one. Despite global interest in fighting violent extremism in the past two decades, only few efforts focused on the deradicalisation process. However, the available reintegration programs are likely to be inadequate especially for individuals under 18 years old, since such programs were originally developed to address adult soldiers and not minors. RTFT in the Balkans and particularly in North Macedonia are currently going through compact DDRR programs (Disarmament, demobilisation, reintegration, and rehabilitation) that last between 3 and 9 weeks, which is a relatively short period to guarantee success to the reintegration and the rehabilitation process.

There were several cases where some radicals have left Europe legally and then, they returned in an illegal way to commit terrorist acts or other crimes in EU countries. The lack of evidence for their re-entry made it harder for law enforcement agencies to probe their involvement in those crimes. Besides, public prosecutors, especially in the Balkans, when they do not have enough evidence to prove the involvement of these individuals in such acts committed in the Middle East, are forced to give minimum sentences that can even be as little as three months imprisonment. Afterwards, and with ineffective DDRR programs, radicals return back to their societies and recruit more individuals. They may get also involved again in such crimes if they have a low income or due to social insecurity.

It is very important to study the interaction between organised crime and politics, to define points of interaction and work towards handling them, considering that OCGs in the Balkans, on the opposite of their counterparts in other countries, tend to have a huge interest in daily politics.

We have concluded that the fight against organised crime, especially in North Macedonia has two components or let's say it is based on two pillars. The first is understanding and analysing the nature of the phenomena to develop a concrete methodology in the right context and the second is the commitment and the determination of state institutions to the fight against organised crime. North Macedonia is facing many challenges, among which we can point three main issues:

- Unwillingness of personnel involved with OCGs to quit, due to social insecurity, low salaries or other;
- Involvement of state officials or other political structures in OCG activities;
- Insufficient cooperation between local and international institutions dealing with the issue.

Balkan countries undertook radical reforms to fight organised crime, including reforming state institutions and improving the cooperation between national and international institutions in every state. However, preventing transnational organised crime requires more effective collaboration between all countries in the Bal-

kans since it is a joint responsibility and not just the responsibility of one country only. Neighbouring states may coordinate successful joint anti-corruption campaigns and strengthen the role of internal affairs within the different political parties in the region. Communication is the key, since fighting OCGs depends much on the quality of networking, communication and information exchange between state institutions and their counterparts in neighbouring countries, in compliance with all previously signed treaties and conventions.

Taking into account the repressive approach used in the Balkans to such phenomena and what we have learned from the Middle East experience, maybe it is time to use a more preventive approach that limit the creation of OCGs, stop their expansion and cut their transnational ties.

Snejana Maleeva
Director General, Southeast European Law Enforcement Center, Bucharest

VALUE AND PERSPECTIVES OF REGIONAL COOPERATION AGAINST ORGANISED CRIME AND TERRORISM

Nowadays organised crime is expending considerably in presence, sophistication and significance – and now threatens many aspects of people's life. All forms of trans-border crimes remain a threat to the security of South East region.

In view of today's criminality, more than ever, the competent authorities must have a proactive approach and a common strategy in order to coordinate their endeavours and join synergies for an effective and enhanced fight against transborder organised crime.

Preventing and countering trans-border organised crime is of crucial importance, thus international and regional cooperation is instrumental in addressing the security challenges that can be best tackled through common approach, enhanced cooperation and strengthened partnership. Having a synergy among countries is a condition sine qua non for an effective fight against organised crime, including terrorism, thus ensuring stability, security and development.

The Southeast European Law Enforcement Center (SELEC) is one successful example of law enforcement regional cooperation, as well as un important segment of the security of the region, by providing, already more than 20 years, support and enhancing the cooperation in preventing and combating the transborder crime,

SELEC is a law enforcement treaty-based international organisation that brings together the resources and expertise of Police and Customs authorities of its Member States, having also the prosecutorial support of the Southeast European Prosecutors Network – SEEPAG. The Member States of SELEC are: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Republic of Moldova, Montenegro, Republic of North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Turkey.

The establishment of SELEC in the vulnerable region of South Eastern Europe has a great importance because, on one hand, it offers the possibility to strengthen the cooperation for the prevention and suppression of all kinds of transborder criminality, including terrorism, and, *on the other hand*, it facilitates the coopera-

tion of the countries from South East region among themselves and with other countries and international organisations, thus making our region safer and more secure for our citizens.

SELEC, through its 11 Member States and 25 partners, fights against all forms of transborder crimes in Southeast Europe, having as priority serious and organised crime, including terrorism, by facilitating the swift exchange of information, conducting joint investigations and regional operations, producing analytical reports and organising Task Force meetings, operational meetings, workshops, trainings.

After 20 years, I can say that we have contributed to establishing trust among all SELEC Member states despite their different economic and political situations. Another important aspect is the established and shared modus operandi among the enforcement authorities from different countries .All these aspect contribute to the success of the law enforcement cooperation in our region.

