

Preventing the Unraveling of the Balkans Peace Agreements

Testimony

By

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Introduction

Recent news from the Balkans is alarming: demonstrator-initiated violence inside the Macedonian parliament, an attempted coup in Montenegro, harsh words between Serbia and Kosovo, a declared intention to hold an independence referendum in Bosnia's Republika Srpska. Fears of renewed violence are in the air. Is the Balkans returning to the now dimly recalled but brutal wars of the 1990s?

In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, the Balkans region suffered the violent breakup of former Yugoslavia, including wars in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo. In 1995, the United States led a NATO air intervention against Bosnian Serb forces and subsequent diplomatic negotiations at Dayton, Ohio that ended the more than three-year Bosnian war. After unsuccessful negotiations concerning Kosovo, NATO intervened again, this time against Serbia in 1999. In Macedonia, U.S. troops joined a successful UN preventive deployment in the early 1990s, and the U.S. and EU in tandem conducted, with NATO backing, a successful diplomatic negotiation to end an Albanian uprising in 2001.

This was the unipolar moment: Russia was weak, Europe operating on its own had failed, NATO was looking for its future role, the U.S. was strong and committed to defend what it regarded as universal human rights violated all too blatantly with ethnic cleansing, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and even genocide in the Balkans.

A decade or more of substantial progress in the Yugoslav successor states followed each of these interventions, due in part to explicit international community guidance and ample support. The EU in 2003 pledged "unequivocal support to the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries" and has backed the promise with major funding and extensive technical assistance. Slovenia entered the EU in 2004, Croatia in 2011. Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia are candidate countries currently negotiating membership, which will not occur before 2020 and perhaps not before 2025. Slovenia, Croatia, and Albania are NATO members. Montenegro soon will be.

The West-ward march of the Balkans has however now stalled, especially in Bosnia, Macedonia, Serbia, and Kosovo. Bosnia finds itself handicapped with a power-sharing constitution Americans wrote to end its war; it now prevents functional and efficient governance, while the leader of its "Serb entity" (Republika Srpska) is threatening an independence referendum that would infuriate the country's majority Bosniak Muslim population. Macedonia is suffering a profound years-long political crisis that has revealed gross abuses of power and aggravated interethnic tensions. Serbia is drifting away from its EU ambition towards Moscow's political and military orbit. Kosovo, still living under a regime of limited sovereignty, has both internal problems with its Serb population as well as issues with Belgrade. Kosovo's youthful population is proving vulnerable to extremist recruitment and pan-Albanian appeals inconsistent with the bargain Pristina made with the West at independence: it would not be able to join any other country.

External factors have greatly aggravated these problems. The United States has sought over the past decade to lower its commitments in the Balkans and pass the baton to Europe, which has greater interests in the Balkans and far stronger leverage to encourage political and economic reform in the region. But Brussels is distracted. The long recession in Europe following the global financial crisis of 2008, the Greek financial crisis that ensued, the flood of Middle Eastern migrants into Europe through the Balkans beginning in 2015, and the Brexit referendum in 2016 have soured EU attitudes on enlargement. EU credibility has diminished dramatically, as has its leverage over Balkan politicians who

see imminent threats to their hold on power from the reforms required for membership but no near-term prospect of joining the EU.

At the same time, Russia has greatly increased “hybrid warfare” efforts in the region, seeking to disrupt progress towards NATO and the EU. Moscow is especially active among more ethnically nationalist Orthodox Christians in Serbia, Macedonia, Bosnia, and Montenegro. It has established a logistics facility in Serbia in the guise of humanitarian center, it sponsored a coup attempt in Montenegro in 2016, it finances anti-NATO and anti-EU politicians and protests throughout the Balkans, it has armed and trained nationalist paramilitaries, and it has greatly increased its Russia Today and Sputnik propaganda efforts throughout the region. The results are palpable: interethnic tension has increased, especially in Macedonia and Bosnia, and Serbia is drifting away from its European ambitions. Russia could seek to repeat its successes in creating puppet secessionist regimes in Crimea and Donbas in Bosnia’s Republika Srpska, northern Kosovo, or even northern Montenegro.

