



17 May 2018

## EPSC Brief

# Engaging with the Western Balkans

*An Investment in Europe's Security*

European Political  
Strategy Centre

**Security in the Western Balkans<sup>1</sup> is not just a matter for the region itself** although it is clear that slow progress on security issues such as rule of law, organised crime, extremism and radicalisation – is also undermining advances in other areas, holding back socio-economic progress and discouraging investments. **It is also a responsibility of the EU, as a regional force for peace and stability.**

President Jean-Claude Juncker once said, **'it is the most basic and universal of rights of European citizens to feel safe and secure in their homes'**. This goes for those Europeans who are already in the European Union, but also for those who are not yet there and who have only recently witnessed the horrors of conflict and warfare.

**Security in the Western Balkans is also intrinsically linked to stability and economic prosperity in the wider region and in the EU as a whole.** Without swift and decisive action, security issues within this region of roughly 18 millions inhabitants will breed and amplify, with the ultimate risk that they spill over into the EU, in particular if exacerbated by foreign actors seeking to gain leverage in the region.

The adoption, by the European Commission in February 2018, of a renewed strategy for the Western Balkans,<sup>2</sup> which includes security as one of its six flagship initiatives, offers **a historic window of opportunity to step up security cooperation between the EU and the region.** This would not only help to build trust between EU Member States and the Western Balkans, as well as within the region. It would also serve to put Europe more firmly on the road to becoming a stronger, more united family – and, as such, a stronger, more united global actor.

**One should not forget that stability and security were not a given in some of the current EU Member States before they joined the EU** – and this is true going right back to the founding members. Little more than a decade ago, the newest Member States joined from Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltics. They have found a place in the European family, experienced substantial economic growth, and built better and safer homes for themselves. The resulting stability and growth has benefited all Member States.

These past experiences underline the importance of bringing partners closer to the Union, and make it clear that the renewed strategy for the Western Balkans must be about the long-term perspective. **History has shown: Perseverance pays off.**

***'We have to export stability to the Western Balkans by extending prospects of accession, rather than importing instability from the Western Balkans into the European Union'***

– President Jean-Claude Juncker, 54<sup>th</sup> Munich Security Conference, 17 February 2018

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### Disclaimer

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## Geography doesn't lie

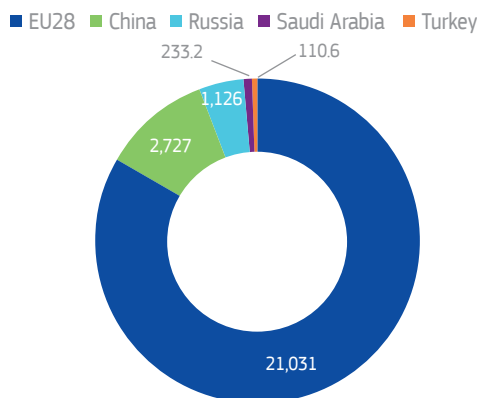
**The map is clear: the Balkan peninsula is part and parcel of the European continent.** This includes Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo,<sup>3</sup> the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and, of course, Slovenia and Croatia, which already joined the EU in 2004 and 2013 respectively. All are part of the same European family, connected by a myriad of historic, economic, and socio-cultural ties.

The prospect of EU membership was first offered at the turn of the century. Back in 2003, at-the-time European Commission President Romano Prodi stated that 'the process of European unification will not be complete until the Balkans have joined the EU', while Chris Patten – then EU Commissioner for External Affairs – described **the region as 'one of the missing pieces in our jigsaw Europe'**.

**EU leaders have long shared the belief that integrating the Western Balkan partners is the best way of stabilising the region,** which is still suffering from the long years of conflicts and ethnic strife in the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> As such, the EU and its Member States have together invested considerably in the Western Balkans for many years. Today, the EU is by far the largest investor in the region (Figure 1), as well as being the Western Balkans' largest trading partner, accounting for over three quarters of the region's total trade.

