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Security Challenges from the Western Balkans

The war between Russia and Ukraine, the armed conflicts in North Kosovo, the South Caucasus, and most recently the Middle East have woken the European Union from its enlargement slumber. These events highlighted the vulnerability of the European continent to external factors. In this geopolitical context, it has become clear that integrating the Western Balkan countries into the EU is timely. Considering the socio-economic, political, cultural and historical background of the countries in the region, it can be established that the EU has reached its civilisational limits. It took many years for most of the countries in the region to obtain candidate status and start accession negotiations with the EU. On the one hand, this is due to the long-term effects of the South Slavic war in the 1990s (social and economic instability, ethnic tensions, political instability). On the other hand, this is partly due to the EU's enlargement fatigue. While the countries of the region have primarily an economic interest in accession, the EU needs to consider geopolitical and security policy aspects in order to maintain the stability of its own borders and the continent and preserve its position in global politics.¹

The European Union's main expectations towards the Western Balkan countries are full compliance with accession chapters 23 and 24, including the fight against organised crime and corruption. The countries of the Western Balkans require substantial assistance in the fight against organised crime and corruption, necessitating the development of region-specific strategies. A new political and social dialogue is needed, rather than exacerbating existing tensions and divisions.

Introduction

On 1 July 2024, Hungary will take over the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union. This policy paper examines Hungary's potential to advance the integration of the Western Balkan countries into the EU, in

¹ ZSIVITY 2023a: 89.

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particular the fulfilment of the European Commission's annual report, chapters 23 and 24. These chapters form the basis for accession negotiations. The pace of negotiations with EU candidates will mainly depend on the progress made in implementing rule of law reforms. If no progress is made in these chapters, no positive movement can be expected in the EU integration process, which could result in an even more serious setback.

As President-in-Office of the EU Council, Hungary will not only have the opportunity to boost the accession process of the Western Balkans but also to put the region's concerns at the top of the EU's political agenda, in line with the criteria for accession to the EU. Hungary, as a neighbouring state of the EU and the countries of the region, can play a key role in keeping these states on the EU's integration path. This is also in the foreign and security policy interests of Hungary and the continent.²

Furthermore, during its EU Presidency, Hungary may have the opportunity to draw attention to the geopolitical and security risks of the Western Balkan countries remaining outside the EU, including organised crime and corruption, migration, the spread of disinformation, and the strengthening influence of China, Russia and Gulf countries in the region.

These threats were also highlighted in the European Parliament resolution of 15 December 2021, on cooperation in the fight against organised crime in the Western Balkans.³ In the policy paper, the concept of security policy has been used in a narrower sense, understanding security challenges as the management, detection and prevention of law enforcement-related security risks. The focus is on the analysis of the most prevalent forms of organised crime and corruption in the countries of the region and beyond their borders. The aim of the document is to draw attention to the narrowly defined security policy issues that have a major impact not only on the security of the region and the countries of the EU but also on the course of EU integration of the states in the region and to formulate proposals for effective management of these problems.

Problem map – Security challenges in the Western Balkans

During the South Slavic war in the 1990s, organised crime and corruption flourished in the region. Smuggling was the main source of livelihood for the

² Zsivity 2023a: 105.

³ European Parliament 2021: 1.

states in the region, which were subject to international sanctions. As a result of the war, many weapons were privatised in the region. In the 1990s, arms were acquired partly at the cost of drug smuggling profits. It follows that organised crime has functioned as a survival strategy for sanctioned regimes. In an environment where instability is seen as a factor providing a stable income, there is no incentive to seek peace or implement reforms to strengthen the rule of law.

The main condition for the accession of the Western Balkan countries to the EU is the fulfilment of the requirements of accession chapters 23 and 24, which are closely linked to the fight against organised crime and corruption.

Referring to academic literature on the subject and the European Commission's annual reports on the region's countries, it is evident that problems related to organised crime and corruption are significantly hindering European integration. The countries of the region face challenges such as drug and firearms trafficking, human trafficking closely linked to migration, and the growing prevalence of cybercrime.