The wars in the Middle East are also likely to affect the situation in the Balkans, where Islamic State and other recruitment of radicalized Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo has yielded small absolute numbers but relatively large percentages when compared with their Muslim populations, which otherwise are markedly pro-Western and specifically pro-American due to the 1990s interventions. Some Balkan extremists are now returning to the region, acting as charismatic magnets and propagators of extremist ideology that threatens the region’s democratic evolution.

The Contingencies

Large scale, long-duration conflict of the kind the Balkans experienced in the 1990s is no longer likely, because none of the Balkan countries has sufficiently malign leadership, political support, or (except for Serbia) military capabilities to sustain such efforts. Instability and shorter, more decisive military clashes, possibly using Russian trained and equipped paramilitary forces at least nominally not under state control, are more likely. The consequences could include ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity, challenges to existing state institutions, border changes, and further Muslim radicalization.

The main concern for the U.S. in the Balkans would be unraveling of the American-induced peace settlements in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Macedonia. All of them were based on the proposition that internal boundaries might be upgraded to international borders but no borders would be moved to accommodate ethnic differences. The five republics that seceded from former Yugoslavia have the same international borders as they had when they were part of the Yugoslav Federation. Only Serbia has a different border, because of Kosovo’s independence, which left the existing boundary between the autonomous province and Serbia proper in place but upgraded it to an international border. This border principle led to the formation of fragile states that were all expected with peace to transition to full-fledged democracy providing Western-style protection and rule of law to ethnic groups that happened to be numerical minorities.

While the sequence of events is unpredictable, events in any one of these still fragile states would likely precipitate problems in the other two. The region is interconnected: if Republika Srpska tries to leave Bosnia, Serbs in northern Kosovo will try to leave Kosovo and Albanians in southern Serbia will try to leave Serbia. If Macedonia is partitioned, its Albanians will want union with at least Kosovo if not also Albania and the Albanian-majority municipalities of southern Serbia, which would trigger partition of

Kosovo and of Bosnia. Moving borders to accommodate ethnic differences would thus open “Pandora’s box,” leading inevitably to ethnic cleansing aimed at moving everyone to the “right” side of the border.

In Bosnia, Republika Srpska’s president has promised an independence referendum in 2018. While international recognition is unlikely, withdrawal of Serb participation in Bosnian state institutions would paralyze them, as they are based on ethnic power-sharing that requires not only numerical majorities for decisions, but separate concurrence of ethnic caucuses. An independence referendum could precipitate a Bosniak military move to seize the northeastern town of Brcko, which links the two “wings” of Republika Srpska and is vital to its survival. Serbia would then have to decide whether and how to intervene (as it did in the 1990s with only a thin veneer of deniability) to sustain Republika Srpska.

Albanian rioting against Serbs in Kosovo, much like what occurred in 2004, could precipitate Serbian military intervention to protect the Serb-majority municipalities of the north, perhaps even with NATO concurrence. Serb provocations—like the train with nationalist slogans painted on it that tried to enter Kosovo earlier this year—could trigger an Albanian effort to seize northern Kosovo. The likelihood of these contingencies will greatly increase once NATO, which will not stay forever, decides to leave.

In Macedonia, Albanian or Kosovar paramilitaries like those who rebelled in 2001 (and appeared suddenly again in 2015) might seek union with Kosovo or Albania, generating pressure to repress the rebellion or to allow Macedonian paramilitary forces to respond. Skopje is the center of gravity for both Albanians and Macedonians, as it is the largest city in the country for both ethnic groups. Rioting or paramilitary clashes there could generate pressure for broader military responses.

While Montenegro, soon to be a NATO member, may seem out of danger, Russian efforts to destabilize the new Alliance member will continue. Moscow has backed Serbs concentrated in northern Montenegro who were loyal to Serbian strongman Slobodan Milosevic, resisted Montenegro’s independence, and opposed NATO membership. Moscow is also courting Bosniak politicians in Montenegro, encouraging their contacts with the Chechnan leadership.