**Figure 1: The EU remains by far the largest investor in the Western Balkans**

Foreign Direct Investment inflows, in million euro, 2007-2016



Source: Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, FDI Database

## A battle of influences

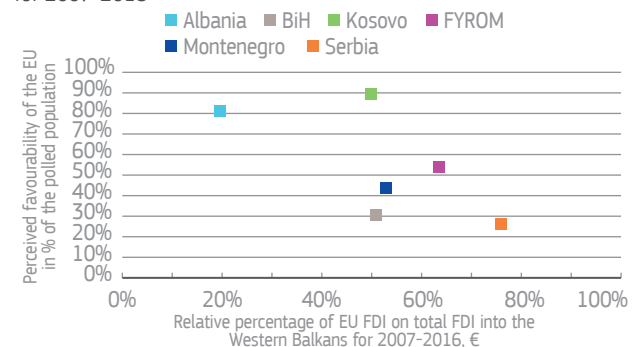
Of course, **the EU is far from being the only geopolitical actor with an interest in the Western Balkans.** The region has historical ties **with Russia and Turkey,** while **China, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States** have been seeking to extend their influence there in recent years. And, of course, the region has nurtured these ties – especially over the past decade, faced with a waning enthusiasm for further EU enlargement among existing Member States, as they battled through their own crisis years from 2008 onwards.

Over the years, **the political elite in the Western Balkans has explored different options to maximise personal and patronage gain from playing rivalling outside actors,** with gains ranging from aid, loans and investment, to access to infrastructure, enhanced military support, or diplomatic backing in international fora.

This has, in some cases, been **to the detriment of democratic and economic reforms.** Seeing their EU perspectives seemingly subside, Western Balkan governments had fewer incentives to introduce the reforms demanded by the EU for accession or tackle issues of corruption, cronyism, violence and security.<sup>5</sup> As a result of this lack of progress, **many supporters of the EU in the Western Balkans have been left feeling disappointed not only in their governments, but also in the EU process. Yet, even so, most continue to consider the EU as their best hope for the future.** Support for EU membership remains overwhelming in Albania and Kosovo, although elsewhere in the region it has gradually deteriorated – and that, despite the important investments made by the EU. In Serbia, public support dropped from over 70% in favour of joining in 2003, to less than 30% in 2017, even as the EU continued to account for 75% of Foreign Direct Investment in the country (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Financial support is not making EU more popular**

Perceived favourability of the EU in relation to EU share of total FDI for 2007-2016



Source: Balkan Barometer 2017, Regional Cooperation Council; Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, FDI Database

While some of the unfavourable perception of the EU in parts of the region is tied to the lack of progress in accession negotiations, it is also a reflection of a deeper problem that the EU faces in the region.

**Despite providing the lion's share of investment and trade opportunities, the EU gets relatively little recognition compared to Russia and China, for example, even though these countries contribute proportionately much less.**<sup>6</sup> A 2015

survey actually found that a substantial proportion of Serbian respondents believed that Russia provides more financial aid than the EU.<sup>7</sup>

There is little doubt that some of this misperception is driven by disinformation and propaganda campaigns, which take advantage of the generally weak media environment in the region to exploit nationalist and other dangerous narratives,<sup>8</sup> including anti-EU ones. As such, it is not only faith in the EU accession process that is at risk, but public trust in the media – an essential pillar of democracy.

Against this backdrop, the reopening of a clear European perspective for the Western Balkans with the adoption of the European Commission's new regional strategy is a much-needed step that could help restore faith in the EU within the region. It could also fend off some of the more insidious influences that risk derailing the accession process and obstructing the path towards fully-fledged democracy.

