

SECURITY CHALLENGES IN THE BALKANS: QUO VADIS?

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Security Challenges in the Balkans: Quo Vadis?

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Ambassador Pjer Šimunović
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It is a privilege to be able to address an issue very topical for Southeast Europe, as well as for a wider community of transatlantic democracies, which are formulating the crux of their security and foreign policies through instruments we have at our disposal in the shape and form of the European Union and NATO. The region in question is full of inviting opportunities, it is a land of promises, but it also entails some dangers and some developments which may become critical if adequate attention is not paid to them.

In the very first place, when I refer to an adequate attention, I have in mind measures and policies, conducted by the countries of the region and by the relevant external actors, leading to a full European and Euro-Atlantic integration of the countries in the region, to their membership in the EU and NATO. This is the best way to get this region fully stabilized, fully at peace within itself and with the wider world. Basically, by spreading the European and the Euro-Atlantic area of stability, very much embodied in the EU and NATO enlargement process, we are establishing security and prosperity of these countries and of Europe as a whole.

Obviously, when you look at the region of Southeast Europe, or the Balkans, there are different issues at play. For the sake of our discussion today, within the limits of my short intervention, I would like to focus on a couple of critical developments worth taking note of in order to be able to address them meaningfully.

In this regard, let me say that against a background of some inherent contradictions existing in the region and stemming, very much but not exclusively, from the legacy of conflicts in the 1990s, which have left some residual traces having an unfortunate potential to degenerate, some additional factors have come into the play.

After the known upheaval of the 1990s, there was basically a decade of exemplary stabilization, normalization, reconciliation. The level of reconciliation achieved in this particular region, albeit imperfect, has been, as it still is, a remarkable achievement, this has to be kept in mind. Because in a relatively very short span of time, a number of violent conflicts has been replaced by a cross-border cooperation; the nations and individuals are not only talking to each other but cooperating economically, socially, culturally, and politically. Notably, the cooperation has always been very prominent on a project of getting into the EU and NATO, where the interests of the countries of the region have been strongly converging.

After what was almost a decade of promising normalization, of openness, of healing the wounds of war and animosity, we got a sliding back, certainly not sliding back all the way, but we have lost some dynamics of that reconciliation, normalization and cross-border cooperation. Something happened that stopped the positive trends and reversed them up to an extent.

¹ Presentation at an event on “Security Challenges in the Balkans: Quo Vadis?” held on December 19, 2017 at the International Law Institute.

Having said that, I would like to be absolutely clear: what we have now still remains a very remarkable achievement in relation to the background provided by the developments of the 1990s.

We have seen that a lot of negative trends coincided with the economic crisis, which hit the countries of the region badly, before they would be able to return to economic growth, surely exacerbating a number of lingering disputes and issues, providing a fertile ground for them to come alive yet again. While the crisis has been one of the most important setbacks in its own right, depriving citizens and the countries of their planned and desired economic development, it has also brought up to the surface, it has crystalized, some residual contradictions and grievances, impacting domestic and foreign policies, undermining inter-communal relations in particular, many of them stemming from the conflicts of the 1990s, some stemming from before that. It has also been adding some new elements to that.

These residual contradictions within the region coming up to the surface have been coupled with some notable intrusions from the outside, happening on an unprecedented scale. Let me concentrate on them. These intrusions have been made possible, up to an extent, also by a relative lack of vigorous, robust engagement from the part of the West at the time. The basic lesson learned would be: if the EU, with all the instruments it has at its disposal, particularly in terms of its enlargement, and NATO, in terms of keeping its door open, are not present in the region in a credible, robust manner, then somebody and something else will be filling the gap.

Against the background of some inherent contradictions in the region, we have seen a whole range of Middle Eastern influences intruding deeply into the region, exemplified also by their most extreme expressions, by a violent Islamic fundamentalism. Some 1,000 people from the Western Balkans have joined the fight in the Middle East, have joined the ranks of Daesh/Islamic State or al-Qa'ida or other extremist groups, with a few hundred of them having lost their lives, a few hundred having returned, and a few hundred still in the Middle East. In terms of the political landscape, socially as well as security-wise, this is a very serious danger indeed. It has materialized in such a clear and present form relatively recently, but it has not come out of the blue, it has come out of a longer-term exposure and intrusion from a whole range of Middle Eastern influences, intruding chiefly, but not exclusively, into the indigenous Muslim population. This remains politically, as well as security-wise, one of the major concerns in the region.

