Fragilities and Security Challenges of Western Balkan Countries

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Abstract:

Western Balkan countries share not only a common past but also similar realities regarding political conditions and security challenges. The region is at crossroads between internal transition, security issues, and constant pressure regarding policies of conditionality that EU has set while the EU enlargement portfolio is on hold, for another five year period of time. It seems like the region is constantly shrinking under its own shelter. Despite a common future toward the EU, the Western Balkan region is also dealing with persistent security issues, while old and new conflicts come to surface from time to time.

Taking in to consideration the Albanian case the article first examines the political, social and economic challenges, (focusing more on Copenhagen Criteria) that still remain as major obstacles for the EU membership of these countries. Second, what are the most concerning security issues in the WB and their impact in the deterioration of the situation?

Key words: WB Integration challenges, WB political conditions, security challenges, WB domestic stagnations

Introduction

Western Balkan countries share a common past in many aspects. Although each of these countries deals with individual

domestic issues, and pace on speed of reforms, they face the same issues regarding the Copenhagen Criteria and have to move quickly regarding the fulfillment of these criteria. Beside harsh ethnic conflicts, new and old nationalist behaviors and divergences, these countries inherited from old political regimes strong doses of anarchy, which remain still as main obstacles for the modernization and democratization process of these countries. This region beside the bitter past made of conflicts, seems to lose from time to time a steady commitment approach to overcoming the legacies of the past and finding solutions for the disputes. On the other hand, it seems like the European Union get involved when the friction between the parties is really aggravated. The Komanovo Case in Macedonia showed again that friction and conflicts in the Balkan region can easily be revived. Moreover, it remains to be seen how the refugee crises will further evolve in the EU, if there will be any kind of restriction regarding transit borders in any of EU countries (namely Central and Western Europe and Scandinavian countries), where hundreds and thousands of refugees mostly from Syria and Iraq are headed to and what impact any deterioration of this situation will bring in the Western Balkans which has been a transit point for these refugees. Western Balkans have made significant strides forward under the transformative power of the EU until now, but they are still lagging behind due to their domestic stagnations and regional security challenges. Moreover, it remains to be seen if there will be a steady continuous support and engagement for the next years now that the enlargement process has lost a "pro-active approach" (Vejdova 2013;27) and is manifesting an incremental enlargement fatigue. There are implications to consider from all these recent developments because "If there is stagnation in the democratic reform process or in the EU's pro-active approach then there is a danger of backsliding and standstill in the hard work of change and reforms."(Ibid) Besides this, a slow down on reforms and EU engagement process may contribute to the amplification of the security challenges that the WB faces,

namely terrorism, drug trafficking, organized crime, ethnic conflicts, money laundering etc.. It is essential to have an individual but also common regional approach to fight these phenomena since "the region is a set of communicating vessels and all processes whether positive or negative reverberate throughout the whole of the region."(Ibid) Taking this fact in to consideration, it is not by coincidence that democratic climate is weak and manifested in domestic stagnation and slow drift in all of these countries.

Furthermore, nowadays security issues are interconnected and have significantly expanded as phenomena "The world has seen an alarming rise in what we call "transnational threats" – those that emanate less from confrontations between states, but from terrorism, organized crime, smuggling of arms and drugs, trafficking in human beings, cyber-crime."(Zannier 2012;1) WB region is also dealing with these kind of transnational threats which have been heightening as a result of long transition processes and as tension between great powers is inextricably linked and reflected in the regions and states related to them.

The article aims to present in general the current affairs and issues in the WB region. The main objective in the first section of this paper is to outline the internal domestic issues where the WB region remains still trapped, taking in to account the Albanian case. The following sections focus on the security issues which continue to evolve due to unfinished transitions, slow integration reforms, informality and lack of democratization. Finally the conclusion part will summarize some of the above mentioned challenges as well as some recommendations related to the security issues.

The Western Balkans trapped in Stagnation and transition processes: The Albanian Case

Western Balkans remains still under a transformative process between back and forth strides toward EU integration process.

Countries of this region seem to lose a steady commitment on continuous reform and insufficient determination to finish the transformation process in order to gain EU membership. After the 1999s, it was expected more progress to be made, but the situation right now reveals more threats and challenges than opportunities.[1] Admittedly, from a general perspective one can notice that all Western Balkan countries face more or less similar issues and challenges related to Copenhagen political criteria but in comparison to each other they have their own speed on reforms and other additional internal specific issues. When analyzing Western Balkan states as separate cases one is not able to have a clear understanding whether an internal issue in one state has a spill-over effect to the neighboring one and then to the whole region, or is the weak democratic climate in all of these states that make them face more or less similar political issues, or maybe is both of them. Examining the Albanian case separately, one can notice how similar the cases of WB countries with each-other are.