### No strings attached?

Through its '16+1' platform, **China has already offered more than 10 billion euro in infrastructure investments to Eastern and Southern Europe**, with a view to connecting the region to China's *One Belt One Road* initiative.<sup>9</sup> The Bar-Boljare Highway project, which would link up the southern ports of Montenegro and the Serbian road network, has a budget equivalent to one quarter of Montenegrin GDP, with Chinese companies contracted for at least 1.35 billion euro.<sup>10</sup> In 2017, China announced that Huawei would overhaul the Serbian telecommunications infrastructure,<sup>11</sup> raising questions as to the country's future cybersecurity, especially in light of recent similar experiences in Africa. China, for instance built the African Union headquarters for free but is suspected of subsequently having automatically transferred all diplomatic data from the organisation back to China.<sup>12</sup>

**Russia also has considerable economic and military clout in Serbia.** Russian company Gazpromneft has controlled Serbia's NIS oil and gas corporation since 2008.<sup>13</sup> Second-hand military equipment sometimes arrives in Serbia as 'free gifts' as, for example, when six MiG-29 fighter jets were delivered to Serbia as part of Moscow's promised military hardware.<sup>14</sup> Serbia and Russia also began joint military exercises on Serbian territory with more than 700 troops staging helicopter assaults, a mock attack on an insurgent base, evacuation of casualties and artillery bombardment practice.<sup>15</sup> Russia is also reported to maintain a non-negligible force of intelligence officers in the country, providing guidance and training to lingering armed groups and paramilitary outfits. Reports furthermore show a wider pattern of close, supportive links with such groups, from the Balkan *Cossack Army* to the now-dissolved *Hungarian National Front*.<sup>16</sup> Most visibly, such elements were used in an attempted coup in Montenegro with paramilitary gunmen, coordination, uniforms, weapons and cash being facilitated cross-border from Serbia.<sup>17</sup>

Next to this, **Russian media operations have been expanding in the Western Balkans** over the past few years, with *Sputnik* news service nowadays having a disproportionate influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina's Republika Srpska,<sup>18</sup> and other platforms often attempting to foster negative attitudes towards Europe and glorifying Russian military cooperation.<sup>19</sup>

At the same time, over the past two decades, **Saudi Arabia and Gulf States have been reported to be investing large sums towards the development of ultra-conservative Wahhabi schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Albania.**<sup>20</sup> For example, since 1999, Kosovo has experienced a building-spree of around 240 mosques funded by ultra-conservative foundations from the Gulf States and staffed with Wahhabi imams. Other initiatives include religious scholarships to Saudi Arabia, and community support that is sometimes made conditional on express religious affiliation and symbolism.<sup>21</sup>

## Security challenges still rife

While security has improved in the Western Balkans over the past decades, sizeable challenges still lie ahead.

**Organised crime’s foothold on the Western Balkans remains strong** – whether in terms of trafficking in human beings, drugs and weapons, or risk of criminal infiltration of the political and economic systems. These crime groups are increasingly international, with a rising number of Western Balkan-based cells operating in the Europe Union. Many are also increasingly becoming cyber-enabled and ‘polycriminal’.<sup>22</sup>

At the same time, remnant **armed groups and paramilitary outfits** have flared in the past few years after decades of lying dormant. **Thousands of tonnes of weapons and ammunition are still held in under-protected stockpiles.** Although no data is currently systematically collected, it is widely suspected that many of these are embezzled by organised crime groups.<sup>23</sup>

Without a proper monopoly on security, the credibility of governments will be jeopardised and paramilitary outfits risk forging other loyalties with citizens in the region.

In addition, the region has seen a **recent rise in the number and activities of extremist groups.** The influx of foreign ultra-conservatism has caused several religious communities to reject the authority of the national Islamic Community platforms and the state authority more broadly, with the associated risk of them becoming echo-chambers for radicalisation. In recent years, over one thousand people left the Western Balkans to go to Syria and Iraq as foreign fighters,<sup>24</sup> with an estimated 300 since returning and bringing with them radicalised ideologies, active combat experience and networks that can support training, supplies and recruitment for terrorist organisations.