The other concern worth addressing stems from the policies of Russia – Russia is present in the region in some unprecedented proportions. It can be observed using all the instruments at its disposal to exercise and extend its influences and gain leverage, be it though diplomacy, intelligence, propaganda, investments, defense cooperation... Russia establishing such a prominent foothold in the region in pursuit of its interests works against the idea of integrating the whole region into the European Union and NATO.

In such a situation we may look at the region as being very much 'a contested battleground', with different forces fighting for the soul of the countries in the region and for the future of the region, whether it will be more in Russia's camp, whether it will

be more linked to different Middle Eastern forces, or it will become a fully integrated part of the EU and NATO.

My final point, when it comes to proposing a realistic and favorable way forward, would be to emphasize yet again the importance, and a renewed urgency, of European and Euro-Atlantic integration as the best, proven and available instrument of stabilizing, enriching and reconciling the region of Southeast Europe.

Ambassador Haris Lalacos*Embassy of Greece²*

The National Security Strategy presentation made by President Trump yesterday was mentioned earlier. The first thing that I did when we had the transcript was to go through it very quickly and see if the word Greece was in it and then if the names of neighboring countries, countries of direct importance to us were there; and they were not, despite the fact that other countries, perhaps bigger countries, were named repeatedly. A staff member actually made a list of how many references were made of China, Russia, Iran, etc. I do not know if this is a good sign or a bad sign, I would tend to think that it is a positive.

In the 1990s, I am sure that many of the countries in our region would have been named there by name. So I am not terribly upset that we were not named in this 58 page document. Perhaps this is for the better. Also, perhaps, in a way it is positive that the Balkans, as a region, is not a tier one concern for the Washington foreign policy and security establishment as it used to be certainly until the late 1990s and maybe until September 11th. Things changed then. I was in Washington back then as well and I was covering for the embassy as a counselor the Balkans and other things, but the Balkans were the bulk of it. It was very important, especially for a Balkan country like Greece. Then, after September 11th, things changed.

But things changed also for another reason. There was considerable progress in the Balkans. There are things that we should not forget or play down marked improvements that have occurred and have taken place in the Balkans since.

Again, when we are talking about the Balkans, definitions vary. Which countries are we talking about? When I was growing up in Greece, in the 1960s for instance, when we talked about the Balkans that was - starting from the south - Greece, Turkey which has a European part in the Balkan Peninsula, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Albania, and Romania. And we had Balkans games in all sports and Balkan festivals. The Balkans for us was the first measure of comparison as a country; not the European Union, not NATO. These are our immediate neighbors, those are the countries with whom we are related, despite the fact that politically we belonged to different groups and camps.

And then after 1991, again people would start to talk about Southeast Europe because Balkans became almost an obscene word at the time. I never believed that we should abandon our terminology for the sake of political correctness. And hopefully this is gone for good now.

But when we talked about the Balkans in the 1990s and later on, we included more or less the entire peninsula. Now, when we talk about the Balkans, we mostly refer to the Western Balkans six countries, sometimes grouped under the W6 heading, which again, I am not sure if it is desirable to do, but it reflects a shifting configuration with respect to Euro-Atlantic integration.

² Presentation at an event on "Security Challenges in the Balkans: Quo Vadis?" held on December 19, 2017 at the International Law Institute.

I would think that the fact that the Balkans is not a number one priority is certainly good. However, we do see in Washington lately a relative resurgence of interest about the Balkans, mostly about the western Balkans, the six countries which are not yet fully integrated into the Euro-Atlantic structures. And this discussion, this concern about the Balkans is almost always security related and, almost exclusively, there is a defensive approach to it, especially in this capital. Interest in the Balkans goes hand-in-hand with concern about possible growing influence by Russia in the region. Of course, the operational conclusion of this discussion is nearly always the same: that we have to advance Euro-Atlantic integration. This is a premise that I think is widely accepted, and certainly accepted by my country. However, I need to stress, that often it is used as an excuse by not only certain governments in the area but by friends of the Balkans of certain countries outside the region to forego the full compliance with the responsibilities and criteria that NATO and EU membership entail. Both organizations have what is called conditionality and again, we believe that it is the future of all the countries to be fully integrated in NATO and the EU, provided that they fulfill the criteria.

