

Sabina Lange, Zoran Nechev, Florian Trauner (eds.)

Resilience in the Western Balkans

2017. European Union Institute for Security Studies. Pages: 143, ISBN: 978-92-9198-627-9.

Recent turmoil and changing geopolitical landscape of the Western Balkans is becoming again a challenge for European security. In the most trying time for the European Union (EU) since its beginning, the issue that was thought to be solved is turning into a potential stability threat. After the final dissolution of Yugoslavia, NATO entrusted the peacekeeping task to the EU, which was eager to make a global statement that security of Europe and its wider neighborhood is the EU's responsibility which can be autonomously handled. The signing of the Stability Pact in 1999 was one of the first steps in EU integration of the Western Balkans and was an indicator of future EU stability strategy for its southeast neighborhood. The successful integration of Central Europe in the 2004 enlargement wave, where most of the countries were post-communist, was enough evidence for the EU to pursue the same pattern for the Western Balkans. However, the Western Balkans region was not to be compared with Central Europe given the extremely violent military conflicts and deep internal issues in most countries of the region. The oversight resulted in a long accession process characterised with difficult impediments for candidate countries that has enabled penetration of other geopolitical players interested in increasing their influence in the region. Furthermore, stability, as well as democracy, built on reaching the accession terms during the integration turned to be fragile and easily disrupted.

Therefore, the EU found itself in a position where it simultaneously needs to respond to terrorism, illegal migration, assertive Russian actions in the East, but also to security challenges in the Western Balkans such as a growing sense of extremism and radicalism, Macedonian political crisis, further deterioration of interstate relations and foreign fighters. In an attempt to adequately handle highly complex demands, the EU introduced the term of resilience in 2016 Global Strategy (EUGS) as a new approach and policy guideline for addressing the pressing issues in Europe and beyond.

“Resilience in the Western Balkans” offers a deeper analysis for

understanding the concept of resilience outlined in the 2016 EUGS and is in particular valuable for the proposition of the potential ways of implementation in the Western Balkan region. This report offers comprehensive insight into both geopolitical set up of Western Balkans and internal issues affecting wider regional stability. All relevant factors for security of the Western Balkans, from external influence to civil society analysis, have been examined from two points of view. This perspective, where authors allowed those factors (or actors) to be perceived equally as drivers of fragility and resilience gives this report and additional value of objectivity.

Editors, Lange, Nechev and Trauner, arranged the report in two sections. First, analysing external and second, internal drivers of fragility and resilience in the region. Both sections maintain the same form of the article what offers a clear overview of the main arguments and easier understanding of the matter.

In the first chapter, Corina Stratulat analyses the role of the EU, as a key actor in stabilisation of the Western Balkans. More importantly, she questions the probity of the EU integration as a main stability mechanism that tolerates omissions in democratic consolidation. Rosa Balfour examines the future of the EU accession process of the Western Balkan countries due to its recent lukewarm engagement in the region in comparison to growingly active geopolitical actors in the region such as Russia, the Gulf States, China and Turkey. The current decline in the EU's presence in the Western Balkans is a consequence of the fact that the member states are focusing on internal issues such as: dealing with Brexit and migration crisis but also addressing terrorist attacks, slow economic development and the rise of populism. Therefore, Germany has indicated the start of Berlin Process as a special agenda for dealing only with the issues and challenges of the Western Balkans. Tobias Flessenkemper analyses the role of it in building the resilience. Also, he gives the overview of other frameworks of cooperation, such as Chinese 16+1 platform, and their impact on building the resilience in the region.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) is still considered as the most important security provider in Western Balkans despite slight decrease in its presence in the region during the last decade. Sandro Knezović