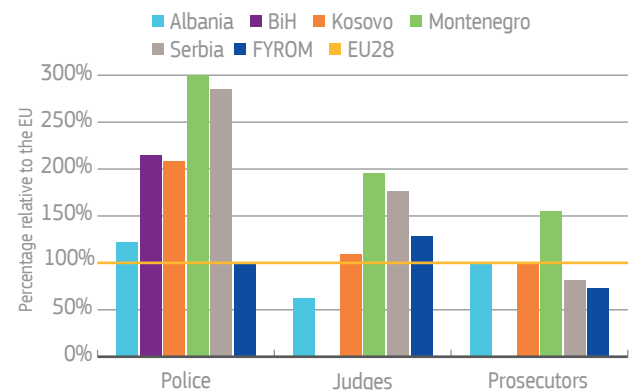
From 2014 to 2016, in Kosovo alone, over 60 people were charged for crimes related to violent extremism, 14 imams were arrested and 19 Muslim organisations were shut down for inciting extremism and recruiting for terrorist organisations.<sup>25</sup>

**The spread of radicalism breeds wider concerns for society, as radical preachers often convey a vision that is incompatible with a European vision and democratic governance,** e.g. preaching the rejection of religious tolerance, and demeaning gender equality. There is a real concern that radicalisation risks creating a ‘lost generation’ in certain segments of Western Balkan societies in terms of education and employment.

Faced with such pervasive and complex challenges, much is expected from the region’s judicial systems. While policing efforts have been stepped up across the board (Figure 3), this has not necessarily translated into more security – often because technical and legal facilities are still lacking, and because **criminal justice systems have not yet come full circle.** This is not only a question of having the necessary prosecutors and judges to follow up investigations with convictions, it also requires a resolute willingness to tackle – in addition to low-level criminality – what are often more political cases of high-level corruption and institutionalised crime, as well as to make progress on historical war crime cases and on the destruction of weapons stockpiles.

**Figure 3: Commendable, but incomplete progress in criminal justice systems**

Number of personnel in law enforcement, relative to EU28 average



Source: European Commission, 2018 Enlargement Package Reports

Today, although dozens of crime groups are mapped and known in the region, deep links throughout business, public administration and politics hamper the development and enforcement of legal frameworks at a national level. Even where political will exists, gaps in the law enforcement chain and a lack of comprehensive data collection limit the ability to implement them.

## Insecurity and fragile economic growth: a chicken-and-egg trap

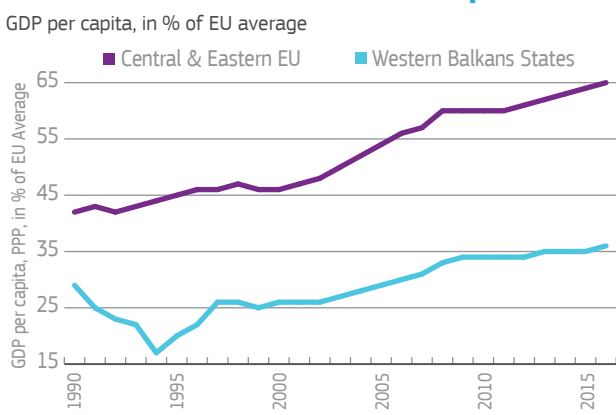
One of the major barriers to any of the six Western Balkan partners becoming EU members is the fact that none of them are currently considered to have functioning market economies capable of coping with the competitive pressures and market forces of the EU internal market.<sup>26</sup>

The latest enlargement reports indicate that, even though progress has been made in the region, inefficient and rigid markets, low productivity, limited access to finance, unclear property rights and a

cumbersome regulatory environment mean the region continues to suffer from low competitiveness and high unemployment levels, especially among the young.

Compared to Central and Eastern EU Member States that in 1990 had similar development levels as the Western Balkans and which have since then managed to narrow the gap with average EU GDP per capita by more than 20 percentage points, the Western Balkans have only managed to narrow the gap by 7 percentage points (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Western Balkans fall far behind Central and Eastern EU counterparts**



Notes: Western Balkans states include Albania, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina. CEE states include Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovak Republic given the relative proximity of development between these states and the Western Balkans beginning in the 1990s.