Among the analytical products, elaborated by SELEC it is worthy to mention our comprehensive analytical report -the Organized Crime Threat Assessment for Southeast Europe (OCTA SEE).

The last OCTA SEE calls for 5 key priorities for the region, namely terrorism, cybercrime, drug trafficking, trade and industry crime, trafficking in human being and smuggling of migrants. Money laundering is inherent to almost all types of criminal activities.

As response to these evolving threats, an increased cooperation at operational level in the rapid exchange of information and a strong judicial coordination between states and organisations at regional and international level are essential for successfully combating the transborder organise crime.

Walter Kemp
Director, South East Europe Observatory, Global Initiative against Transnational Orgenised Crime, Geneva

ORGANISED CRIME AS A THREAT TO STABILITY

I represent the global initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, a network of around 500 experts worldwide. It is well known that organised crime poses a threat to security in South-Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region, particularly from smuggling drugs, weapons, migrants, and counterfeit goods (like tobacco products). A few recent trends include:

- The growing impact of cocaine transiting the region (both through the Balkans and the Black Sea region);
- The transnational tentacles of criminal groups from the Western Balkans now stretching around the world (This trend is greater outside than inside the region);
- The Caucasus and the Black Sea emerged as a transit corridor for opiates and precursors.
- The growing sophistication of criminal groups from the Balkans and the Black Sea regions – manifested by the use of cryptocurrencies, cyber and cyber-enabled crime, encrypted communications, and money laundering techniques.

These threats are transnational; they flow across borders, including NATO and EU countries. Furthermore, organised crime is a danger and a force also linked to other threats such as corruption. For example, security services can use criminal groups to carry out assassinations, protests, or cyber-attacks. And violent groups, like biker gangs or football hooligans, can be mobilised to act as militias, join paramilitaries, or provide intimidation or protection, including politicians.

What is the impact of organised crime in these regions?

It undermines democracy and the rule of law, and it helps to enable "organised corruption" where business, political and criminal elites collude to protect each others' interests and milk the system. It creates *stabilocracies* and criminalised

governance even within some NATO members and the EU's neighbourhood. It skews economic development, and it contributes to instability and unpredictability. It is the opposite of what the UE and NATO stand for.

In the Balkans and the Black Sea regions, there are grey zones – areas where governance is weak or contested (like northern Kosovo or Crimea) or conflict, as in eastern Ukraine. Indirectly, developments in Afghanistan also impact security and drug trafficking in the Balkans and Black Sea regions and if instability increases after the withdrawal of troops from NATO countries, there is a risk of an increase in the smuggling of migrants. Such regions are magnets for organised crime; instability and weak governance attract criminal groups, increasing instability in these regions. Grey zones also create illegal markets, for example, for smuggling fuel, weapons, people, and contraband. Furthermore, the potential spill-over of the illicit economies in these grey zones can impact other regions.

For example, let's take weapons being smuggled out of these grey zones into western Europe; illicit flows through ports in Crimea. Let's also think about how northern Kosovo is used as a hide-out for criminals.

Cyber-spaces have also become grey zones that criminal groups from the Balkans and Black Sea region have been quick to exploit.

Given the seriousness of the threat, what can be done to address it?

First, states, not least NATO members, should stop coddling *stabilocracies*: too often, it seems that stability trumps good governance. It is a recipe for long-term instability.

Second, governments, civil society and the media should call out the danger of corruption, and the influence of organised crime on governance and NATO countries should work with partners to address it.

Third, it is vital to highlight the dangers of criminal governance, illicit markets, and the spill-over from grey zones. To do so, it is crucial to have a clear picture of what is going on. At the moment, the impact of crime on conflict is too often a blind spot of the international community. It can have dangerous consequences, leading to protracted conflicts, as we have seen in Afghanistan and other theatres. To rectify this, it is essential to better understand the problem, for example, by including a political economy analysis into situation assessments and strengthening analytical capacity in capitals and the field to explain the drivers and enablers of illicit economies in grey zones. Furthermore, at an operational level, we should consider including the monitoring of illicit economies in the mandates of peace operations. I am not suggesting that organised crime requires a military response, but peace operations need to understand the problem and have the tools to deal with it. Otherwise, as we have seen in Afghanistan and elsewhere, it will be impossible to build sustainable peace and development.

Fourth, since money is the oxygen of crime, it is essential to identify and cut illicit financial flows like corruption and money laundering.

Most of the organised crime in the Western Balkans and the Black Sea regions is transnational.

