



BiEPAG



Policy Brief

Leadership Adrift: American Policy in the Western Balkans

By Florian Bieber

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About BiEPAG

The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG)

is a co-operation initiative of the European Fund for the Balkans (EFB) and Centre for the Southeast European Studies of the University of Graz (CSEES) with the aim to promote the European integration of the Western Balkans and the consolidation of democratic, open countries in the region. BiEPAG is composed by prominent policy researchers from the Western Balkans and wider Europe that have established themselves for their knowledgeable understanding of the Western Balkans and the processes that shape the region. Current members of the BiEPAG are: Dimitar Bechev, Florian Bieber, Blerjana Bino, Srđan Cvijić, Milica Delević, Srđan Majstorović, Natasha Wunsch, Marika Djolai, Vedran Džihić, Dejan Jović, Marko Kmezić, Jovana Marović, Milan Nič, Corina Stratulat, Dane Taleski, Nikolaos Tzifakis, Alida Vračić, Shpend Emini, Zoran Nechev, Tena Prelec, Donika Emini and Igor Bandović.

Context

Over the past year the Balkans have come back to the radar of the United States and the EU. The renewed engagement has been dominated by three themes: opportunity, decline and risk.

Opportunity is epitomized by the resolution of one of the long-standing points of contention in the region, the name dispute between Greece and North Macedonia.

The name dispute between what is now known as North Macedonia and Greece has been a low-intensity conflict that poisoned bilateral relations for nearly three decades preventing North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration and eventually contributed to its democratic decline. The resolution of the dispute over the past year reveals the courage of the two governments, in particular in North Macedonia, but also demonstrates the possibility of having Balkan disputes resolved within the region, with limited outside support. It also highlights the appeal of Euro-Atlantic integration as a motivator for addressing difficult disputes. Without the prospect of NATO and EU membership, the dispute between the two countries would not have been resolved.

The case of the Kosovo-Serbia dispute is different. While a normalization of relations has been on the agenda for nearly a decade, a settlement has—to date—proven elusive. Here, outside involvement has been more extensive, and the timeline has been dictated by external actors. While there has been coordination among the key protagonists – the EU, its member states and the US – it has broken down in recent years, as became apparent concerning the debate over the potential of border changes. This idea has since become widely accepted, if only implicitly, by crucial external actors as a possible key to a settlement. However, irrespective of the problems such border adjustments would entail, they are also not based on a rapprochement of the parties, but are rather framed as creating hostile separation, a concept reinforced by the media and the Kosovar and Serbian political leaders' speeches. Furthermore, the motivation behind escalating tensions is very much linked with democratic deficiencies in both countries. Thus, the Kosovo - Serbia dialogue has been strategically used by elites in both countries as a distraction from the second theme of external engagement, namely decline.

A number of Balkan countries, and particularly the frontrunners in the EU accession process, Serbia and Montenegro, have been experiencing a serious democratic decline in recent years. This is reflected in key international indices, such as those of Freedom House and the Economist Democracy Index. However, the governments' and presidents' formal commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration has obscured the democratic decline. Recently, protest movements in both countries have displayed broad dissatisfaction with the respective regimes. And while the protests are waning, their causes remain unaddressed.

The democratic decline poses a particular challenge for the United States and the EU. The democratic and European consensus has been undermined by autocratic leaders who have co-opted the discourse of pro-European reform, while systematically undermining democratic institutions. The regimes' use of pro-Western positions taints the idea of Euro-Atlantic integration in the eyes of many citizens. As a result, the pro-Western consensus that has shaped the region for the past decade is no longer secure. Opposition movements and parties are often struggling to formulate democratic and pro-Western alternatives; such a dynamic empowers anti-American and anti-European forces that often seek support and inspiration in Russia. Social movements and opposition parties are predominantly interested in making their countries more democratic and governed by the rule of law. Efforts by regimes to portray them as radical pro-Russian forces need to be challenged. This highlights the third regional dynamic – threat.

Non-Western actors, Russia in particular, have become more involved in the Balkans. Their engagement has thrived on an environment of geopolitical uncertainty and lack of Western leadership and normative power. Thus, both governments and opposition parties in the Balkans have used Russia, China, Turkey and other outside powers to enhance their bargaining position and leverage towards the West. The rise of outside powers has weakened the rule of law, democracy and has brought to the region the semblance of an alternative to Euro-Atlantic integration that does not exist in reality. This threat can be contained as is highlighted by North Macedonia's path towards NATO membership.

However, the dangers remain real, particularly in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as in Montenegro, where the combination of internal polarization and democratic decline provides outsiders with greater leverage and are used by ruling elites to retain their power.

The Western Balkans can become both a success story of how Euro-Atlantic integration, along with the key underlying values of democracy, rule of law and cooperation, has prevailed, or a story of how the West has lost the region, encouraging a combination of anti-democratic and anti-Western dynamics elsewhere.