We believe that there is more stability now in the Balkans than in the past, although the situation is certainly not at the desirable level. And I think that what has mostly contributed to this improvement is the process of European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

However, security challenges still exist and should not be overlooked. Because the Balkans is such a vast, diverse, and dear topic – especially for people from the region, and certainly for me - I could talk for a long time. Let me try to limit myself to the security challenges in the region, which is the topic of this meeting.

First of all, we have inter-ethnic tensions in the Balkans, I do not have to elaborate on that. They are always a source of concern. Also, there is a problem with the maturity of political institutions in some countries. We have nationalist rhetoric, which never completely subsided and we have nationalistic political platforms groups, which are very dangerous in a region that is burdened first of all by a living memory of conflict – conflict in the region was recent – but also it is a region burdened with a heavy historical load.

There are narratives of unfinished business. And although this is understandable from an intellectual or romantic point of view, in almost all of the countries and in almost all the ethnicities in the region and perhaps outside the region as well, when it comes to being a guiding principle for policy, this is a problem. We have to make sure that this stops being the case.

When we talk about immediate security challenges in the region, perhaps number one is extremism – political extremists and fundamentalist extremists – and second is organized crime.

Everybody knows about foreign fighters from Balkan countries who ended up fighting in Syria and Iraq. And they are perhaps the best example of growing fundamentalist extremism in the region. It is a complex phenomenon. We have to see its causes. But at first glance, it is a curious thing that people from the Balkans, from this part of Europe, a corner of Europe but still European, they would leave their countries and go to fight for the so-called Islamic Caliphate in Syria or Iraq. Why should

they do that? Of course, money is part of it but it should not be seen as the only explanation. It is not only an economic reason, there are other reasons. There is infiltration by other countries, not from the region, among segments of the population. There is an ideological element there in the minds of many people. And let us not forget that we are basically talking about foreign fighters who, almost all of them, come from the part of the Balkans which was most of the time, until the emergence of modern states, under Ottoman rule. And in the Ottoman Empire, you had the millet system. It was system where your religion largely, if not exclusively determined your affiliation, your identity, what became an ethnic identity along the way. I am not saying this is good or bad, but it is something that exists here and has not been fully eradicated from the collective mindset of the people in the region. So, it is important to keep all of these things in mind when trying to explain why you have hundreds, perhaps 500 people from different countries in the region leave and go to Syria or Iraq and fight with ISIS or al-Qa'ida formations.

What happens with them now that ISIS has been largely defeated militarily in the region, is that many of them are returning, some of them are returning with families, and certainly indoctrinated. Who knows what they will be doing once they are back? We saw that ISIS operatives are not limiting their war in the Middle East, they are bringing the war in the form of terrorism, terrorist attacks in Europe, in North America, and in many other countries. It is something to be concerned about.

Also, organized crime. Organized crime started in the region and is becoming a real factor after 1991. At the beginning it was a way to fill in a vacuum, especially a vacuum in the security apparatus of some countries – in some countries more, in other countries less. And of course, there is always corruption, that was not a post-1991 phenomenon only, but it is certainly there. Organized crime is a concern also because it is more and more linked to extremism, terrorism, inter-ethnic tensions. Groups exchange funds, weapons, logistical support, etc.

Challenges are regional, challenges are transnational in the Balkans, and we have to follow the regional approach, but work has to start at home. It is important not to use the regional approach as an excuse to postpone or sidestep needed reforms in each and every country. The European integration and the criteria provided by the European Union are certainly important in this respect, but they are not a panacea. The work has to start at home and the element of ownership is extremely important here.

To overcome the shortcomings, we need to have solutions in a number of areas. Solutions that should be bilateral, trilateral, or wider region-level. And for that to be successful, we absolutely need to see the establishment and sedimentation of a culture of compromise and a culture of dialogue in the region. The reassuring factor that we see is that all nations want the same thing: future stability and prosperity, rule of law, democratic institutions. They see that as best being served within the Euro-Atlantic framework. There is a growing realization that current security challenges are common to all the countries, to all the people who live in the area. There is a growing regional cooperation to counter these threats. There are many regional groupings, some older and some newer. Just to give you an idea of growing regional cooperation when it comes to security, on December 18, 2017 there was a meeting in Thessaloniki with the chiefs of police of four countries. It was a Greek initiative going back a couple of years ago. The other three are the three northern immediate neighbors of Greece. This started as a

meeting of the foreign and interior ministers and it has become more specific now, with operational work at the levels of chiefs of police. We have challenges from migration also.