Albania has been systematically dealing with corruption since there is not yet a notable reform progress made on democratization of the institutions. *"According to the Transparency International, corruption in Albania within the public sector remains one of the country's biggest challenges, particularly in areas such as political parties, health, and justice systems. The low wages, the social acceptance of bribery and the narrow social networks make difficult the task of combating corruption among police, judges and customs officials. Corruption is also closely interlinked with organized crime with many of the senior state officials being involved in smuggling, contraband, tax evasions and land grabbing. (Nence 2013)"*

Although a Judicial Reform Strategy is in progress since 2011, Albania still lacks rule of law, poor performance and liability in judicial institutions and corruption in judiciary system. Moreover, it has been since the beginning a process very much debated for lacking transparency, comprehensive

inclusion and consensus. "Albania's ruling parties and the opposition remain divided on important judicial changes, intended to curb political influence on the judiciary and help the country's EU accession"(Mejdini 2015), while some other local analysts express skepticism about the results of this judicial reform. The major problem in the judiciary system is again the corruption. In an interview for the Albanian Daily news the German Ambassador to Tirana Mr. Hellmut Hoffmann comments on judicial reform that *"when the European Union member states say that there is a problem with corruption in the judiciary, their point is not so much that you don't have the right laws or that the laws are not perfect. Their real concern is that the existing laws are not applied in the right way because too many judges are corrupt. This is the heart of the problem."(Hoffmann 2015)*

Decriminalization of the Parliament is another major challenge or mission to accomplish in Albania. Some Politicians with criminal records amidst Albanian political parties has been a breaking issue recently. Head of Venetian Commission during a recent visit in Tirana declared: *"Albanian parliament should be a place of constructive debate. On this key institution exists the weight of a doubt and you need to escape from it, it should be reached what is called decriminalization. A legal reflection on this matter is very urgent for Albania and the Venice Commission is ready to help."(Buquicchio 2015)*

The political class seems not fully committed to tackle or free itself from this phenomenon, regardless of persistent calls from the international factor about this issue.

Another issue which needed to be solved many years ago as the project on the opening of communist files is still on hold. In comparison to other communist countries which get rid of this matter years ago, Albania continues to delay also this process. This is still an obstacle in shedding light on the activity of regime collaborators or security service persons from communist period that might still be in some official position or might have probable links with government officials that are in

power. The completion of this project would help to tackle the old problems inherited from the past, old forms of political regimes and would finally bring transparency and hopes that democracy is a process that is maturing in the country. Other current issues that Albania is dealing with are informality, conflicting governance between the political parties and media freedom.

Informality has had a corrosive effect on the economy of Albania for many years. The results of informality for 25 years were seen in unemployment rates, decrease in economic growth and lack of economic stability. Political dialogue still remains a challenging issue for Albanian political forces. The relations between the political forces need further improvement and consensus in finding less conflictual ways to move ahead towards reforms. Media freedom in Albania is still characterized by informality, lacking freedom of thought, fair media competition in the market and misinformation.

What is differing in the other WB countries regarding these challenges mentioned in the Albanian case is only the intensity of these phenomena and their own internal peculiarities in addition. Furthermore issues like the normalization process between Belgrade and Pristina and name issue between Macedonia and Greece require great efforts and attention to find compromise for the benefit of good relations between the countries and good regional climate. "If Serbia and Kosovo do not find a solution to their relations (and the only solution is a clear European perspective for both), rising ethnic and religious tensions may explode with unpredictable consequences for the wider surroundings."(Božinovic 2015)

Unrest time in the Balkans; the persistent security challenges continue to heighten

