

THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL ACTORS IN THE BALKANS.

Martin Sokolov, Analyst, Sofia Security Forum

In the end of the 90s and the first part of the 2000s the role of the international actors in the Balkans was immense but afterwards the approach of *regional ownership* was adopted which reflected their changing role. This itself emphasizes the fact that the relevance of an international actor in a given state or region is not a constant variable. Rather, its importance is determined in the context of *the day*; specifically, the urgent challenges.

The most pressing issues ahead of the Balkans today, much like in the rest of Europe, are terrorism, radicalization, and the migration crisis. Thus, the actors to which the most attention is to be devoted to are the European Union, NATO, the United States, Russia, Turkey, and, to a certain extent, China. These are the actors that have the highest potential for molding the current international environment and, by extension, the way in which the Balkans can adopt and cope with the challenges they are faced with.

The European Union is the actor with the strongest influence in the region as membership offers financial and economic prosperity, and political development. The truth of the matter is that the EU's power of attraction and promise of membership is its strongest tool to influence separate countries or an entire region as a whole. Regrettably, the enlargement process of the Union has come to a halt

for the foreseeable future and has, in this manner, also stalled reforms in some countries.

There are several factors behind this issue. Some of them are related to internal for the EU's processes such as the ongoing identity crisis – is the union a *superstate*, just a single market, a federation, or something other. This, taken together with the fact that the Union has always faced certain difficulties in coming to common decisions, has also led to signs of renationalization. Moreover, the financial and economic issues, and the Brexit have not contributed in a positive manner. When one also adds the stoppers for accessions among Balkan states themselves, the enlargement prospects become only bleaker.

Nevertheless, regardless of membership, when addressing the challenges of radicalization, terrorism, and the migration crisis in the Balkans, it is to be emphasized that it is the EU that has the highest potential and biggest capabilities to cope with them. This is especially important when it is taken into consideration that it is *de facto* the Balkans that are experiencing the most malevolent aspects of the migration crisis. They are not only faced with the financial, economic, and political setbacks, but also with the risk of relations between them to deteriorate.

Thus, it is vital that the region as a whole insists on a comprehensive approach from the EU and not allow for the Western Balkans to become capsulated or a buffer zone between Europe and the sources of the migrants. This will not only

be devastating for the region but will also become a ticking time-bomb for the Union.

It is essential that the EU takes the leadership role in resolving the challenges that the European countries, particularly the Balkans, are faced with. The migration crisis especially needs to be seen and understood as an objective and long-term problem ahead of the Union and the continent. Therefore, it is important that the solution comes from shared EU policies, which need to be supported by the non-member states in the region. It is nothing more than wishful thinking that countries can fend for themselves in the current situation.

A good example of a shared EU policy is the recent creation of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency. Its aim is to control and even possibly reduce the influx of migrants coming to Europe.

Nevertheless, stopping migrants at the borders is not a solution to the problem. First of all, it is impossible to reduce their number to zero; regardless of the time and situation, some will always find a reason and a way to get into the EU illegally. Secondly, merely stopping them at the borders does not resolve the migration crisis. Many have already entered Europe and more will sooner or later also enter. This is why it is vital that the EU relocates on a quota basis the migrants across member states and monitor them so as to prevent *ghettoization* of migrant communities. If the Union is to address the crisis in an effective manner it needs to assure their successful integration.

On the topic of radicalization and foreign fighters, there is intelligence data that the highest number of foreign fighters *per capita* fighting in the ranks of DEASH are in fact from the Balkans. It is vital that the factors that pushed them to join ISIS are properly analyzed and understood. These factors can be both economic and social such as the radicalization of Islam and the Islamization of radicalism.

All European countries are secular – religion is separated from politics. However, this has also led to the situation in which what is preached by Imams is overlooked. This has permitted some to preach violent radicalism and recruit on behalf of DAESH. Countries need to cooperate with the Muslim communities so as to prevent radicalization. Nevertheless, there are also people who are looking for an outlet of their extremism and ultimately find it convenient to merely put the *veil* of Islam just so that they can garnish more attention to their deeds.

Furthermore, with the achievements of the international coalition against DAESH led by the US it is to be expected that some of the foreign fighters will return to their countries of origin. The pressing question is what to do with them; are they to be accepted with open arms; treated as criminals and isolated; or monitored and hopefully reintegrated into society? There is no doubt that some will return traumatized from what they have seen and, possibly, committed and have understood the error of their way. However, undoubtedly there will also be those who will seek to carry on the fight on European soil.

This can only be resolved through cooperation not only with the EU, but also with the United States, and NATO. Through information sharing and the exchange of good practices not only will the issues of radicalization and countering terrorism be addressed, but also associated ones such as organized crime and human trafficking.

The importance of NATO for the Balkans is no less important than that of the EU as the Alliance continues to bring about stability through either membership, or partnerships. Alas, much like the EU, its enlargement will almost certainly come to a halt after Montenegro becomes a member in April of 2017. Moreover, after the Warsaw Summit it became evident that NATO is focusing predominantly on the security of its current members and the threats emanating from the East.

Nevertheless, the Alliance can still play an important role in managing the migration crisis as demonstrated less than a month ago. After the meeting of the Defense Ministers, NATO decided to launch Operation Sea Guardian which, among other tasks, will also aid the EU's Operation Sophia in fighting human trafficking.