Source: World Bank

It is clear that **the prevalent culture of corruption and criminality has contributed to stunting the development of a competitive business ecosystem**. Not only does it eliminate incentives to progress on transparency and rule of law, **it feeds into a generalised sentiment of impunity, inequality and mistrust throughout society**, creating precedence for an extractive society where citizens feel the need to buy into quasi-state loyalties, rather than to democratic institutions, in order to progress in life and career.

This, in turn, further aggravates existing security challenges by making alternative means of income – or indeed of purpose – such as organised crime, cybercrime or violent extremism, seem more attractive for some. For others, the alternative is simply to move away, with as much as 25% of the population living abroad in some cases.<sup>27</sup> This brain drain further compounds the lack of competitive businesses, innovation and jobs.

What is more, the weak economic environment makes the Western Balkans reliant on foreign loans and subsidies, creating leverage for interests that are not necessarily aligned with the region's European future and the spirit of the accession criteria.

## A trust-building exercise

While EU accession will require Western Balkan partners to fully comply with all the standard criteria, it is clear that **strengthening security cooperation will enable a major leap towards the accession objective** by helping to build trust between EU Member States and the Western Balkans, as well as within the region.

Security in the EU will continue to be jeopardised as long as the Western Balkans are not just durably stabilised, but largely freed from the spectre of the security threats currently residing or transiting through it.

### Only as strong as the weakest link

The Western Balkans are still widely seen as an entry point for trafficked drugs, firearms, and human beings into Europe.<sup>28</sup> The sale and smuggling of assault rifles and other small arms from the Western Balkans into Europe are a particular concern to many Member States.

Another key issue is that, while a number of Western Balkan partners have visa-free travel regimes with the EU, several of them also grant visa-free access to countries to which the EU does not. For instance, the visa regimes of Serbia, Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina are not in line with EU regulation on countries such as Russia, China, Turkey and some Gulf States.<sup>29</sup>

While there has been gradual but slow progress in the alignment of visa policy, in the meantime, these vulnerabilities help to sustain supply lines for foreign radical and criminal networks across Europe. This alignment needs to speed up.

**The reinvigoration of the overall process and accession talks creates an opportunity for a revisited EU paradigm and for tackling some of the security issues more forcibly.**

### Organised crime – turning exit gates into effective bulwarks

In prior accession processes, fighting organised crime was dealt with specifically as one of the domains scrutinised under the EU's post-accession Cooperation and Verification Mechanism. In the case of the Western Balkans, it will be critical to act jointly to reign in organised crime far earlier in the accession process.

Of course, some actions are already being taken or considered. Notably, the Western Balkans Strategy opens the door to including the Western Balkans in the EU Policy Cycle on organised crime, which integrates the efforts of Europol, Member States and regional partners on an operational level.<sup>30</sup> The 2018 Annual Enlargement Package, published by the European Commission, calls on Western Balkan partners to adopt enhanced frameworks to target the finances of criminal activity, funding and proceeds alike. The EU also currently funds both the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse to start the first ever comprehensive data collection campaigns to inform these policy processes and target law enforcement efforts.

However, even more could be done. **Progress is needed on mapping organised crime more thoroughly and on delivering credible Action Plans for further developing the law enforcement framework, strengthening the prosecution chain and improving data collection.** It is in these areas – where there is a risk of national actors being corrupted – that the EU should step up cooperation with the Western Balkans. This should ideally be done both at national and regional levels and could be reviewed at dedicated, regular joint ministerial meetings. International incentives and platforms can provide supplementary frameworks. In addition, targeted capacity-building and resourcing can plug the gaps currently impeding the region in successfully dealing with organised crime.