Therefore, my fifth point is that more needs to be done to enhance inter-state cooperation, both regionally and internationally. More needs to be done to improve intelligence-led policing and law enforcement cooperation upstream, for example, between the Western Balkans and Latin America. Since criminals operate seamlessly across borders – as if the Balkans were a common area – law enforcement needs to do the same. There is scope for greater regional cooperation to fight crime, such as information sharing and analysis, joint operations, cooperation among prosecutors, and more effective use of existing organisations like SELEC.

Sixth, illicit economies profit from licit ones. That is why globalisation and the boom in transnational organised crime coincided over the past thirty years. Since smuggled goods often move through the same entry and exit points as licit trade, a sixth remedial measure is to put greater emphasis on port, airport and border security.

Seventh, and related to Sustainable Development Goal 16, is the need for effective institutions to strengthen integrity. Too often, the temptation of big money leads to grand fraud. Since corruption facilitates organised crime and organised crime deepens corruption, it is necessary to have accountable, independent oversight mechanisms that deal with organised crime and corruption. Laws are not enough; they need to be implemented. A particular area of interest for NATO countries should foresee the creation of a framework with some partners to reduce the risks of corruption in security and defence sector procurement.

My eighth and final suggestion is to strengthen resilience among civil society. Strengthening the social antibodies of vulnerable communities, for example, where the rule of law is weak, can help prevent and resist organised crime and corruption and more generally contribute to safer, more inclusive and democratic societies. Such a bottom-up approach is fundamental, where high-level corruption or even captured states make a top-down approach difficult.

To conclude, organised crime is often seen as a peripheral issue. But unfortunately, it has moved into the mainstream, with a corrosive effect on security, development and governance. It, therefore, needs to be considered a high priority and dealt with more effectively.

Concluding Remarks

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg visits the Headquarters of KFOR, Kosovo (July 2021).
Source: www.esercito.difesa.it

PIERO FASSINO
President, Foreign Affairs Committee,
Chamber of Deputies, Rome

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I want to begin my reflection, starting with what I consider to be the keyword to try to unravel the geopolitical knots that the Balkans and Black Sea regions require us to focus on. This key word is trust. Without trust, there can be no stability. Without trust, there can be no development. And the lack of stability and development only fuels scepticism and disenchantment. Thirty-two years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, and almost 30 years since the end of the Soviet Union, the Black Sea region and the Balkans are still far from being stabilised areas.

Let me begin with the Balkans, which are Italy's geographic neighbours, particularly the Western Balkans to which we have been devoting a substantial part of our deliberations on the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chamber of Deputies. For this reason, is the one area in which mutual trust between the countries in the region, and between the individual countries and the European Union and NATO, is crucial. It has been 26 years since the Dayton Peace agreement, 22 years since the war in Kosovo, and 18 years since the Thessaloniki Declaration that advocated membership by the Balkans, all the Balkans, of the European Union. Now let us cast our minds back to Europe in 1945. Then let us think of Europe in 1970, 25 years after the end of the Second World War. A continent that had been completely transformed and made prosperous by the Marshall Plan, NATO, the ECSC, the EEC, and the Treaties of Rome. An area of political stability with integrated, rapidly growing economies, an area where winners and losers were working together to build up a common future by tackling poverty and championing the cause of freedom. Now let us think of the Balkans in 1995 and the Balkans today. Yugoslavia is no more. New nations have emerged after five years of terrible wars, of which Srebrenica is the tragic symbol. The prospect held out to those countries was their integration into the Euro- Atlantic institutions. But while substantial progress has been made with NATO membership, European integration is finding it hard to achieve. Negotiations with Serbia and Montenegro are flagging. Negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia have stalled, and the pros-

pects for Bosnia and Kosovo are even more remote. The fanciful ideas of the last Milosevic have been brought back into circulation, non-papers are appearing that are questioning the borders and conjecturing the existence of mono-ethnic states, young people are emigrating, the new states are refusing to recognise each other, with counter-vetoes and ancient rivalries raising their heads. Time is passing, trust is wearing thin, and the Balkans are in danger of once again becoming the area of permanent instability that marked out Europe's history for a long period between the 19th and 20th centuries.