Drug trafficking

The six Western Balkan countries remain a major transit region for drug trafficking, and the most prevalent criminal activity in the region.⁴ This can be attributed to the long-term negative consequences of the 1990s war in Southern Slavia and the closely related economic sanctions imposed on the countries of the region. War-torn and disintegrated societies have had little success in fighting corruption and consolidating basic democratic values. In this situation, serving vested interests has become a priority over serving the public interest. Corruption, thus, has a negative impact on the EU integration of the Western Balkan countries.

According to the Commission's 2023 report, some progress has been made in Montenegro. In 2022, Montenegro's law enforcement agencies had key successes in the fight against criminal networks and arrested 24 members of the so-called Balkan Cartel group, suspected of drug smuggling.⁵ According to the report, the mayor of Budva was arrested in April 2023 on suspicion of creating a criminal organisation and drug smuggling.⁶ The prosecution of the

⁴ European Parliament 2021: 6.

⁵ European Commission 2023a: 55.

⁶ European Commission 2023a: 15.

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former President of the Supreme Court of Montenegro, Vesna Medenica, as well as her son, her former bodyguard, and nine other people led to an indictment in October 2022.⁷ Medenica is suspected of creating a criminal organisation, drug and cigarettes smuggling from Colombia,⁸ active and passive corruption, abuse of official position.⁹

In Montenegro, civil society organisations continued their prevention action and services, including some financed by the government, regarding drug abuse prevention and harm reduction.

Firearms trafficking

According to the European Parliament's resolution of 15 December 2021, illicit firearms possession and trafficking remains serious issues as many weapons that are found and used in organised crime throughout the EU come from the region.¹⁰ The main source of the problem is the large number of weapons left in the hands of the civilian population after the South Slavic war in the 1990s. The countries sanctioned because of the war were characterised by a bleak economic situation and high unemployment. In this situation, the trade in illicit goods proved to be a profitable activity, especially for those who had no other means of financial gain.

According to the Commission's 2023 report, Serbia has been called to adopt the new Law on Weapons and Ammunition and step up the fight against the storage, sale and ownership of illegal firearms.¹¹ The Serbian Government announced that it will introduce stricter measures on the possession of weapons and will amend the Law on Weapons and Ammunition within a set deadline.¹²

According to the European Parliament's resolution, the Parliament calls on the relevant authorities to place more focus on prevention and reiterates the need to increase the focus on education, particularly the negative societal impact of arms trafficking.¹³ It is to increase resilience, paying greater attention to socio-economic conditions, especially in municipalities at risk of segregation.

⁷ European Commission 2023a: 55.

⁸ FÓRIS 2022.

⁹ European Commission 2023a: 55.

¹⁰ European Parliament 2021: 6.

¹¹ European Commission 2023b: 54.

¹² ZSIVITY 2023a: 92.

¹³ European Parliament 2021: 7.

Migration and human trafficking

Migration flows in recent years have posed a major challenge to the region. The Western Balkan countries serve as a transit corridor for migrants and refugees.

In its resolution, the Parliament called on the countries of the region to prevent the smuggling of refugees, protect their fundamental rights and ensure adequate reception conditions.¹⁴ It also stressed the importance of increased exchange of information and coordination between the Western Balkan countries and EU Member States to tackle the problem effectively.

According to the Commission's 2023 report, in 2022, Montenegro registered 8,519 migrants who had crossed the border illegally, a twofold increase compared with 2021.¹⁵ A total of 8,320 people registered an intention to request asylum, but only 175 actually lodged an asylum request.¹⁶ Nine persons were granted international protection status.¹⁷ Montenegro and the EU signed a new status agreement in May 2023, enabling European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) deployments anywhere on the territory of Montenegro.