## Reigning in radicalisation and extremism

The EU and the Western Balkans already have a degree of cooperation on countering radicalisation and extremism. The Western Balkans Strategy includes a number of potential further actions. Most notably, dialogue and efforts have been stepped up under the Stabilisation and Association Agreement framework and the Western Balkans Counter Terrorism Initiative to respond to developments related to terrorism, violent extremism and radicalisation in the Western Balkans. Under its Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA II), the EU finances dozens of projects focused on strengthening civil society against violent extremism.<sup>31</sup> The Commission’s Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), which brings together practitioners working on the prevention of radicalisation, held its first session dedicated to preventing violent extremism in the Western Balkans in April 2018.<sup>32</sup>

But the EU must continue to seek increased cooperation in this domain. Importantly, the Western Balkan partners need to demonstrate clearly and unambiguously their

willingness to address the issue at a broader societal level. Beyond national strategies, the issue of foreign fighters and returnees would benefit from a coherent regional strategy that is aligned and connected to EU undertakings, and implemented under joint political-level review and monitoring.<sup>33</sup>

**To minimise the risk of radical ideologies being imported under the guise of investments, all Western Balkan partners should better align their visa policies with those of the EU.** In addition, policies and regulations that ensure that financial support for religious and political endeavours are fully transparent and allowed only on a non-discriminatory basis, in line with the spirit of EU accession, should be firmly put in place, preferably at regional level. Real estate acquisition by non-nationals, important as it is to leverage struggling budgets, should be regulated to prioritise and/or incentivise those which conform to the accession process.

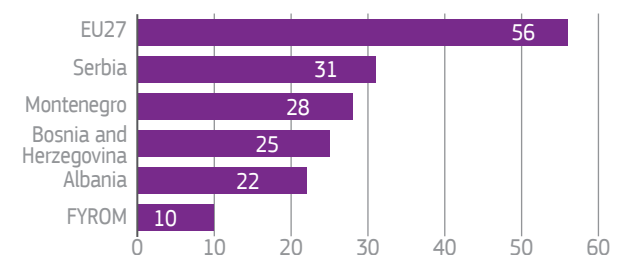
## Dispelling myths and showcasing reality

With increasing evidence of the problems of propaganda and disinformation within the EU, there is a clear case for more cooperation on these issues also with the Western Balkans. Indeed, the region not only suffers from **extensive political interference** in – and control of – the media, it also faces **a growing Russian and anti-EU media influence**. At the same time, **fake news has become a lucrative business**, such as in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, where the set-up of fake websites has seen a surge, feeding into US misinformation campaigns among others.<sup>34</sup>

Propaganda and disinformation tend to thrive in societies where interpersonal trust and social cohesion are low. At the same time, poor levels of media literacy (Figure 5) leave Western Balkans citizens and societies vulnerable to nationalistic narratives and identity politics further chipping away at societal cohesion.<sup>35</sup>

**Figure 5: Resilience towards harmful narratives is low in the Western Balkans**

Media Literacy Index 2018



Source: Open Society Institute

Addressing the issue is not just a matter of tackling sources of disinformation and propaganda, it also requires investing in basic education and media literacy.

The recent Commission Communication on online disinformation provides insights into how the different initiatives might also be applied to the region, e.g. by allowing Western Balkans partners to access the platforms funded by the European Commission.

The European External Action Service already set up, in 2017, a ‘Stratcom Western-Balkans Task Force’ in order to promote fact-based narratives about the EU. It is currently in the process of building operational capacity. In the future, it may be beneficial to further explore the potential for an even more comprehensive ‘360 degrees’ approach. This could entail the Western-Balkans Task Force joining up with other EEAS Stratcom Task Forces – East and South – to also develop joint responses countering harmful foreign propaganda and disinformation, and strengthen independent media in the region, together with the Western Balkan partners.