Post-Dayton NATO has been decisive to stabilising the region, first by providing a military presence that has prevented any more wars. And then by opening its doors to Montenegro, Albania and North Macedonia, as well as Slovenia, Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania. Integrating the region is not easy because, as we know, the interests and hegemonic aspirations of such powers as China, Russia and Turkey are present in this region. We need to be able to prevent conflicts, and not only to fight them; this has been the main historical function of NATO, which is essential today to unravel the Balkan skein. It is now time to decide. If we intend to guarantee stability in the Balkans, we have to hasten the process of integrating these countries into the European institutions. Where NATO has succeeded, the European Union must follow suit, but the European Union must also rapidly reach out where NATO is unable to. We must acknowledge the strategic value of European integration for the stabilisation of the Balkans, and particularly the Western Balkans. For example, the fact that a NATO country like Bulgaria is vetoing the start-up of talks for the accession to the EU of another NATO country like North Macedonia, is a defeat for everyone, because it shows that the past still lingers on, and is taking pre-eminence over the present and the future. Instability is taking precedence over stabilisation. Yet we know that without stability there can be no development, and without development there can be no stability. Even the pandemic has been a wasted opportunity. If Russian and Chinese vaccines reach the Balkans before the West's, it means that the West is not betting on, or investing in, or even hoping that this part of Europe will have a Euro-Atlantic perspective. The same applies to terrorism and Islamic extremism, for which the Balkans have been both a breeding ground and a nursery in the last decade. Against the background of an incomplete transition of weak states with massive international assistance, civil societies are experiencing changes of identities which is the exact opposite of the democratic maturity process we had expected to see occurring. Ethnically-based nationalism driven to extremes is prevailing over autonomy. This is an outcome that only appears paradoxical: while the Western countries, and Europe in particular, are the biggest donors, they are also viewed as unreliable and lacking in credibility. We should all examine our consciences about this. If we do not fight the battle to achieve a consensus between the civil societies of the Balkans, and if we fail to win back their trust, we will inevitably lose our credibility and legitimacy. And today, credibility can hasten negotiations with Serbia and

Montenegro, launch negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, recognise Bosnia's "candidate" status, and send out signals of inclusion to Kosovo, by, for example, liberalising visas to enter the European Union.

If the strategic goal for the Balkans is integration, cooperation is the choice that best represents the Black Sea region's priority concern. Cooperation means partnership, and partnership and integration are not one and the same. The *BLACK-SEAFOR naval cooperation initiative* between Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria, and Georgia – the six Black Sea states – dates back 20 years. Once again, 20 years on, the original prospects and promises have not been achieved, instead they deteriorated with the passage of time, mainly due to Moscow's strategy to weaken the neighbouring countries and interfere in their internal dynamics. The conflicts between Russia and Georgia, and then between Ukraine and Russia, have disrupted this process. Today, the conceptual framework of the naval cooperation initiative, namely, regional multilateralism, no longer exists, having been supplanted by a series of unilateral or bilateral initiatives that are having the natural effect of undermining the stability of the region. As previous speakers have already pointed out, an arc of 'frozen conflicts' encompass the Black Sea: from Transnistria in Moldova to Donbass in Ukraine, from the unilateral annexation of Crimea to Abkhazia and Ossetia in Georgia, we are witnessing a policy of fait accompli in which the instruments of multilateralism and international law have proven to be weak and ineffective. But frozen conflicts are not likely to lead to stabilisation. We have seen this in Nagorno Karabakh, a conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan that had been frozen for almost 30 years, but suddenly flared up into open conflict in October last year, without the OSCE or the international community being able to stop it. What has happened in the Caucasus region has set a dangerous precedent by demonstrating the success of military, over diplomatic solutions. Unilateralism winning over multilateralism.

In this ever-changing scenario, NATO must also update its strategy, by adopting innovative and creative solutions. With regard to Russia, we can see all the limitations and failures of the westernisation of the post-Soviet area, with the fortunate exception of the Baltic states. But on closer examination, Russia's centuries-old strategic goal has never been to win hegemony over the Baltic, but to ensure its access to the so-called "warm seas", which has been a strategic choice ever since the age of the Tsars. And it is no coincidence that it is precisely in the warm seas, such as the Sea of Azov, the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, that we see Russia's unilateralism and assertiveness. The question therefore arises, as to whether the Western states should be updating the strategy of confrontation with Russia, moving beyond a policy of containment to a policy of modus vivendi, from a containment strategy to a strategy of involvement of Russia. In my opinion, there are two issues to which Russia is particularly sensitive. The first, Russia aspires to be acknowledged as a world power. The Geneva meeting between President Biden and President Putin has been a significant event – a sign of strong mutual

acknowledgement after the initial friction: a wise gesture. Because wisdom is what is needed in this phase: determination in the pursuit of our own principles and values – starting with our unwavering demand for human rights to be respected – and at the same time patience when accompanying developments. The Geneva meeting still has to show its results, but they can pave the way for cooperation. Second, Russia is also experiencing a siege syndrome, fearing that whatever happens on its borders will challenge its security. We must free Russia from this syndrome by showing it that no-one wants to undermine its sovereignty and security. I remember that when we enlarged the EU to incorporate the Central European countries (an enlargement that Russia did not want) we didn't accept that veto, and we enlarged the EU. At the same time the EU signed its first Partnership Agreement with Russia, to demonstrate that the European enlargement was not hostile to Russia.