Ambassador Vasko Naumovski
*Embassy of the Republic of Macedonia*³

The few issues that are mentioned for this program on “Security Challenges in the Balkans: Quo Vadis?” include organized crime, Islamic terrorism, the refugee crisis, political turmoil, and economic instability. I would say that these are only additional issues to the existing concerns that have been alive in the Balkans for the past years or even decades. The issues that we are reviewing today are in fact only additional concerns that can destabilize the region. We do have concerns which have been security challenges, like inter-ethnic issues in the Balkans, religious issues, border disputes, certainly historical debates, etc. All these issues, as I said, are completing the picture of concerns in the Balkans.

Nevertheless, we should not look to the past and instead look to the future to see how to overcome these concerns and at the same time to deal with new threats. Islamic terrorism and the refugee crisis are probably the two issues that have defined our concerns in the past few years, especially the refugee crisis. We are all aware that more than one million refugees have passed through the Balkans in the past two years, although the Balkans and the countries in the Balkans have not been the final destination for them. But it was up to us to deal with this problem. Final destinations include Germany, Scandinavian countries, and other countries in Western Europe. Nevertheless, it was the countries from the Balkans, starting from Greece and all the other countries in the north, that had to deal with this issue.

I must say that especially in the first months, there was not enough awareness in Western Europe about this issue and not enough cooperation between the countries and their agencies and governments. After all, the reasons for these refugees coming into Europe were not part of the activities of the countries in the Balkans. Or, if you want to put it more directly, the Balkan countries did not create the mess in Syria and that region. Nevertheless, we are the ones who are suffering the consequences.

The refugee crisis brought to light different concerns, like the terrorism threat. Unfortunately, having the terrorist attacks in Nice, Brussels, and Paris, we were able to see that part of the individuals who were committing those attacks infiltrated into Europe through these waves of refugee crises, disguised as refugees. They were able to enter the European countries and later commit terrorist attacks and this only emphasized the need for greater cooperation between the security and counterterrorism of the European countries. We still need to stay alert and prepare for the potential crisis in the future.

Also, there is the threat of Islamic terrorism, as it was mentioned before. There is part of the population in the Balkans that is of Islamic religion and we do face a problem of so-called foreign fighters. So, citizens of the countries in the Balkans are fighting in the battlegrounds of the so-called Islamic State. It is a significant problem for us knowing that most of them have already returned or will return in the coming months or years. So that is why we need to increase the cooperation between the countries in

³ Presentation at an event on “Security Challenges in the Balkans: Quo Vadis?” held on December 19, 2017 at the International Law Institute.

this area, too, and be aware that our countries may also become targets of these terrorist attacks.

Also, I would like to just mention some other areas of concern which pose security challenges for our countries. Some of them were already mentioned in the previous discussions, like the influence of Russia and the potential to destabilize the region. Although, most of the Balkan countries have never been formally part of the Soviet bloc and have never had especially close relations with the former Soviet Union, there is a tradition of cultural links between Slavic countries. Unfortunately, some of our countries have been targeted in order to be destabilized. Very often the targets include areas of society that are able to destabilize the whole country or region. For our country, it was, for example, inter-ethnic relations or the political relations. Fortunately, we have been able to overcome these threats but we are not sure if they will stop in the future.

An issue that is related to this is the NATO enlargement and the still unclear role of NATO in the Balkan, or if you want to say also globally. So the hesitation of NATO for the enlargement process and also the current process of the European Union enlargement, which is not existing in the past years. The European Union has even renamed its own commissioner which used to be named Enlargement Commissioner and now it is called Commissioner for Enlargement Negotiations. Meaning that we can negotiate for enlargement, but there is no enlargement. And until the end of the current European Union Commission term, there will be no enlargement for new member states. So, it creates additional frustration for the people in the nations of the Balkans knowing that the European or the Euro-Atlantic future is not fully secured. And it is also creates an atmosphere where other centers of influence may be invited to come into the region.