analyses its importance in building the resilience, current approach and possible change of it in order to maintain the position of the region's key security provider. Return of geopolitics made international community shift its focus again on the Western Balkans. Dušan Reljić analyses Russian approach towards the region that came under the spotlight after the events in Ukraine. Reljić presents the exact numbers and facts where Russian influence is to be perceived as a threat. His main argument is, presented more deeply in a chapter, that Russian growing influence through religion, culture, gas supplies and a seat at the Security Council, can hardly overpower the fact that Western Balkans and the EU are one single security space. President Trump also made the statement that the US is determined to promote Euro-Atlantic partnership and support further enlargement towards the Western Balkans in order to become integral part of Europe, what Ivan Vejvoda is analysing through an overview of US's approach towards the region. Anastas Vangeli analyses growing investments from China, as a potential driver of both fragility and resilience. Vangeli keeps the optimistic view of possible EU – China cooperation in maintaining stability in the region due to its importance for accomplishment of Chinese interests regarding the Belt and Road Initiative. Filip Ejduš in his chapter examines to what extent Turkey and the Gulf States can compete with the EU with their growing investments, as well as the nature of their further intentions and influence.

In the second section, where internal drivers of fragility were analysed, Florian Bieber successfully targeted factors that since the 1990s have the greatest influence on the national political and economic situation and courageously points out the population as the main driver of resilience. Srdjan Cvijić in his chapter argues that "stabilitocracy" supported by the EU, failed to build such civil society that would be the core of resilience in the region.

"An empowered civil society is a precondition for a successful EU enlargement process and a more resilient Western Balkans region. In a situation where parliaments are severely marginalized by, and judiciary subservant to, the executive power, civil society is the only hope for a functioning system of checks and balances." (Lange et al. 2017)

Igor Bandović and Nikola Dimitrov examine the relation between the EU

and Balkan political elites with authoritarian characteristics by stressing out the effects of this correlation on future accession processes of the remaining candidates and overall regional development. Alessandro Rotta analyses key segments which need to be strengthened in order for Balkan countries to fully develop an integrated society, which is in Rotta's view a core of sustainable security. Ana E. Juncos analyses 'principled pragmatism' as a new foreign policy principle adopted in 2016 EUGS which introduces a more pragmatic attitude of the EU's foreign policy and represents the basis for actions regarding building the resilience, in particular in the Western Balkans. Predrag Petrović and Florian Qehaja deal with the phenomena of foreign fighters that is an alarming concern for wider European security and offer concrete recommendations on the issue instead of a conclusion of the chapter. Julija Sardelić analyses the impact of the 2015 migration crisis on the Western Balkans by trying to optimistically present arguments for enhanced regional cooperation during the crisis. Such arguments can be critically reviewed considering the military force, walls and fences on national borders during the crisis; however, the attempt to present migrant crisis as a driver of resilience is rather refreshing.

In the final chapter, Thanos Dokos disassembles the very concept of 'Western Balkans and the EU - a single security space' and highlights the necessity of indivisibility of the European security. Such *la fin* represents the perfect conclusion of the report by pointing out all common security challenges and picturesquely stressing the fact that European security is inevitably inseparable from the security of the Western Balkans.

The value of the report is in the recommendations offered by every author, either throughout the chapter or as a conclusion, why it can serve as a valuable handbook for policy makers, besides being interesting read for all dealing with the current situation in the Western Balkans and possible development of events. It can be argued that this analysis is only tackling the factors affecting the stability in the region, which can be analysed much deeper due to their complexity. However, the success of this report is in the fact that all authors hit the core and gave precise insight in all relevant factors implicating the Western Balkans security. Moreover, besides precise geopolitical analysis of the region, ongoing political processes and the mentality of political elites have been authentically

presented, making the report comprehensive and valuable.

“Resilience in the Western Balkans” report is a definite evidence of the importance of further Western Balkans consolidation. Considering the complexity of the current situation, it is rather a difficult task. However, the EU is still the only optimal solution for the sustainable stability and democracy in this region. It is evident that the EU needs to revise and increase its presence in the Western Balkans, not only in order to preserve its own stability, but also to underline its position as a security provider in its proximate neighbourhood. Resilience represents a new EU’s guiding principle in achieving its main goal – stabilisation of its neighborhood and an attempt to overcome the disadvantages of the previous approach. However, the real challenge will again be to put words into action before being geopolitically outplayed.

Nani Klepo¹

.....
1 Associate at Ministry of Public Administration of Republic of Croatia, nklepo@uprava.hr