A country like Italy can play an important role in this. As a founder member of the European Union, one of the first to sign the Atlantic Pact and a strategic country within the NATO system, even during the Cold War, Italy always had a respectful relationship with the Soviet Union, a relationship that continued with Russia under the leadership of all the Italian governments – of differing political hues – that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall. Dear friends, let me conclude by saying that the Balkans and the Black Sea are two areas that share several features in common: they are strategic areas for the stability of their own regions and for European security; they are countries that are harbingers of rivalries and conflicts that are deep-rooted in their histories; they are nations whose stability and security can only be ensured by regional integration and cooperation. We must therefore place our wagers on integrating the Western Balkans into the European Union and on cooperation between the Black Sea countries. In both instances, the determination to build a common prosperous future must be greater that the demand to right past wrongs. NATO has an essential role to play by guaranteeing the common security that is needed to be able to embark confidently on such a far-reaching process. NATO in this scenario is the main player to ensure stability and to favourite the integration of Western Balkans and the cooperation between Black Sea countries.

SPEAKERS BIOGRAPHIES

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, Ambassador Minuto-Rizzo worked as Head of the External Relations Office of the EEC. In the following years, his career focused on Europe and Space Policy. In 1997 he was appointed Diplomatic Counsellor of the Minister of Defence Beniamino 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 as far as the relations with sensitive countries such as those in the Gulf and the Southern Mediterranean were concerned. His most recent book was "NATO and the Middle East: The Making of a Partnership" (New Academia Publishing, 2018).

POLITICAL SUMMARY

Alessandro Politi
Director, NATO Defense College Foundation, Rome
Alessandro Politi is Director of the NATO Defense College Foundation. A specialist in political and strategic affairs, he has worked with different top decision makers in Italy and abroad both in public institutions and private companies. He teaches geopolitics, geo-economics and intelligence at the Italian MFA-affiliated SIOI School.

Matteo Bressan

Emerging Challenges Analyst, NATO Defense College Foundation
Teacher at the Italian Society for the International Organisation, he is author of various books concerning terrorism and focused on Eurasia geopolitics, jihadism and hybrid wars. International relations professor at LUMSA University.

Stefano Giantin

Western Balkans Chief Analyst, NATO Defense College Foundation
Journalist based in the Balkans since 2005, he covers Central- and Eastern Europe for a wide range of media outlets, including the Italian national news agency ANSA, and the dailies La Stampa and Il Piccolo.

SESSION 1 - COMPETITION FOR INFLUENCE AMONG GREAT POWERS

Helena Legarda

Senior Analyst, China Security Project, Mercator Institute for China Studies, Berlin
Helena Legarda's research focuses on China's defense and foreign policies, including their domestic sources and drivers, and their geopolitical impact. Dr Legarda coordinates research in the Foreign Relations team at MERICS, and she is also a joint lead of the China Security Project, in collaboration with the International Institute for Strategic Studies. Prior to joining MERICS she gained professional experience at the Delegation of the European Union to China and at research and advisory firm China Policy in Beijing. Dr Legarda holds a Master in Public Policy degree with a focus on International and Global Affairs from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government and a BA in Chinese Studies from the University of Oxford. She also studied Chinese language at Peking University.

Dmitri Trenin

Director, Carnegie Moscow Center, Moscow
Dmitri Trenin has been Director of the Carnegie Moscow Center since 2008. He joined Carnegie in 1994, after serving in the Russian military from 1972-1993. In 1993, Dr Trenin was the first Senior Research Fellow at NATO Defense College from a non-NATO country. From 1993 to 1997, Dr Trenin held a post as a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Europe in Moscow. He is the author of a number of books, including - in English - "Russia"; "What Is Russia Up to in the Middle East"; "Post-Imperium: A Eurasian Story"; "The End of Eurasia"; and several others.

Amer Kapetanovic
Political Director, Regional Cooperation Council, Sarajevo
Mr Kapetanovic has been working as a carrier diplomat for more than two decades, serving at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina in different senior ranks. He is currently serving as the Political Director at the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) an inter-governmental organisation based in Sarajevo, where he is in charge of maintaining working cooperation and liaising with 26 countries. He supervises Justice, Home Affairs and Rule of Law portfolio of the RCC - driven regional cooperation, with special emphasis on security cooperation, both in Western Balkans and South East Europe. He has a long experience in journalism as well, having worked as reporter, editor and columnist in leading domestic printed and online media. He was one of the founding members of the Foreign Policy Initiative (FPI), a foreign policy think-tank based in Sarajevo. He is author and co- author of dozens of publications, books and researches.

SESSION 2 - THE CHALLENGE OF REGIONAL SECURITY AND INCLUSION

Solomon Passy
President, Atlantic Club of Bulgaria, Sofia
Dr Solomon Isaac Passy is a Bulgarian scientist, statesman and innovator with a significant career in a variety of fields. He paved the way for Bulgaria's membership both in NATO and the EU, and, as Minister, he signed Bulgaria's Accession Treaties to both organisations. He held a number of institutional and internation posts: Minister of the Foreign Affairs (2001-2005); Chairman of the UN Security Council (2002-2003); OSCE Chairman in Office (2004); twice Chairman of Parliamentary Defense and the Foreign Affairs Committees and a member of the Parliament (1990-1991, 2001-2009). Dr Passy holds a PhD in Mathematical Logic & Computer Sciences with still cited publications in world leading journals. Today Dr Solomon Passy is frequent commentator on international affairs, defense and security. He is currently President of the Atlantic Club of Bulgaria, which he founded in 1991.