None of these contingencies could be readily contained to one or even two countries without a massive commitment of international troops and resources. Prevention is the only viable option.

Warning indicators

Balkan politics is already flashing warning of possible future violent instability. Nationalist leadership is dominant in most of the region. Hate speech is common in Balkans media. Even if most people are primarily concerned with jobs and the economy, extremist Serbs, Albanians, and Macedonians make no secret of their loathing for each other and their willingness to return to violence, sometimes organizing militias or hate groups for the purpose. Some display intentionally provocative symbols and parade ostentatiously. Even a recent claim that Serbian, Croatian, Montenegrin, and Bosnian are dialects of the same language (a common view in the past) roused passionate nationalist objections. Anti-nationalists and human rights advocates are subjected to denunciation, harassment, petty violence, and worse.

In Bosnia, the president of Republika Srpska speaks openly of secession, while prominent Croats advocate a “third entity” that would revive the wartime para-state of Herzeg-Bosna, which aimed at eventual union with Croatia. Macedonia’s political crisis is due in part to an Albanian political platform written in Tirana under the tutelage of the Prime Minister of Albania. It would require Albania to be spoken throughout Macedonia, which is a practical and political impossibility. In Montenegro, the

Russian-sponsored coup attempt was the tip of the iceberg. Moscow is expending substantial resources supporting anti-NATO and anti-EU politicians there and elsewhere throughout the region. In Serbia, the President-elect who helped unveil the Montenegrin coup attempt and ran as a pro-EU candidate is hedging his bets by maintaining Belgrade's strong links to Moscow. In addition to the existing Russian facility near Nis, Moscow wants a training center in the northern province of Vojvodina. Relations between Serbia and Croatia are strained, with Belgrade buying more weapons from Russia to try to match Zagreb's enhanced NATO-compatible capabilities.

Additional warning indicators could include:

- Scheduling of an independence referendum in Republika Srpska
- More parading or exercises by armed paramilitaries of any ethnic group in any Balkan country
- Strengthening of pan-Albanian sentiment in Albania, Kosovo, or Macedonia
- Belgrade expanding cooperation with Russia
- Russian meddling in Balkan elections, especially in Montenegro and Macedonia
- Continued failure of Macedonia to form a new government
- Worsening of relations between Serbia and Croatia

Implications for U.S. interests

The Balkans are not a primary area of U.S. interests in the 2010s, but unraveling of the peace agreements there would nevertheless have a serious impact on U.S. interests, reflecting badly on its past achievements as well as its current global leadership role, and causing real harm to its interests in Europe and the Middle East.

The big losers in the Balkans would likely be Muslims, who already generate a disproportionate number of foreign fighters in the Middle East. Partition of Bosnia would create one or more non-viable Islamic republics, likely under Turkish or Iranian patronage. Already in the 1990s the U.S. was concerned about the possibility that such rump Islamic states would provide platforms for international terrorists. Concern should be much greater today. Partition of Kosovo would likely further radicalize some of its notably young, growing, and increasingly religious Albanian population, which is mostly Muslim, even if many Kosovars are no more than mildly observant.

Transnational organized crime already has a substantial foothold in the Balkans, where drugs, people, money, and weapons flow without any barriers among criminals of different ethnic groups. The states of the region have begun to implement serious law enforcement measures, as they all need to do to qualify for upgrades in their relationships with the EU. Instability in the region would dramatically reduce the restraints on organized crime and unleash a wave of trafficking that would be a major challenge to existing state structures as well as neighboring European allies of the U.S. Kleptocratic politicians throughout the Balkans would be enriched.