The rise of nationalism, which is still another concern, is not only a problem for the countries of the Balkans, it is a problem for Europe in general. But, given the history and traditions in the Balkans, it is always something that is a continuous threat for our region. It is often said that the Balkans are producing more history than we can consume. So we do have history for export. Very often historical disputes have the potential to create instability in the whole region. And if you look at the bigger picture, the European picture, we see a rise of nationalism and extreme right-wing political parties in many European countries.

It was somewhere in the mid-1990s where some of the Western European academics were trying to create a process in order to Europeanize the Balkans, before Europe is Balkanized. I am afraid that leaving the Balkans outside the European Union and NATO for too long, not only creates a potential to create new instabilities in the region, but also spreads the “disease” to other countries in Europe.

So, overall it is a picture of different challenges, most of them related to the security. But I would say that with greater cooperation between the governments in the region, greater involvement of the European Union and NATO, and greater involvement of the United States, we will be able to overcome these challenges. The role of the USA has varied in the past decade, unlike the period in the 1990s where we were able to see clear involvement of the United States in the region. In the last decade we are not seeing much of it as if the U.S. has delegated this responsibility to the Europeans.

Professor David Kanin

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First, I would suggest that the interventions from outsiders affecting the Balkans since the wars of the 1990s are anything but unprecedented. The Balkan region has been, is, and will continue to be subject to intrusion by stronger powers. The enforcement by force of the priorities and ideologies of those powers is central to the history of the region.

In that context, there are a couple of myths that have grown about the Balkans.

One is that it is an area of primordial ethnic hatred and dispute, whether the issue is Serbian-Albanian, Serbian-Croatian, or involves Macedonians, Bulgarians, and Greeks – take your pick. The idea is that they have been engaged in bloody identity-based disputes forever. This throws everything backwards and posits some sort of basic operating condition. I would suggest that all of the conflicts involving the various nationalities are problems of modernity that date from the late 18th century. Again, interventions by outside powers related to and affected by these conflicts are not unprecedented. The problems around these issues remain unsettled, no matter Western declarative insistence on the existence of “final statues.”

A second myth holds a mirror to the first. This is the idea that the Balkans is an area where there exists a tradition of multi-ethnic cooperation that from time to time has been tarnished by the advent of ill-intentioned leadership. Bad actors – Slobodan Milošević for example – for a time threatened or destroyed elements of this cooperation, but international stewardship now is helping reestablish it. This myth, in my view, comes partly from a misunderstanding of the millet system, which has already been mentioned. The Ottoman Empire’s management of its non-Muslim communities enabled parallel economic, social, and cultural communities organized by religious authorities who had much say over cultural, educational, political, and even tax policy – not just religion. So communities developed in parallel; people of different faiths might live next to each other but they often had separate means of securing their resources and security. This baseline condition survives to this day and fundamentally defines the trust networks that have so far successfully thwarted western policy prescriptions and academic orthodoxy.

A third myth, more centrally concerned with the current outsiders who have imposed themselves on the region, is that there exists a universal applicability of western institutions, democracy, and law that produces transparency, good governance, and, of course, democracy. This system supposedly is universally applicable. The problem is to enable the region to develop mature Western-style institutions. This myth is part of a global teleology, a belief in a purposeful democratic endpoint to political and social development. This involves a caricature of Western institutions and their history. The current imposition of a supposed Euro-Atlantic answer to everything serves as a means of work avoidance ensuring there is no consideration of the weaknesses of Western institutions and the possibility of different approaches to Balkan problems.

⁴ Presentation at an event on “Security Challenges in the Balkans: Quo Vadis?” held on December 19, 2017 at the International Law Institute.

One element of this involves the point that was raised before regarding organized crime and corruption. We use these terms to talk about the bad things that undermine transparency, reconciliation, rule of law and other slogans we use to underscore what we claim must happen in the region. The epithets of “corruption” and “organized crime” represent phenomena that are subsets of a general informality that is opaque, sometimes violent but necessary. People engage with informal economic and security organizations to protect themselves when they realize that formal political structures cannot or will not perform those functions. In the Balkans – but not just the Balkans – this is an indelible condition.