Alina Bârgăoanu
Member of the High-Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation, European Commission, Bucharest
Dr Alina Bârgăoanu is a Romanian communication scholar, Dean of the College of Communication and Public Relations at the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration in Bucharest. She is currently a member of the advisory board of the European Digital Media Observatory, founder and editor of www.antifake.ro a fact-checking portal. From October 2018 to March 2019, she was a visiting scholar at Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies at

Harvard University. Since 2018, she has been a member of the High-Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation of the European Commission. She has published extensively, both for the Romanian and the English press, on topics related to COVID-19 infodemic, conspiracy theories, public trust and government communications.

Ahmet Evin
Founding Dean, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Sabanci University, Istanbul
Professor Evin 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.

Oleksiy Melnyk
Co-Director, Foreign Relations and International Security Programme, Razumkov Centre, Kyiv
Mr Oleksiy Melnyk is the Co-director of Foreign Relations and International Security Programmes at Razumkov Centre in Kyiv. From 2015 to 2016, he served as the First Assistant to Minister of Defence of Ukraine and worked for Ukroboronservice. He has twenty-one years of military service (Air Force, Lt Col. Ret.) including participation in the UN peacekeeping operation UNTAES. In 1984, he graduated from Chernihiv Higher Military Air Force Academy, was the trained in the US in 1993-94 & 2000-2001 and studied international relations and security at the Royal College of Defence Studies in London (2007). His main areas of research are international security, conflict management, national security, defence governance and reforms, and NATO-Ukraine relations.

Bodo Weber
Senior Associate, Democratization Policy Council, Berlin
Bodo Weber is a Senior Associate of the Democratization Policy Council, a transatlantic policy analysis and advocacy group fostering accountability in Western democracy promotion. Mr Weber is one of the leading Western experts on the Western Balkans. He is a longtime analyst of international policy, Western Balkans policy and society and German foreign policy. He also works as a political consultant for political foundations and international organisations in Germany and the Balkans.
In the 1990s, he worked as an editor with Perspektiven (Frankfurt/Main) journal and served as a board member of the Bosnien-Büro Frankfurt. He has published

articles and OpEds in various journals and papers such as Die Zeit, Internationale Politik, EUObserver et. al. and regularly appears as a commentator in Southeast European media.

SESSION 3 - ILLICIT THREATS FROM NON-STATE ACTORS

Rabiè W. Sédrak
Head, Strategic Research Department, Center for Security Research, Skopje
Rabiè W. Sédrak is the Head of Department for Strategic Research at the Center for Security Research in Skopje. After years of experience in the Middle East, he joined the CSR in early 2017 as a special coordinator for the counterterrorism research program, covering South East Europe. His research interests include illegal migration and counterterrorism, with an emphasis on al Qaeda; ISIS; radicalisation; political Islam, and European Security. In 2012, he designed the Balkan Integration and Immigration Program, a tool assisting Balkan countries to integrate and control immigration flows that hit Europe following the Syrian civil war.

Snejana Maleeva
Director General, Southeast European Law Enforcement Center, Bucharest
In 2017, Mrs Maleva has been elected Director General by the SELEC Council. Before holding this position, since 2011, Mrs Maleeva has been the Director for Legal and Internal Affairs of SELEC for three consecutive terms. She was a Trainer and a lecturer on acquis communautaire at the Bulgarian National Institute of Justice and Visiting Lecturer at the Université de Montreal. Prior to that, Mrs Maleeva was the Head of the European Affairs Department in the Bulgarian Ministry of Interior. She worked actively for the accession of Republic of Bulgaria to the Schengen area. Before that, she was Director of the European Integration Directorate at the Ministry of Justice, being actively involved in the negotiations for the accession of Republic of Bulgaria to the European Union. She has received numerous awards.

Walter Kemp
Director, South East Europe Observatory, Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, Geneva
Walter Kemp is particularly focused on GI's work in South East Europe, and bigger picture issues like dealing with the impact of drugs in urban environments as well as the relationship between crime and conflict. Before joining GI – the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime – Mr Kemp was the Head of the Strategic Policy Support Unit at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Between 2010 and 2016, he worked at the International Peace Institute (IPI) where he led the Institute's "Peace without Crime" project. Previously, he served for four years as Spokesman and speechwriter at the United

Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). During his tenure at the OSCE, between 1996 and 2006, he also held the posts of Senior Adviser to the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, to the Secretary General and OSCE Chairmanships. In addition to his work at GI, he is a Special Adviser to the Cooperative Security Initiative. He also teaches at the Diplomatic Academy in Vienna.