Russia is making major inroads in the Balkans, including through arms sales to Serbia. Instability in the Balkans would enable Russia to widen its foothold further among Christians, especially the Serb Orthodox, in the region. Moscow's influence would grow in Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Republika Srpska, while America's stock throughout the region would decline sharply. NATO, which still has troops in Kosovo and is regarded as a guarantor of Bosnia's territorial integrity (even though the troops there now are under EU command) would be exposed as a paper tiger. Moscow, which already

cites Kosovo's independence as a precedent for its behavior in Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova, would treat any future partitions in the Balkans as post-facto validation justifying Russian irredentism in Crimea, Donbas, South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Transnistria.

In addition to the NATO members in the Balkans, the U.S. has close and productive military relationships with Serbia, Kosovo, and Macedonia, which cooperate respectively with the Ohio, Iowa and Vermont National Guard contingents. The Macedonian army has fought under U.S. command in Afghanistan. Kosovo has no army yet but its lightly armed Kosovo Security Force (KSF) is mostly U.S. and British trained. The Iowa National Guard will help with the process of upgrading the KSF to an effective, NATO-eligible army. The Ohio National Guard connection is a major contribution to U.S. efforts to overcome past conflict with Serbia.

The United States still has more than 600 troops in the Balkans (mainly Kosovo) as well as U.S. citizens who are likely to number in the thousands, including aid workers as well as dual nationals. Any instability could put both civilians and troops at risk. Violence in the Balkans also has the potential to spread to Croatia, Albania, Greece, and Bulgaria, which are all NATO members, in addition to causing refugee flows into the EU and eventually into the U.S., where there are already substantial communities of Balkan origins, especially in New York, Ohio, Missouri and elsewhere. Congress, which played a strong role in encouraging the U.S. interventions in the 1990s, would likely be concerned with any serious widespread instability in the Balkans.

Preventive options

Primary responsibility for preventing the worst in the Balkans belongs to the EU, which has stronger carrots and sticks as well as more immediate geopolitical, economic, and cultural interests in the Balkans. The Europeans have launched a Bosnian initiative aimed at political and economic (not constitutional) reform, but the conditionality on which its implementation depends has been erratic. Brussels has also sponsored a dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo that has yielded concrete results and initially a much-improved atmosphere between their capitals, but there too implementation has lagged and major problems, especially Serbia's block on Kosovo joining the UN, remain. The U.S. has given ample support to the EU in its so far unsuccessful efforts to resolve Macedonia's ongoing political crisis, which has left the country without an effective government for two years.

None of these EU efforts has proven sufficient to compensate for the declining lure of EU membership. The EU has already given away many of its carrots: all the non-member states in the Balkans have Stabilization and Association Agreements that provide market access and ample funding, most have visa waiver programs, and several have EU candidate status. NATO membership, which in the past has proven a stepping stone towards EU membership, is currently blocked for Bosnia (by its internal politics), Kosovo (because it has no army yet), Macedonia (by Greece, which claims Macedonia's name and wants Skopje to give it up), and Serbia (which has not opted to aim for NATO membership).

Future options include:

Accelerate NATO and EU membership. Washington and Brussels could either remove obstacles to faster progress in EU and NATO accession or find other ways of increasing their impact on Balkan behavior. Montenegro's impending NATO accession is an important signal to the region that the door is not slammed shut, and NATO should continue to use its Partnership for Peace and Membership Action Plans

to good effect. The U.S. could give more resources and visibility to its National Guard cooperation with Balkan states. The EU may want to create a new category of “associate” membership or something similar that brings Balkan candidate countries further inside the Union’s decision-making process, without however the votes associated with full membership.

Develop and use better carrots and sticks. While the EU has exhausted many of its carrots, the U.S. has not. It could consider bilateral free trade agreements with Balkan countries as a reward for meeting NATO and EU requirements. Or Washington could encourage the non-EU Balkans countries to form a free trade area among themselves, which could then negotiate a free trade agreement with the U.S.