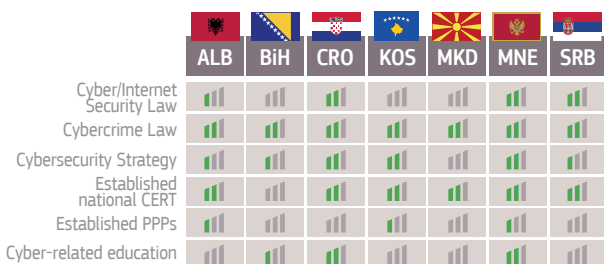
## Looking to the future – bolstering the region’s cybersecurity

On an ever-more connected and digital continent, pursuing a coherent policy on protecting cyberspace is a must. Digital channels are also likely to grow in importance for governments in the region when communicating with their citizens, and public trust in authorities will increasingly be reflected in how resilient digital systems are.

Yet, the general level of cybersecurity in the Western Balkans – resources, legislation and structures, let alone cross-institutional response culture and capability – is still considered to be very low (Figure 6).<sup>36</sup> And, as foreign actors continue to invest heavily in the region,<sup>37</sup> there is a particular risk of critical digital infrastructure being run by third countries, opening up the possibility of becoming a backdoor for cyberattacks and -espionage into the EU.

**Figure 6: Western Balkans risk becoming EU digital blind spot**

Level of readiness of cybersecurity instruments



Notes:

CERT = Cyber Emergency Response Team

PPPs = Public Private Partnerships

Source: DiploFoundation 2016

## Cyberattacks on the rise

Growing a digital society without the proper security in place is already leading to increased cybercrime and hampering competitive economic growth.

The level of reported cyberattacks and online fraud has grown exponentially over recent years in their intensity, sophistication and frequency. For example, Montenegro went from just six Advanced Persistent Threat-level attacks reported in 2012, to 200 by 2016. In 2017, this number had more than tripled to over 700.<sup>40</sup> The escalation of attacks has primarily been linked to Russian state-sponsored hackers hired to interfere with Montenegro’s bid to join NATO in 2017 and the current accession talks with the EU.<sup>41</sup>

The EU has already taken actions to increase the security and resilience of ICT networks in the Western Balkans by building and training local capacities to adequately prevent and respond to cyber-attacks. For example, within the scope of its Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP), the Commission funded a pilot project ‘Enhancing Cybersecurity (ENCYSEC)’, which included some, albeit not all, Western Balkans partners.

However, at a time when the EU itself is moving forward on cybersecurity – as exemplified with the implementation of the Directive on security of network and information systems (NIS Directive) and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), as well as the recent EU Cybersecurity Package<sup>38</sup>, there is a risk – with obvious consequences – of leaving the Western Balkans even further behind. **The EU cannot afford to have the Western Balkans as a ‘digital blind spot’.**<sup>39</sup>

**Helping to develop and implement a coherent cyberstrategy, accompanying legislation and ICT structures that seek to align over time with the EU’s own framework, would be a winning strategy over the longer term.** As such, the Western Balkan partners should also get observer status in the European Union Agency for Network and Information Security (ENISA) – a move which is currently already being considered by the European Commission.

And, while the problem cannot merely be solved with more funding, the EU could consider dedicating specific funding to strengthening inter-regional resilience and developing joint cross-border response mechanisms. Member States, in particular those bordering Western Balkans, could also be encouraged to cooperate more systematically or partner up on cross-border infrastructure projects with the Western Balkans.

Finally, the EU could consider partnering in a more systematic way with other stakeholders, including Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), NATO and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which have also sought to increase awareness and capacity on cybersecurity (and defence) in the region.<sup>42</sup>

### Defence cooperation to matter more in the future

Given the risks involved on both sides of the partnership, the Western Balkans need to make a more visible commitment to pursuing joint security ambitions and objectives with the EU. This could be formalised through an overarching coordinating mechanism involving the European Commission, the European External Action Service and representatives of the Western Balkans and relevant EU Member States, e.g. as a Security Cluster. One concrete deliverable could be a hybrid vulnerability survey to map potential areas to improve in cooperation between the EU and the Western Balkans.