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, he was re-elected in all the following legislatures until 2011- when he became mayor of Turin (2011-2016) - and elected again to Parliament in 2018. He is currently 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. Undersecretary of State for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1996-1998 in Prodi government) and, in the same period, Undersecretary for European Union Policies to the Prime Minister; Minister of Foreign Trade (1998-2000 in D'Alema government); Minister of Justice (2000-2001 in Amato government). From 1991 to 1996 Honourable Fassino held the role of International Secretary of the Democratic Party of the Left. From 2016 to March 2020, he was President of the Socialist Group and spokesman for the Mediterranean at the Congress of Local Authorities of the Council of Europe.

BLACK SEA AND BALKAN PERSPECTIVES
A STRATEGIC REGION

HIGH-LEVEL CONFERENCE
Organised by the NATO Defense College Foundation

Under the High Patronage of the President of the Italian Republic

*In co-operation with the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation,
the NATO Public Diplomacy Division, and the NATO Defense College*

ROME, THE 28TH OF JULY 2021
Venue: Parco dei Principi Grand Hotel & Spa, Via Gerolamo Frescobaldi, 5, 00198 Roma

15,30-15,35   **Foreword**
- Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo, President, NATO Defense College Foundation, Rome

Session 1 - COMPETITION FOR INFLUENCE AMONG GREAT POWERS

Since a long time, the whole area is evidently the object of strategic competition by powers like Russia, Middle Eastern countries and with China quietly structuring multi–bilateral relations with several instruments (FDI, BRI, medical geoeconomics, etc.). At the same time the EU remains the most important economic actor and donor that will carry out its enlargement policy across the next decade.

15,35 - 16,30   Chair: Alexandra von Nahmen, Chief, Brussels Bureau, Deutsche Welle, Brussels

- Helena Legarda, Senior Analyst, China Security Project, Mercator Institute for China Studies, Berlin
- Dmitri Trenin, Director, Carnegie Moscow Center, Moscow (Virtual)
- Amer Kapetanovic, Political Director, Regional Cooperation Council, Sarajevo

Q&A

Session 2 - THE CHALLENGE OF REGIONAL SECURITY
AND INCLUSION

The Balkans and the Black Sea area have some evident concerns, namely the consequences of the illegal annexation of Crimea and the destabilisation of Ukraine, but there is much more than meets the media eye. On the one hand, there are several frozen conflicts that affect regional security from the Adriatic to the Black Sea. On the other, existing and future critical infrastructures need to be protected. The Alliance's versatility and resilience will be essential in preventing future crises.

17,00 -18,00   Chair: Zoran Jolevski, former Minister of Defence,
Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, Skopje

- Solomon Passy, President, Atlantic Club of Bulgaria, Sofia
- Alina Bârgăoanu, Member of the High-Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online
Disinformation, European Commission, Bucharest (Virtual)
- Ahmet Evin, Founding Dean, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Sabanci University, Istanbul
- Oleksiy Melnyk, Co-Director, Foreign Relations and International Security Programme, Razumkov Centre, Kyiv (Virtual)
- Bodo Weber, Senior Associate, Democratization Policy Council, Berlin

Q&A

Session 3 -   ILLICIT THREATS FROM NON-STATE ACTORS

If terrorism captures the headlines, reality on the ground shows that trafficking and organised crime are much more serious and lethal threats, undermining democracy, rule of law, economic development. Moreover, within the grey areas created by frozen conflicts, organised crime tends to network from a safe haven to neighbouring countries. Extending multilateral and regional cooperation, what are the priorities and the most effective choices?

18,15 -19,05   Chair: Fatmir Mediu, former Minister of Defence,
                Government of the Republic of Albania, Tirana

- Rabiè W. Sédrak, Head, Strategic Research Department, Center for Security Research, Skopje
- Snejana Maleeva, Director General, Southeast European Law Enforcement Center, Bucharest
- Walter Kemp, Director, South East Europe Observatory, Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, Geneva