According to the Commission's assessment, Montenegro must continue its efforts to cope with migratory pressures, improve international cooperation on readmission, increase its capacity to prosecute refugee smuggling networks, and set up a system for registering refugees.¹⁸

According to the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration (KIRS), in 2022 a total of 124,127 migrants passed through the reception and asylum centres in Serbia, a near twofold increase compared to 2021 (68,308).¹⁹

The Ministry of the Interior reported that 12,852 irregular migrants had been apprehended within Serbia in 2022, of which 36% originated from Afghanistan and 29% from Syria.²⁰

In 2022, 51,017 migrants were prevented from entering at the border, and 182 criminal charges were filed against 249 people.²¹ This includes six criminal charges against 52 members of organised criminal groups, suspected of smuggling irregular migrants to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Hungary.²²

¹⁴ European Parliament 2021: 5.

¹⁵ European Commission 2023a: 8.

¹⁶ European Commission 2023a: 8.

¹⁷ European Commission 2023a: 8.

¹⁸ European Commission 2023a: 8.

¹⁹ European Commission 2023b: 65.

²⁰ European Commission 2023b: 66.

²¹ European Commission 2023b: 66.

²² European Commission 2023b: 66.

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Serbia participated in several international operations aimed at combating both irregular migration and trafficking in human beings. Serbia has also established, together with Hungary and Austria, the operational task force “ladder” targeting violent migrant smuggling at the Hungarian–Serbian border.²³

The large number of refugees also raises the problem of the shortage of human resources, space and funding for reception centres.

The lack of financial resources means that the reintegration programs foreseen for refugees are not being implemented, with serious consequences for the host society. In a deprived situation, the frustration of refugee groups gradually increases, which can lead to extremist behaviour and membership of radical communities.

According to the Parliament’s resolution, the Western Balkan countries are countries of origin, destination and transit for trafficking in human beings. Human trafficking is the crime with the highest proportional share of links to organised crime and therefore calls on the relevant authorities to place more focus on prevention and strengthening the resilience of groups that are vulnerable to the risk of trafficking in human beings.²⁴

Cybercrime

Cybercrime is also on the rise in the Western Balkans. Parliament welcomes the efforts of the Western Balkan countries to expand their capacity to fight cybercrime and the increase in prosecutions for cybercrime. It also encourages the EU to assist the countries of the region with the appropriate tools and means for tackling cybercrime and other online threats. It underlines the importance of fighting manipulative disinformation in close cooperation with European partners. Hybrid threats, the spread of disinformation and cyberattacks, particularly against critical infrastructure, remain a political and security challenge for the countries of the region. It is important to note here that the Western Balkans is the region where hybrid warfare between Russia and the Western powers is taking place without military factors. Following the outbreak of the Russian–Ukrainian war, Moscow’s ability to use the conflicts in the Western Balkans to its own advantage has become visible.

²³ European Commission 2023b: 66.

²⁴ European Parliament 2021: 5.

Russia's influence in the key Western Balkan states is steadily growing. In doing so, it continues to project the image of a power to be reckoned with, despite EU sanctions and diplomatic isolation. According to the Commission's 2023 report, it called on the Serbian leadership to take urgent steps to curb the dissemination of anti-EU narratives by the mass media and the emergence of manipulative disinformation on the Russia–Ukraine war. This is necessary because a number of Russian state-supported channels sanctioned by the EU broadcast radio and multimedia programmes in the country, including Russia Today (RT). According to the Commission's assessment, the channel also promoted military recruitment by the Wagner paramilitary group, which is prohibited by Serbian law but the Prosecutor's Office still did not investigate the case.

The Commission believes that such media contents have a major impact on public opinion, not only in Serbia, but also in the region. This claim is also supported by a case study published in July 2023, which shows that there are several pro-Russian media platforms in Serbia, including the "News Front", the content of which is often cited by other media in Serbia as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina.²⁵

The fear of the EU and its allies is that Russia is using information operations to foment ethnic tensions and frozen conflicts in order to stop EU expansion in the Western Balkans. This strategy can be seen in the issue of the settlement of relations between Serbia and Kosovo and in the secessionist aspirations of the President of the Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik. Russia's aim is to delay the accession of the countries of the region to the EU and to polarise their populations, including through the opportunities offered by information technology.²⁶

How has the EU addressed these security challenges in recent years?