There exists work on this topic regarding Central Asia that is better than anything I have read on the Balkans, perhaps because the former region has suffered less imposition of Western teleology than has the Balkans. Anthropologists are researching the relationship between formal government and economics and informal activities that they recognize are strengths of supposedly weak states. I can provide references to anyone interested in this work.

An issue related to this involves something that is not a myth, but rather a central condition in the Balkans – the bedrock difficulties of transportation and communication. In this region, whoever controls placement and construction of roads, pipelines, and other infrastructure developments, becomes stronger than those who do not benefit from these physical development projects that development. These elements of opaque informality central to those projects will continue to be important.

It is true that the Balkans suffer from less instability now than in the 1990s, but that is a very low bar. It is worth remembering the optimistic claims about how things have been getting better coming from Western voices during the Congress of Berlin, the Cold War and since. During the 1980s, some Western practitioners and academics were confident that things would “continue” to get better in the Balkans just before Yugoslavia collapsed. So, yes, things are less unstable now but – as it has been pointed out already – dangers still exist. We will not see the 1990s again; the next set of problems will be different. I do not know how they will look, but basic structural instability will persist. This is true in particular in Bosnia, which is not a subject for today but on people’s minds, in Kosovo, also not a subject today but also on people’s minds, and regarding the issue of Macedonia, which is represented very well here today.

There is more optimism right now regarding the issue of Macedonia’s name than has been the case for many years. In my view, it is important that this gets settled next year, largely because of rising expectations.

More generally, today’s discussion reflects a fluidity regarding exactly who is in the Balkans and who is not. During the Cold War, for us in the U.S. Greece was not in the Balkans. It was in NATO and the Western Alliance, as was Turkey. The term “Balkans” itself was more of a geographic expression than a strategic marker because of the Soviet-American division of Europe and the existence of Yugoslavia. The collapse of Yugoslavia is a strategic loss, given the partitioned space that has replaced it. Those developments have brought “the Balkans” back as a geostrategic concept.

Since the end of the Yugoslav federation Croatia has gotten out of “the Balkans.” It is in the EU now, as is Slovenia. What Hans-Dietrich Genscher wanted to happen has happened. Croatia and Slovenia can say they have always been Central Europeans.

Greece, meanwhile, is back in the Balkans, not just because of the name issue but because the Cold War is over and Athens has engaged in Balkan issues, often in a positive manner. Greek investment in Macedonia was one of the things holding it together in the 1990s, even with the dispute over the name. Even during the financial crisis of 2008 and after, things did not entirely fall apart in Macedonia or in Bulgaria, in part due to Greek investment.

If there is to be a solution to the Balkans’ chronic problems, it will be regional, not Euro-Atlantic. I do not believe that membership in the EU will solve any of the issues raised today.

In part, this is because the issues of identity that were settled for much of the rest of Europe in 1945 were not settled in the Balkans. Let us remember there is another myth about Europe. The story told is that Europe used to be the great powerhouse of the planet. Everyone had to listen to Europeans because they were strong. Then this Europe destroyed itself in the 20th century. After 1945 it had to deal with its new smallness, with its being dwarfed by the giants on its flanks. Europe’s surviving elites created a new myth that, having learned their lesson, Europeans now were wise and humane. The promised to help those they once ruled to avoid Europe’s mistakes. The message was that everyone still had to listen to the Europeans who now had become so evolved. The Europeans created courts to try human rights violators and otherwise adjudicate and express Europe’s righteousness. I do not believe these courts or other elements of “Europe’s” self-celebration have not contributed to reconciliation in the region. They will not provide solutions to conflicts that simmer just below the surface of an apparently stable Balkan present.

I do believe there is possibility for improved security and economic and political relationships in the region if these come from people in the region. There have been notions of a possible Balkan federation since a proposed by Serbia’s King Alexander Obrenović in the 1860s. Tito and Georgi Dimitrov discussed something like this in the 1940s. Serbia’s President Alexander Vucic recently has articulated a vague proposal for regional consultations and some sort of an arrangement among Balkan countries. I hope this idea leads to more serious discussions, and that folks in the Balkans, will stop avoiding the hard work of constructing regional relationships that optimize the transportation, communication, economic, and social potential of the region. Unless solutions and conflict management come from the inside the Balkans it is not going to come.

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