The EU should also encourage its Western Balkan partners to align their defence efforts with those of the EU wherever possible. **In a region formerly embroiled in conflict, regional defence cooperation could not only help defuse tensions between military institutions but also become a signal to society-at-large that times are changing.**

The region would benefit from following and emulating efforts such as the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) to strengthen their own strategic development and ensure future integration in relevant EU programmes. Similarly, useful Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) projects in regional cooperative frameworks, e.g. with neighbouring Member States, would enable the Western Balkans to benefit from European experiences. For one, the Lithuanian PESCO project on the Cyber Rapid Response Teams might serve as a model for strengthened cybersecurity structures and cooperation in the region.

Meaningful integration into European defence cooperation would also have to have a more operational side. Some examples of such cooperation already exist: all except Kosovo have signed a Framework Partnership Agreement with the EU, while Montenegro, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia have contributed to four Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) operations between them.<sup>43</sup> More substantial contributions to such missions from current or potential Western Balkan EU candidates will positively inform the next steps on the accession path.

And, as accession progresses, building the defence dimension will signify more than just increasing mutual trust. A growing EU defence cooperation, leading over time to genuine defence integration means that, from now on, harmonisation with EU legislation and policies will need to incorporate the defence dimension as well. Significant ground in this direction has already been made with membership or partnership relations between the Western Balkans and NATO.

### A more self-assured partner

With the lion's share of international investment to the Western Balkans coming from the EU, **the Union should not be afraid to engage more persuasively in a discussion on rule of law and security in the region.**

First of all, it must make it clear that **the Western Balkans need to visibly boost efforts to tackle serious remaining security issues.** Completing the judicial system, which is the bedrock of any well-functioning democratic society, will be a crucial step to fighting organised crime and corruption. It would also go a long way to restore trust, while also building capacity in other areas such as economic competitiveness, cybersecurity, media resilience, as well as intelligence and defence cooperation.

And of course, it should be clear that they can rely on the EU to work with them in their efforts. However, it should also be stressed that **there will be no rewards for those who choose to play according to different rules and do not make the effort to reform towards shared European democratic principles and values.** As such, investment phases and cash transfers should be tied directly to progress on milestones of reforms to strengthen the rule of law and security. The EU clearly has the resources and economic clout in the region to do so credibly. This would be in the common interest of all European citizens, including those in the Western Balkans.

At the same time, the conversation must include **taking a frank look at the real role of foreign funds and influences in the region.** In particular, there is a need to cooperate on defining what would be off limits for foreign investors in terms of critical infrastructure – both in the EU and in the Western Balkans. While large infrastructure investments by non-EU actors do not *per se* represent risks and are needed to help the future development of the region, they do have the potential to breed dependencies in small, politically volatile and economically fragile entities.



## Conclusion

**Both the EU and the Western Balkans undoubtedly stand a far better chance of addressing their common security challenges faster, deeper and more effectively by working together under one roof.**

With this in mind, **there cannot be a more enabling political context than the accession process.**

The benefits from enlargement far exceed the effort required to manage security threats, while neglecting the challenges could mean jeopardising the successful implementation of other flagship initiatives under the Western Balkans Strategy focused on the rule of law, competitive economies and reconciliation.

Lastly, the EU and the Western Balkans are not alone in their endeavours. Third countries such as the United States are strategic partners, while organisations like the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the United Nations already play a role in tackling specific issues, for instance on limiting firearms. Moreover, the cooperation between NATO and EU on issues like hybrid and defence capacity building is growing increasingly relevant for the Western Balkans and continued coordination with such partners will be key.

Few, if any, other areas of cooperation between the EU and the Western Balkans carry the same tangible direct benefits – and potential for building trust and persuasion – as security. Offering a new, credible perspective makes it possible to take cooperation forward to mutual benefit.

## Notes

- For the purposes of this paper, the Western Balkans refers to the region comprised by Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo (see footnote 3), the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia.
- European Commission, 'A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans', February 2018.
- This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.
- DW World, *Hopes for the "European Jigsaw's Missing Piece"*, 21 June 2003, <http://www.dw.com/en/hopes-for-the-european-jigsaws-missing-piece/a-898694>
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