In addressing the challenges of radicalization, terrorism, and the migrant crisis in the Balkans the role of the US in not to be overlooked. As stated earlier, Washington is leading a coalition against ISIS and, thus, the United States can play a major role in stabilizing the source of the migrants, which in turn will reduce their influx to Europe. However, there are still many uncertainties

regarding how the coalition will address the situation in Syria and how cooperation with Russia on the matter will develop. What is certain is that it will in any case impact the Balkans.

Furthermore, through partnerships with the US, Balkan states can engage in the exchange of good practices with regards to radicalization, countering terrorism, and fighting organized crime. The United States has one of the best track records of countering terrorism since the September 11 attacks. Like the EU and NATO, the US can only benefit from a stable Balkan region.

An active actor in the region that does not benefit from stable and Western-oriented Balkan states is Russia. When analyzing Moscow's role and influence in the region it is to be done so in the context of the Kremlin's goal to reclaim its position as a Global Power. This can be seen in Russia's aspirations in the Black Sea region, the Middle East, and the Balkans. As all Balkan states have stated their intentions for either EU or NATO membership, or in both organizations, Moscow's impact is to be regarded as destructive.

To increase its influence in the Balkans Russia is using hybrid warfare, media outlets, strategic communication, emphasizes common Slavic roots and religion, and is also utilizing its dominant role in the energy market. In non-member states, Moscow can directly challenge EU and NATO influence. In member-states the Kremlin is deploying the same means and methods so as to cause tensions which can lead to the election of anti-Western and pro-Russian government that can

challenge EU and NATO unity. Furthermore, this could also lead to the removal of the financial sanction placed on Russia after the annexation of Crimea.

An alarming new development of Russia's power play in the region is the formation of paramilitary organizations. Those are people who have acquired firepower and have supposedly self-organized themselves in order to protect their religion, traditions, and Slavic culture not only from the migrants but also from the influence of the 'eroded' West. This is an emerging challenge which is the product of persistent Russian policies in the region. As such it not only has to be monitored but also addressed. Such organizations have already formed in Bulgaria, Serbia, and Montenegro. Russia is exploiting the ongoing crisis in the Balkans, in Europe, and in the EU; every current challenge that the Balkans is faced with is a welcomed opportunity for the Kremlin.

On the topic of international actors in the Balkans the role of Turkey is also not be overlooked. While the country is part of the region, its impact and influence transcend it. From a purely geographical perspective Turkey is part of the migrants' way to Europe which bestows it with a vital role in managing their influx to the continent. This is why it is of great importance for both the Balkan states and the EU to maintain a constructive dialogue with Ankara.

Nevertheless, there are two main issues which are uncertain how they will develop in the near future and what their impact will be. Firstly, while Turkey is a NATO member and has been openly aspiring for EU accession for almost two decades,

its relationship with Moscow can change the political environment in the region. As stated Russia is utilizing a wide variety of tools to influence the Balkans, with the plans for Turkish Stream and the *renewed* friendship between Presidents Erdogan and Putin it is uncertain what this will mean for the Balkan states. Secondly, there is the deal between Brussels and Ankara to exchange Syrian for non-Syrian refugees. While the difficulties in implementing this deal are widely discussed, what is not a popular topic are the difficulties ahead of Turkey. The country is finding it difficult to keep track of the around 3 million refugees in the state as it is. Moreover, Turkey is also facing troubles with integrating them with many refusing to learn Turkish and send their children to school.

It is also to be stressed that even if the deal between the EU and Turkey goes through it is not a solution. It will neither stabilize the source of the migrants, nor insure their successful integration, or prevent radicalization and terrorism. The deal will only provide some time and be a stop-gap solution.

Albeit not directly related to the challenges of radicalization, terrorism, or the migration crisis a brief analysis of China's role in the Balkans should be offered. While it is often seen as an emerging actor in the region, China has had close relations with some countries as early as 1978. However, with the turn of the century its growing economy and aspirations increased its relevance.

Beijing's role is predominantly an economic one as it is willing to invest in ventures which are seen as risky by Western companies such as certain energy

projects, infrastructure, machinery, and rail and maritime transport. Moreover, some of its banks offer loans for such projects with virtually no interest rates which makes them very appealing to work with.

The Balkans are important to China for three major reasons. First, the region offers new markets for China with decent potential. Second, if Beijing fulfills its ambitions to resurrect the *Silk Road* strong presence in the Balkans will also secure it a dominant role in the *road*. Third, there is no vacuum in international relations; with the EU unwilling to further enlarge in the Balkans in the foreseeable future it is only logical that other actors will take advantage of this opportunity. If China increases its presence and enhances its role in the Balkans it will gain leverage over Brussels in future negotiations. This will also in turn strengthen its position as a Global Power; something which Beijing has openly been striving for in recent decades.

In conclusion, the Balkans have always been of strategic and geopolitical importance for international actors. For some it is important that the Balkans are stable while for others it is in fact the region's instability that is beneficial. This is, of course, in the context of the day and the aspirations of the international actors. Nevertheless, with the current challenges – radicalization, terrorism, and the migration crisis - it is essential that the Balkan states do not allow themselves to be capsulized and become a buffer zone between the EU, the Middle East, and

Russia. They need to voice their concerns and state their cases in unity while at the same time support shared EU policies.

The Balkan countries need to coalesce around the idea of accession and pursue it together. This is especially important in a time when nationalist and populist ideas are becoming louder and more frequent. We saw what nationalism did to the Balkans in the 90s; it is difficult to imagine it can offer something better this time around.