Causes

These challenges in the Western Balkans are caused by domestic developments, larger global trends and the difficulties of European integration.² In addition, the diminishing role of the United States and the breakdown of synchronized EU-US policies contributed to the difficulties in sustaining the post-war order in the region and completing Euro-Atlantic integration of the countries as stable democracies.

US and EU policy towards the Western Balkans is still adrift. For the better part of the past two decades, US and EU policy towards the Western Balkans converged and acted in a coordinated fashion. Both used different tools to pursue their policies: those by the US have been more coercive and security-oriented, whereas the EU has used means more geared towards economic engagement and European integration. Still, the goals and approaches have been in sync. This is no longer the case, as shown by the drift with regard to border changes between Serbia and Kosovo. While the US has openly endorsed such changes, with similar messages coming from the State Department and the White House,³ the EU has been divided and Germany has been firmly opposed. The divergence has been mainly caused by the Trump administration that views the EU with suspicion, without actively seeking to maintain the post-war order in the Western Balkans. At the same time, EU policy towards enlargements is adrift, with differing views among member states and the EU institutions themselves. This has increased the opportunity for and relative ease of divergence of EU and US policy towards the region.

Divided US foreign policy. There are several separate centers of US foreign policy under the Trump administration. The Trump White House, with John Bolton as national security advisor and its foreign policy amounting to a series of photo-ops for the president, is susceptible to erratic policy shifts. This is due to the access of particular lobbyists and the opportunistic approach of the White House itself. The US National Security Council with Deputy Senior Director for Europe John Erath and the Balkans Director Brad Berkley have become active in mediating the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue independently of the State Department.

² These have been outlined by BIEPAG in previous policy briefs, see <https://biepag.eu/>

³ See ESI, "The Hypnotist – Aleksandar Vucic, John Bolton and the return of the past," 25.4.2019, https://www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=156&document_ID=194

Despite its somewhat thinned out resources due to large gaps in the hierarchy, the State Department has initially retained partial policy continuity. Over the past year, its policies have aligned with the overall political framework of this administration, but competition remains an obstacle.

Finally, Congress and the Trump administration have divergent views on foreign policy. In recent months there has been renewed interest by the Congress with regard to the Western Balkans, with high profile hearings in the House and Senate. This polarization is likely to increase in the run-up to the 2020 presidential election.⁴

The divisions in US policies are visible in a variety of foreign policy arenas, including the Western Balkans. However, as the White House has displayed little interest in other regional issues apart from the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue, there have been few opportunities to witness these divergences publically. With regard to the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue, there have been less visible differences as both White House and State Department favored or at least condoned border changes.

Declining effectiveness of US foreign policy in the Western Balkans.

During the period between the end of the wars and the Trump administration, US involvement in the Western Balkans has been diminishing in terms of a security presence and consistent engagement, but the US remained a crucial mediator with considerable leverage and credibility in moments of crisis. This continued throughout the early Trump presidency with US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Hoyt Yee being a critical mediator in the Macedonian crisis in 2017. However, US leverage has weakened since. In Albania, the Democratic Party's boycott of the local elections in June 2019 could have been averted through more coordinated mediation by the EU and the US – both have been absent or weak in ending the deadlock between government and opposition. It is in Kosovo that the US weakness has been most clearly on display. The tariffs imposed by Kosovo against imports from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina were condemned by US officials, including in a high-profile public letter in February 2019.⁵ Similarly, the US has been ineffective in pressuring political parties in Kosovo to agree to border changes as part of a settlement with Serbia.

⁴ Stephen M. Walt, "America's Polarization Is a Foreign Policy Problem, Too," *Foreign Policy*, 11.3.2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/11/americas-polarization-is-a-foreign-policy-problem-too/>

⁵ "Trump supports mutual recognition in new letters to Vučić and Taçi," *European Western Balkans*, 15.2.2019, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/02/15/trump-supports-mutual-recognition-new-letter-vucic-thaci/>

However, the Kosovo government, despite being very reliant on the US and receptive to US demands, did not budge. This signals a decline in the USA's ability to impose its policy preferences. This decline is based on the reduced credibility and consistency of US foreign policy in the region, as well as the divergent policies of the US and key EU member states, Germany in particular.

Geopolitics trumps democracy. American views of the Western Balkans are strongly shaped by the prism of global geopolitics and rise of competing powers, Russia and China in particular. Thus, the Western Balkans, if given any attention at all, are reduced to a stage for big power competition. As relations with China and Russia are viewed as being essentially antagonistic and zero-sum, Russian or Chinese influence receive more attention than the domestic dynamics in most countries. Such a lens inhibits a focus on democracy and rule of law and other norms-based considerations. Furthermore, the emphasis on solving open 'problems' in the region, such as relations between Kosovo and Serbia, or the internal functioning of Bosnia and Herzegovina, obscures recognizing democratic deficiencies and how these are de facto being encouraged by supporting governments that pretend to be in search of solution to open disputes.