The EU has a vital interest in making the Western Balkans a secure area. As the EU and the states in the region face similar security challenges, the role of the region has been enhanced. Law enforcement cooperation (including at the operational level) between the EU and the countries of the region has developed positively. All the Western Balkan countries (except Kosovo, with which a working agreement is in force) have ratified agreements with Europol and have access to Europol's Secure Information Exchange Network Application (SIENA). Northern Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia have also appointed liaison

²⁵ ZSIVITY 2023a: 92.

²⁶ ZSIVITY 2024.

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officers to Europol in The Hague. The level of participation of the countries in the region in EMPACT has been further strengthened. Most of the states in the region cooperate effectively with CEPOL, Eurojust, Europol and Interpol, in particular in the fight against arms trafficking, drug trafficking and large-scale organised crime groups. In the recent period, Eurojust has facilitated approximately 200 joint criminal investigations between EU Member States and the Western Balkan countries.²⁷

The Parliament welcomes the entry into force of the agreements on border management cooperation between the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) and Albania, Montenegro and Serbia allowing Frontex to execute joint operations in these countries in order to improve the management of their borders, fight cross-border crime and control irregular migration in line with international standards and with full respect for human rights.²⁸ The Parliament underlines the need to further develop cooperation between Frontex and the Western Balkan countries in matters related to the fight against organised crime.²⁹

The Parliament underlines that regional cooperation is key to fighting organised crime effectively. It commends the work of existing regional initiatives aimed at strengthening interinstitutional relations in the fight against corruption and organised crime between the Western Balkan countries, such as the Southeast European Law Enforcement Centre (SELEC), and encourages further regional cooperation in combating trans-border organised crime more effectively.

The EU has called on the Western Balkan countries to increase their knowledge of organised crime by improving their capacity to collect and process reliable data on organised crime. It stresses the need for interdisciplinary research in this area. It also encourages the Western Balkan countries to work with international partners to establish national statistical systems for recording and analysing organised crime data, which will be used to develop evidence-based policies.

The above suggests that, however much the EU has tried to encourage cooperation and to involve the Western Balkan countries in the work of law enforcement agencies and other authorities, it has not succeeded in solving the problems that are important for integration. The EU's financial input is not commensurate with the expected results.

²⁷ European Parliament 2021: 7.

²⁸ European Parliament 2021: 7.

²⁹ European Parliament 2021: 7.

Security challenges and EU accession: How do identified security challenges relate to the EU accession of the Western Balkan countries?

The EU's relationship with the Western Balkans is shaped by national policies and geopolitical developments. The EU's uncertainty about enlargement, its non-strategic approach to the region and the potential of the geopolitical situation in the Western Balkans have been recognised by actors outside the EU. It has therefore become necessary for the EU to develop a new approach to ensure that accession negotiations with the countries of the region are smoother.

The European Union's main expectations towards the Western Balkan countries are full compliance with accession chapters 23 and 24, including the fight against organised crime and corruption, and alignment with the Community's foreign, security and defence policy.

Former Prime Minister of Montenegro, Dritan Abazović said that organised crime in the Western Balkan region is a direct security threat to the EU and European countries.³⁰ In his view, the greatest burden will fall on the institutions of the State Prosecutor's Office, the Chief Special Prosecutor and the police.³¹

The German Minister of Foreign Affairs, Annalena Baerbock said that the next milestone for Montenegro is meeting the interim benchmarks for the rule of law chapters 23 and 24. Before this, no chapters will be closed. Concrete results are needed in key areas such as media freedom, fight against corruption and organised crime, as well as a renewed commitment to the implementation of the judicial reform.³²

It follows from the above that the problems of organised crime and corruption are clearly delaying European integration. High levels of corruption are an indication of serious weaknesses in the functioning of public bodies and institutions. Candidate countries must show willingness to meet the obligations imposed and undertaken. However, the extent to which the EU is able to make accession processes dynamic also depends on its ability to present a credible and attractive image.

Growing Euroscepticism in some countries in the Western Balkans and the rise of third countries in the region can be countered by clearly defined accession perspectives.

³⁰ Vijesti Online 2022.

³¹ Vijesti Online 2022.

³² Euronews Albania 2024.