Q&A

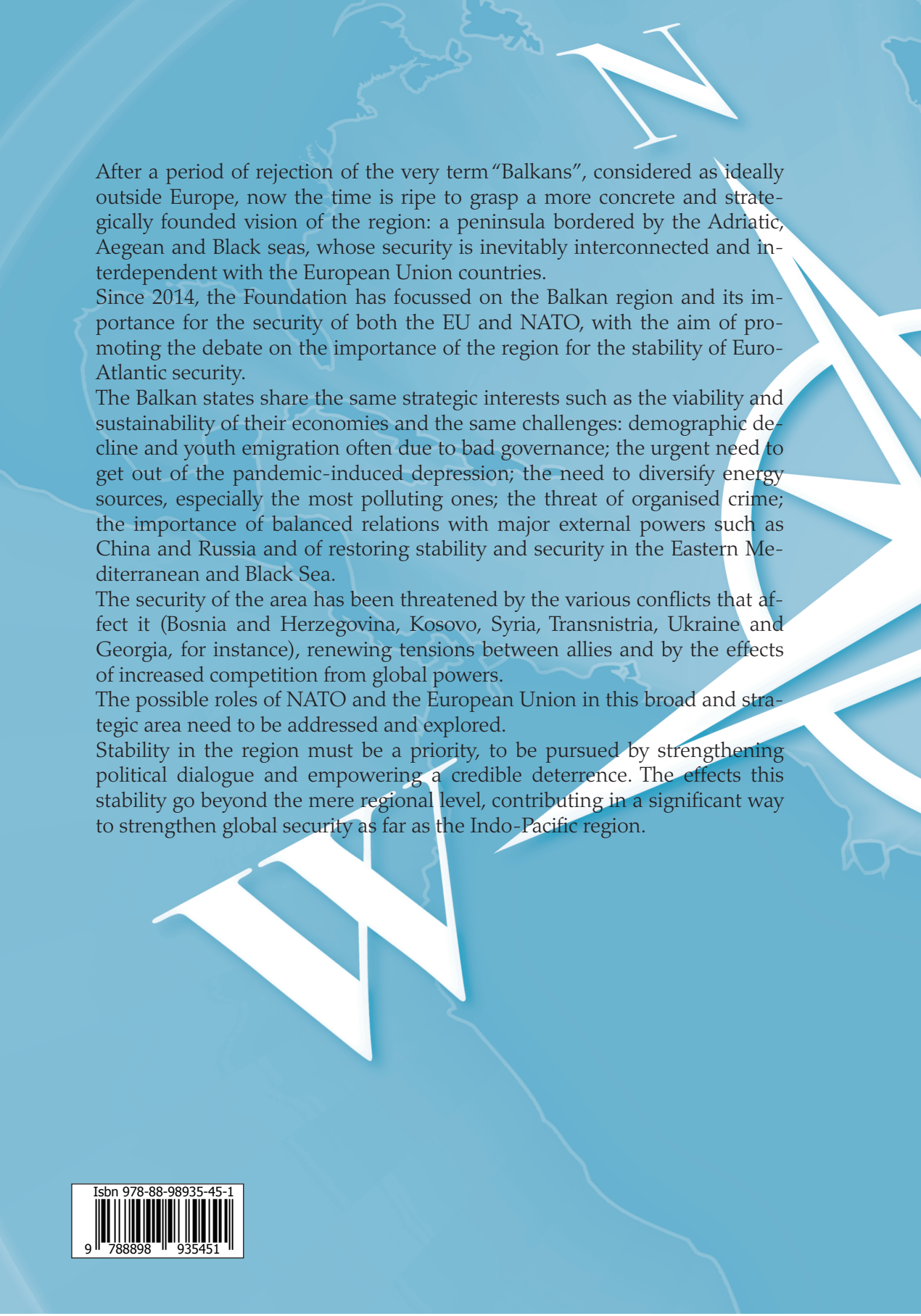## CONCLUDING REMARKS

19,05 - 19,15   Piero Fassino, President, Foreign Affairs Committee,
                Chamber of Deputies, Rome

A night view of Saint Alexander Nevsky Cathedral Church in Sofia, Bulgaria

After a period of rejection of the very term "Balkans", considered as ideally outside Europe, now the time is ripe to grasp a more concrete and strategically founded vision of the region: a peninsula bordered by the Adriatic, Aegean and Black seas, whose security is inevitably interconnected and interdependent with the European Union countries.

Since 2014, the Foundation has focussed on the Balkan region and its importance for the security of both the EU and NATO, with the aim of promoting the debate on the importance of the region for the stability of Euro-Atlantic security.

The Balkan states share the same strategic interests such as the viability and sustainability of their economies and the same challenges: demographic decline and youth emigration often due to bad governance; the urgent need to get out of the pandemic-induced depression; the need to diversify energy sources, especially the most polluting ones; the threat of organised crime; the importance of balanced relations with major external powers such as China and Russia and of restoring stability and security in the Eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea.

The security of the area has been threatened by the various conflicts that affect it (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Syria, Transnistria, Ukraine and Georgia, for instance), renewing tensions between allies and by the effects of increased competition from global powers.

The possible roles of NATO and the European Union in this broad and strategic area need to be addressed and explored.

Stability in the region must be a priority, to be pursued by strengthening political dialogue and empowering a credible deterrence. The effects this stability go beyond the mere regional level, contributing in a significant way to strengthen global security as far as the Indo-Pacific region.