Policy Recommendations

With an EU divided on the Western Balkans and an erratic US administration, circumstances are not favorable for restoring an effective EU-US engagement in the region. The open challenges are not easily resolved, ranging from the relations between Serbia and Kosovo to the unresolved internal polarization in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the regional crisis of democracy. Thus, there are no easy results to be achieved. Yet, joint US and EU engagement can put the region back on track. To restrict the malign influence of other countries, as well as to secure the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans, the following steps would contribute to restoring an effective cooperation:

1. **Addressing the gap in EU-US engagement** in the Western Balkans is crucial, given that major breakthroughs came as a result of joint action or mutual support. A precondition for that is greater policy coherence in the US and the EU. That means less discrepancy between the White House and the State Department, and between the European Commission, the European External Action Service and the member states, in the US and the EU, respectively. If the EU and the US send contradictory or merely divergent messages, it weakens the hand of both. A "success" in Western Balkans requires both the US and the EU to pull in the same direction.

2. **Communicating the policy debates** between Washington and Brussels. Policy debates in the US and the EU have very different emphases. In the US, there has been a strong focus on security: for some, it is the context of wars of the 1990s that prevails, for others it is the post-2001 threat of radical Islam and the logic of violent extremism and terrorism. In the EU, on the other hand, the prevailing narrative has been one of enlargement and economic transformation, and in terms of security – migration through the region since 2014/2015. More communication spaces are needed to ensure that the main challenges and opportunities are understood similarly.
3. **Resuming State Department-led US mediation.** The US has been an effective crisis manager in the past two decades, as senior State Department officials have been more flexible to intervene than the EU mediators. This requires high-level State Department officials who combine professional involvement in the region with White House backing, implicit or explicit. The appointment of Philip Reeker as Acting Assistant Secretary of European and Eurasian Affairs in March 2019 is a first encouraging step in this direction.
4. **Coordinated participation of the US in the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue.** Since the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue was derailed in 2018 due to a lack of progress and the subsequent border change debate, the process needs a reset, closely linked to the incoming new European Commission. This new format will need to continue to involve the US to ensure a consistent message. US involvement will require greater coordination between the EU and the US, to ensure that different parties do not play the US, the EU and its members off against each other to sabotage an agreement. Such a joint effort will require mutually agreed parameters that would set both clear goals (recognition) and limitations (border changes).
5. **Renewed joint effort in Bosnia and Herzegovina.** Ever since the German-British initiative on Bosnia has faltered, the country has been put on the back burner of international diplomacy. This has made the current High Representative, Valentin Inzko the longest serving office holder since Dayton, as he cannot be replaced due to policy differences between the West and Russia, nor can the office be closed for American fears of being locked out of formal mechanisms to influence the country. A new EU-US effort to facilitate an end to the country's deadlock could help hold the disintegratory dynamics in check and reverse them.

6. **Joint support for democratic grassroots movements.** There is limited recognition of the fact that current elites in most Western Balkan countries not only undermine democratic rule, but also contribute to the malign influence of some external actors. Stronger coordination of US and EU support for opposition, grass-roots movements and civil society in a broader sense, and independent state institutions, is needed to ensure that political alternatives can grow.
7. **Renewed support for independent media.** Free and critical media in the region have been under pressure. Both commercial difficulties and pressure by governments have reduced the space for independent reporting. This has facilitated the authoritarian drift and the proliferation of hate speech in the region.

About the European Fund for the Balkans

The European Fund for the Balkans is a joint initiative of European foundations that envisions, runs and supports initiatives aimed at strengthening democracy, fostering European integration and affirming the role of the Western Balkans in addressing Europe's emerging challenges.

The up-to-date programme strategy is based on three overarching areas – Capacity Development, Policy Development and Regional Cooperation - and channelled via flagship programmes and selected projects, complemented with a set of actions arising from EFB's regional identity as a relevant player in its fields of focus.

Their synergetic effects are focussed on continuous “Europeanisation” of the policies and practices of the Western Balkans countries on their way to EU accession, through merging of the region's social capacity building with policy platform development, and a culture of regional cooperation.

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About the Centre for Southeast European Studies, University of Graz

The Centre for Southeast European Studies was set up in November 2008 following the establishment of Southeast Europe as a strategic priority at the University of Graz in 2000. The Centre is an interdisciplinary and cross-faculty institution for research and education, established with the goal to provide space for the rich teaching and research activities at the university on and with Southeast Europe and to promote interdisciplinary collaboration. Since its establishment, the centre also aimed to provide information and documentation and to be a point of contact for media and the public interested in Southeast Europe, in terms of political, legal, economic and cultural developments. An interdisciplinary team of lawyers, historians, and political scientists working at the Centre has contributed to research on Southeast Europe, through numerous articles, monographs and other publications. In addition, the centre regularly organizes international conferences and workshops to promote cutting edge research on Southeast Europe.

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Notes:



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