Recommendations

To sum up, the Western Balkans should not be treated as a homogeneous whole. Security risks in the countries of the region must be seen in a complex way and the challenges they pose must be addressed accordingly. Despite their common past, the states of the region are at different levels of socio-economic, political and cultural development. The source of conflicts is essentially rooted in these differences, which need to be managed effectively and with due care. The events of the 1990s are still vivid in the minds of the political elites and citizens of the region. All it takes is a spark and the conflicts will be generated again. This must be prevented, and I call for consideration of the following proposals:

- A call for strong and joint action for enhanced personal protection of all actors who have received death threats and attempted or actual assassination attempts against them for their actions in complying with EU accession chapters (e.g. in 2003, the Prime Minister of Serbia, Dr. Zoran Đinđić³³ was assassinated and more recently the former Prime Minister of Montenegro was threatened,³⁴ who had started to dismantle the drug mafia and tobacco smuggling).³⁵
- Reducing corruption in border management: proposing solutions – primarily law enforcement solutions – that can effectively reduce corruption in border management in the short term. A concrete case in point is the armed conflict that broke out in September 2023 in Banjska in northern Kosovo.³⁶ The question arises as to how firearms were transferred across the Serbian–Kosovo border. The clash took place in an area where NATO KFOR is stationed.³⁷
- Developing a new agenda for immigration and asylum policy: the already conflict-ridden Western Balkan region is particularly at risk of new refugee flows when the integration of refugees in the region has not been achieved. Taking into account the ethnic composition of the Western Balkan region, it is crucial to stress the importance of integration programmes in order to prevent incidents on national and religious grounds and the marginalisation and stigmatisation of certain social groups. Strengthening border protection and closer cooperation with external

³³ Portfolio 2003.

³⁴ Euronews Serbia 2023.

³⁵ Press 2022.

³⁶ ZSIVITY 2023b.

³⁷ Kossev 2024.

partners are necessary to tackle this problem. It is important to emphasise the role of countries further away from the EU borders in border management. The Italian–Albanian agreement to set up additional reception centres in Albania,³⁸ in case of inadequate border control, could generate further conflicts between countries in the region. Peace is fragile in the Western Balkans. Good neighbourly relations are key for the countries of the region and for the EU.

- Cyber defence: effective, coherent and jointly coordinated responses to the challenges need to be developed. It is important to train specialists at tactical and operational level, to strengthen interinstitutional, regional and EU cooperation between Member States and countries and organisations in the region (ministries, support institutions, organisations, etc.). Since it is difficult to separate the military and civilian spheres in cyberspace, it is necessary to train and educate the public, and to raise awareness in schools of the dangers of cyberattacks and how to prevent them. It is important to show “media literacy” in education. It is also important to invest in fact-checking organisations in the Western Balkans.
- Provide relevant assistance in the fight against organised crime and corruption. Region-specific strategies need to be developed to tackle the problem.
- Encourage the continuation of the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue and encourage the parties to cooperate. To assist the parties in developing a consensus-based minority protection regime, which is accepted and implemented by both Belgrade and Pristina.
- Stress the importance of dismantling paramilitary militias.
- Based on Hungary’s own experience of accession in 2004, it can make proposals to the Commission on how to draw lessons from the previous enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe and on transitional arrangements to facilitate the integration of the Western Balkans while maintaining the competitiveness criteria for the countries concerned.³⁹
- Hungary has a special responsibility to take the initiative in developing an EU system for the protection of minorities, and it may use the opportunities offered by its Presidency. A system of minority protection within

³⁸ Euronews 2023.

³⁹ ZSIVITY 2023a: 105.

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the EU could ensure that ethnic conflicts in the integrating Western Balkans do not undermine the security of the whole continent.⁴⁰

It is in the common economic interest to make the Western Balkans a stable and secure region. Instability reduces the competitiveness of the countries in the region, thus limiting opportunities for domestic and foreign investment. In an unsatisfactory economic situation, countries in the region will be less resilient to organised crime and corruption.

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⁴⁰ ZSIVITY 2023a: 105.

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Policy paper presented on 3 April 2024.

The manuscript was closed on 30 April 2024.