The U.S. Treasury has “designated” some Balkan individuals, blocking their access to the U.S. financial system and preventing them from traveling to the U.S. because of the obstacles they pose to peace, security, and democracy in the Balkans. While this may have little immediate practical impact, the symbolism is important and has seriously affected the political calculations of at least some of those so designated. The EU has not consistently followed suit. It is vital that the U.S. and Europe act jointly in the Balkans against recalcitrant Balkan political leaders and their cronies. It would be particularly useful to prevent those who finance them, often with the proceeds of corrupt behavior, from accessing the European banking system.

Beef up OSCE activities. The Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe still maintains a substantial pro-democracy network in Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia, and Macedonia. This network is vital to the free and fair conduct of elections. Its resources could be increased to ensure that it delivers the other democratization assistance that these countries require, particularly in the media space.

Improve relations among Balkan ethnic groups. In the more than 20 years since the end of the Bosnian war, little has been accomplished in improving people-to-people relations among ethnic groups in the Balkans. Transitional justice has focused on the activities of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, which has been slow and unconvincing in its pursuit of criminal justice despite more than 100 convictions. The Balkans could establish an official, region-wide truth and reconciliation effort like that proposed by the Commission for Recom, a regional nongovernmental organization that has documented war crimes and other violations of human rights.

Enhanced U.S. diplomatic efforts. In several Balkan countries there are distinct issues that might be resolved through enhanced U.S. diplomatic efforts, which could require appointment of a special envoy responsible for mediating and resolving key hot spots in cooperation with the EU, in particular in Macedonia, Kosovo, and Bosnia.

In Macedonia, the “name” controversy with Greece has caused a marked increase in ethnic tension between Albanians and Macedonians. U.S. pressure on both Greece and Macedonia to allow Macedonia into NATO as “The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” (as provided for in a 1995 Interim Agreement validated by the International Court of Justice in 2011) or as the Republic of Macedonia (its constitutional name) would require presidential-level engagement. Another possibility is to end the UN mediation effort, which has lasted more than 20 years and become unproductive, thus encouraging Athens and Skopje to deal directly with other on the issue.

In Bosnia, the U.S. needs to encourage the EU to be much stricter in requiring implementation of political and economic reforms. Washington could also encourage the Europeans to move their troops—now scattered in militarily insignificant numbers throughout Bosnia—to Brcko, signaling to both Serbs and Bosniaks that this center of gravity will not be allowed to fall to either. As Republika Srpska has let its plans for an independence referendum in 2018 be known, the U.S. and EU could prepare and publicize a vigorous planned response, including non-recognition and ineligibility of independent Republika Srpska, or any country it joins, for EU membership or loans from the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank.

In Kosovo, formation of the army required for NATO membership is stalled due to Serb opposition, which stems in part from Belgrade's concern about how the army might be used. The U.S. could help to resolve this quandary by urging Belgrade to accept Kosovo UN membership, in return for an army designed not for territorial defense but rather for deployment on international missions. Serbia has preferred to put off the question of acceptance of Kosovo's sovereignty until just before EU accession, but that is a mistake since all the bargaining power then will be on the EU's side, not Serbia's. The U.S. could consider threatening NATO withdrawal from Kosovo unless Belgrade permits Kosovo UN membership and both Belgrade and Pristina fully implement all their agreements.

In addition to these country-specific issues, enhanced U.S. diplomacy could focus on ensuring that the Balkans, parts of which are highly dependent on Russian natural gas imports, has alternative sources: Azeri, U.S. liquefied natural gas, or eventually Eastern Mediterranean gas from Cyprus or Israel.

Counter Russian troublemaking. The U.S. could use its influence with NATO members to block or hinder Russian air and ground access to the Balkans, especially to its "humanitarian" base in Serbia if that is used for nefarious purposes. It could also use a portion of democratization resources Congress is likely to make available to beef up U.S. broadcasting and social media efforts in the Balkans to offer a more positive image of the U.S., EU, and NATO.

Seek Russian cooperation in the Balkans. U.S./Russian relations are at a nadir. Cooperation in Syria or Ukraine seems unlikely, as Washington's and Moscow's interests there diverge sharply. The U.S. could seek to make the Balkans an experiment in cooperation with Russia, promising no further NATO expansion there if Moscow will stop its hybrid warfare efforts to destabilize the region and allow the states of the region to accede to the EU.