The Western Balkan region is not characterized only by ethnic division and conflicts. Actually, the ethnic groups, despite their differences, are brought together for criminal purposes. This

region has been systematically dealing with organized crime, drug trafficking, money laundering, and finally terrorism is now increasingly finding free ground for action there. The intensity of the criminal activities has increased in the recent years due to "the fall of strong border defenses and controls as well as the virtual collapse of police forces and even of any central authority, the entire region opened up to the forces of lawlessness. Indeed, criminal organizations co-opted not only political but also law enforcement officials". (Binder 2002) Throughout the years, the Balkan countries served as convenient transit point for distribution of various narcotics. They have not only served as transit points or transit corridors but also recently they have been cultivating cannabis in particular. *"Albania, apart from being on the heroin transit route, is also an important cannabis producer for markets in Europe. The cultivation is largely carried out in the more remote mountain regions of the country that the government has difficulty accessing, with the most likely final destinations being Italy and Greece."(Likmeta 2010)* This trend is upgrading these countries from cultivating ones into ones able to store what they are producing or cultivating, more over "domestic consumption of drugs is growing and the drugs that are transited through the region are fueling the growth."(Ibid) In Albanian case, although the international calls and aids and several initiatives carried out by the governments to fight this phenomena, still it's a notable occurrence of this kind of trafficking. According to US State Department International Strategy for Narcotics Control report, released on 2010 *"Albania, Bulgaria, Kosovo, Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are used by narcotics traffickers to move Afghan heroin from Central Asia to destinations around Western Europe. To a lesser extent Macedonia, Romania and Montenegro are also considered as staging posts for traffickers" (Ibid)*

As long as there are weak institutions and endemic corruption not only Albania but the whole region will continue to remain vulnerable to drug trafficking trends and also to

other criminal activities. Terrorism is a phenomenon already widespread across the globe. The Balkan region has been a crossroad meeting place for international actors and players, including terrorist organizations. The ongoing transition processes and economical difficulties continue to open the possibility to these phenomena in the region. The Balkans possesses potential for criminal activities, recruitment, terrorist activities and the possibility to raise funds for terrorist purposes and activities through money laundering. Although "the ongoing battle for the hearts and minds of Balkan Muslims for radical causes is not new – it started long ago, with the fall of Yugoslavia (Vićić 2014) , there is a notable growing influence of Al-Qaida and recently of the ISIS organization in the region. *"More than 330 Bosnian citizens, 50 to 90 Albanians and 80 to 150 Kosovars, in addition to a number of fighters from Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro, went to Syria and Iraq to fight. These are mostly people who come from the social, economic and even geographical margins, with no possibility for work or abilities, with limited education, who believe they are fulfilling their holy mission there," explained Vlado Azonović, professor at the Sarajevo Faculty of Political Science and expert on terrorism issues." (Vićić 2014)* In addition, the refugee crisis that has plagued Europe but also WB as a transit point has triggered the fear that potential terrorism may grow out from this Syria and Iraqi flow of refugees, since WB region serves as a trampoline zone for Islam extremists heading toward west. *"But Europe already has a terrorism problem, and the bigger danger is that radicalized European Muslims will transform the Syrian refugee community into a more violent one over time. The actual security risks now are low, but the potential ones are considerable if the refugee crisis is handled poorly."(Byman 2015)* The Paris attacks might spring further debates and criticism on *"the continent's system of open borders"(Troianovski & Walker 2015)* or "open door refugee policy" (Ibid) and *"the security concerns raised by the attacks could put the Schengen open- borders policy under pressure in the long term,*

given the likely intensified criticism coming not only from radical populist parties but also moderate center-right forces"(Ibid) If all these debates will drive to border closures decisions across European nations *"the result could be a rapid buildup of migrants in Europe's frontier countries, Greece and Italy, as well as in Balkan countries. Countries' lack of resources for accommodating migrants in wintry weather could lead to disaster and humanitarian crises on top of everything else, analysts warn."*(Ibid)

The latest Kumanovo crises in Macedonia showed again that peace in the Western Balkans is still a fragile process and unfinished business. In the case of Macedonia, the recent crisis originates from the non-compliance to the Ohrid agreement. Since the time of its conception, its potential for a better functioning of a multi-ethnic state never showed in practice, or has been abused with. Political forces have shown since the start of its implementation a predisposition to avoid fulfilling the agreement obligations in detriment of the agreement.

"What is happening in Kumanovo is an attempt of the authorities in Macedonia to divert public opinion and create stress among people through artificial ethnic conflict*; "The mere coincidence is extremely improbable. The attempt to present things that at the moment the Albanians in Macedonia seek to divide from the state, as other observers put it, this is the wrong time for it," Professor. Pavlov[2] explained. In his words, the division in the Macedonian society is the fault of the government. According to this historian, what is happening in Macedonia is a result of a regime that has nothing to do with democracy." (Pavlov 2015)*