Arrange for ethno-territorial partition of Bosnia, Kosovo, and Macedonia. The U.S. and EU could conclude that state-building in the Balkans within existing borders is impossible and embark instead on an effort to negotiate ethno-territorial partition of Bosnia, Kosovo, and Macedonia, with the right of the resulting states to join neighboring states. This would require heavy diplomatic lifting on the part of the U.S. and likely also a deployment of thousands of U.S. and European troops to minimize the likelihood of associated violence. They would likely need to stay for that purpose for many more years, if not decades.

Mitigating options

The U.S. should be prepared

- to sponsor with Russia and EU members a UN Security Council resolution condemning any outbreak of large-scale violence in the Balkans and naming/shaming parties that have contributed to it.
- to convene an emergency meeting of the Peace Implementation Council for Bosnia, the body that oversees the Dayton agreements, and
- to redeploy some or all U.S. troops in Kosovo, and NATO troops from neighboring countries, to the north, to Brcko, to Skopje or any other location of instability to assist in reestablishing a safe and secure environment as well as warning off any perpetrators.

Recommendations

There is no viable alternative to Euroatlantic integration for the Balkans. The U.S. needs to act urgently to preserve peace and stability in the region, relying on the EU as the vital partner in the effort. Together they should

- Develop a new set of carrots and sticks for Balkans countries, including bilateral free trade agreements with the U.S., accelerated EU membership, and more effective European procedures for blocking individuals from traveling in the EU or utilizing its financial system.
- Jointly designate Balkan leaders who threaten democracy, peace and security.
- Try to develop with Russia an understanding that will reduce Moscow's meddling.
- Enunciate publicly a planned joint response to Republika Srpska's independence referendum.
- Establish a region-wide truth and reconciliation effort that would seek a common understanding of what happened during the conflicts of the 1990s as well as compensation for victims.
- Enhance OSCE democratization resources and activities.
- Consider redeployment of U.S. and EU troops to maximize their deterrent effect.

The U.S. should also appoint a special envoy for the Balkans who would seek to resolve, in close consultation with the Europeans, country-specific issues:

- In Bosnia, constitutional reform aimed at creating functional and effective governments at all levels, including a state (central) government capable of negotiating and fulfilling the requirements for NATO and EU membership.
- In Serbia, an end to the Russian veto on Kosovo UN membership.
- In Kosovo, creation of an army that poses no threat to anyone inside the country and is capable of substantial contributions to international, including UN and NATO, missions.
- In Macedonia, transparent and accountable governance as a prelude to NATO membership for The FYROM at the next NATO summit.
- For the region, natural gas and other energy networks that are economically viable and minimize dependence on Russia.

The special envoy would also seek to ensure high-level U.S. Government visits to all the Balkan countries, several of which have been neglected in recent years.

In addition, the U.S. needs to beef up its efforts to counter Russian hybrid warfare in the Balkans. This should entail a major commitment to Balkans media, including television, which would make it harder for Moscow to spread its propaganda, as well as willingness to block overflights into the Balkans by Russian aircraft. National Guard cooperation with Balkan countries should get increased resources and

visibility. Only by showing determination will Washington get from Moscow the type of cooperation that could be helpful: Moscow's willingness to drop its veto on Kosovo UN membership as well as an end to Russian meddling in Macedonia, Bosnia, Serbia, and Montenegro. Promising no expansion of NATO would be a mistake, as it would signal weakness and seriously disappoint Kosovo and Macedonia, radicalizing Albanians and Macedonians in counter-productive ways.

The fraying Balkans should not be allowed to unravel. The costs of preventing a reversion to violence in the region will be minimal compared to the costs of even minor instability, never mind a rearrangement of borders and state structures, which would require major U.S. diplomatic and military efforts. The U.S. should expect the EU to foot most of the bill for prevention, but renewed warfare could vastly raise the costs to the U.S. The time to act is now.