In another interview former Albanian Ambassador to Macedonia Mr. Arben Cejku stated: "I think, beyond what is being said by the media, we see clashes of multiple interests in Kumanovo, starting from the crime world (a crossroads which has seen criminal regional segments) and political conflicts between the two main parties. (Cejku 2015) The political class in power seems more vulnerable to such incidents, clashes and

friction in detriment to the whole region rather than performing an institutional good work in favor of cohesion among people and cooperation. On the other hand, the EU comes out with strong statements whenever friction breaks out and poses a risk for escalation, not only in the region but also beyond. Commissioner Hahn declared on the situation in Kumanovo:*"I urge the authorities and all political and community leaders to cooperate, to restore calm and fully investigate the events in an objective and transparent manner within the Law. Any further escalation must be avoided, not the least in the interest of the overall stability in the country."; (Hahn 2015)* Also, "The Latvian Presidency of the Council of the European Union has called on the authorities, as well as both government and community leaders, to work together to prevent any escalation of violence." (The Latvian presidency 2015) In case of WB countries a sustainable security regional environment "is necessary condition for effective domestic reform" (Cawthra & Luckham 2003:325) in all WB countries. Building "regional security organizations or multi-functional organizations" (Ibid) would help to harmonize actions and strategies and enhance multilateral cooperation. "Moreover, if reforms can be harmonized across countries constituting a "security complex", this can be an important confidence- and security-building measure."(Ibid)

Conclusion and Recommendations

Delays that have brought endless transitions seem to have waning hopes for the people of WB countries. Returning again to the EU membership, the main difficulties for the WB countries to gain it, lie in three main issues: 1.domestic change and reform, as democratization and modernization process moves slowly in the WB countries 2.Regional cooperation has been lacking until the recent years, taking into consideration "the fact that each country perceives such demands for cooperation with neighbors as a profound threat[3] because such

cooperation appears to be made as a precondition of membership of the EU and NATO" (Cauthra & Luckham 2003;296) and security challenges which will heighten in the future as long as there is stagnation on reforms and no clear perspective for EU membership of these countries. In fact, *"precise dates of enlargement are not as important as oversight and application of democratic practices and procedures in the region. Strengthening democracy is the best way to prevent these countries finding themselves caught between Western and non-Western values." (Božinovic 2015)*

The refugee crises pose potential threat for WB if borders around Europe will close up or any restriction entry on emigrants will follow on after the latest terrorist attack in Paris, France. Western Balkan would be too fragile to bear stockpiles of refugees and could be overwhelmed by this situation. Moreover, interstate relation could deteriorate and old or new conflicts may come to surface again. Meanwhile slow progress in reforms that are related to Copenhagen criteria on separate state level may jeopardize the whole region when it comes to common regional threats as organized crime, illicit trafficking, smuggling, money laundering, Islamic radicalism etc.

Corruption is an issue which has been systematically preventing stability, development of democratic and efficient institutions and a good economic climate in WB countries. This phenomenon has been eroding the resources available for the benefit of citizens and linking corrupted officials and governance to criminal operations, criminal alliances, conflict and gripping them to power.

Media environment in general is also a concerning issue in the WB states. *"The 2014 report from the US-based watchdog Freedom House has classified the Western Balkans as a region that saw a sharp deterioration in terms of freedom of the press. All the Balkan countries except Greece are classified as partly free in the freedom of the media index."(Erebara 2015)* The improvement of Media freedom requires great attention

because "media freedom and pluralism and the democratic social and political functioning of a state are mutually dependent." (European Parliament, Directorate B;72:2014) Finally, ongoing relations between WB and EU need to constantly be maintained in order to avoid the WB region stuck in the past. *"Many observers of Eastern Europe and Balkan history have long been aware of—that the same economic and political conditions persist there today as five hundred years ago: laws are not subject to enforcement, everything is negotiable and relative, and everyone interprets rules to their own advantage. And, again, this entire, chaotic and inherited system is often portrayed by the people of the Balkans as a talmesh-balmesh, a dish whose contents cannot be described. (Grumeza 2010:217)* For this reason in-depth monitoring ,assistance and constant relations are needed from the EU side, to make sure that WB countries could be able to achieve serious progress on reforms needed for EU accession.

Recommendation regarding some security issues

The Kumanovo case

The situation in Kumanovo should be reviewed and followed with great attention for the prevention of similar events in the future. The Kumanovo issue first appeared as a matter related to international terrorism, even with the ISIS organization and secondly as a criminal activity that sought to destabilize Macedonia. These insinuations were fabricated by pro-government opinions in order to legitimize this criminal event and distract attention from the domestic problems between the government and opposition. Then was "the Albanian factor" involved. The Albanian case is usually seen or featured under a "nationalist" optic because attracts more attention and is aimed to contribute to acquiring political capital, especially for the government.

There has been no official version from the investigative authorities so far, but despite this, the Macedonian factor on

their side should finally come to grips with some key questions, such as: How far or how much is the Albanian factor[4] in the Macedonian society integrated as a constituent factor? Until what point will the Albanians be discriminated as low society class citizens! Why has the Ohrid agreement not been applied in everyday life for more than 14 years? Answering these questions with transparency, mainly by the Macedonian factor and the further democratization of the Macedonian society in aspects of human rights and fundamental freedoms and also strengthening the rule of law can lead to social peace and democracy consolidation. In this respect, the Euro-Atlantic monitoring process may play a greater and influential role.

Terrorism in the WB

The Balkans represent a real potential threat for the development of terrorism for several reasons such as: 1) Rural populations with low levels of cultural and religious background and very poor economically can be easily reached and assisted by an intense propaganda by radical groups associated with humanitarian and financial aid. This can contribute to further development of the terrorism phenomenon. 2) Fragile democratic culture, low social emancipation and the weak function of the state, which has insufficient control over the territory and society, may favor the distribution and development of terrorism. The situation calls for the need to intervene in some aspects.

First: These countries should be assisted by the international community at the economic level, as well as in the democratization process in implementing real standards.

Second: These countries need to enhance collaboration between them on these issues, not only in the field of information exchange, but also in common activities such as conferences, groups of expert exchange and joint exercise in practice.

Third: These countries should be cautious in surveying and exerting internal control to groups coming from outside and

to groups that are inside despite the fact that they are separated from the state. Furthermore, the WB countries should strengthen the intelligence services and surveys with highly specialized and modern technology.

Fourth: Media, educational institutions, and non-governmental organizations have work to do in this regard to affect public opinion and raise awareness about this great international risk to which the whole global society is exposed.

Organized crime in the WB

The issue of organized crime is related to the lack of investigative journalism in the whole WB region in general. The development of investigative journalism requires an emancipated society. Investigative journalism is an indicator of the level of democracy in a country. In the Western Balkan countries case this will take time because the development of investigative journalism is a process slowly moving forward. One cannot imagine an independent and professional media, when some countries in the WB region are still lacking the standards of free elections. It is impossible to think of an independent media, when the elites and clan groups in power are constantly buying, bribing or owning these media. A country will definitely lack it as long as justice and law institution lack deep reform and are immersed in corruption. Further weakness or limitations to media freedom in general to the whole Balkan region states will not contribute in tackling groups and activities of organized crime, corruption, terrorism and issues like money laundering and narcotic trafficking activities.

"The problems facing the media and journalism involve various aspects of the social, political, legal and economic functioning of states, and efforts to improve the level of media freedom and pluralism need to take into account all of these aspects. Neglecting any of these areas creates loopholes in the overall efforts and strategies, which could undermine the sustainability of media freedom and the overall protection of

freedom of speech, access to information and public representation of the opinions of the different groups in a society.'(European Parliament, Directorate B;2014:72) This is a question of gradual development and maturity that comes with the democratization of the society, but fastening reforms in the WB countries case it would be of great help in fighting these phenomena, therefore, "further efforts should be made to evaluate the implementation of the legal framework, and especially its guarantees for sustainability in all countries on the path to EU accession. (ibid)

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Notes

[1] The Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe and later on the SAP-Stabilization and Association Pact marked a deeper engagement from EU side toward the WB region.
The policies of conditionality set by the EU as the main actor and process supervisor were expected to enhance the transformation process in the WB region in order to gain the EU membership which would eventually depend on each country own speed of reforms.
[2] Prof. Plamen Pavlov is a Bulgarian Academic. former chairman of the State Agency for Bulgarians Abroad (SABA)
[3] Significant cooperation has been lacking among Balkan states until the recent years, as they have been inheriting old hostilities from the past. After the breakup of Yugoslavia, followed the Kosovo issue, accepting it or not as an independent state, bilateral dispute over the name issue between Macedonia and Greece and some other nationalistic behaviors that are keen to happen from time to time. Although a Berlin Process is in
progress for the period 2014-2018, a framework which will unite the WB countries in their path toward integration to achieve additional progress in resolving bilateral issues, reforms and reconciliation process and overcome internal challenges still interstate relations are fragile.
[4] The term Albanian factor is often referred to Albanian state-building minority.