



Policy Recommendations

of the PFP-Consortium Study Group “Regional Stability in South East Europe”

“From Bosnia and Herzegovina to Northern Kosovo – Coping with the Remaining Impasses in the Western Balkans”¹

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General Outline

Besides positive developments in the region, which are in particular connected with Croatia’s finalization of negotiations with EU on membership and encouraging signals being sent by the Presidents of Croatia and Serbia in the process of reconciliation, heavy impasses in regional peace-building still remain to be coped with. Unfinished state-building, respectively state weakness in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) and Kosovo, fragile interethnic relations in Macedonia as well as rising tensions inside the Islamic community in the Serbian region of Sandžak remind the regional actors and the Euro-Atlantic community that more efforts are necessary to achieve positive peace in this post-war area.

As BiH experience and the latest development in Sandžak have shown, the role of religion and of religious representatives in the process of political transformation is evident. Their influence on peace-building is perceived as ambivalent, the radical political rhetoric of some religious dignitaries contradicts messages of religious tolerance. However, the aim of achieving a positive climate in regard to intra- and inter-religious relations and preserving the tolerant tradition of Islam in South East Europe goes hand in hand with finding a balance between ethnic and civic principles in the processes of transition. Apart from facing the economic and political challenges, establishing satisfying inter-ethnic relations remain a priority goal in regional peace-building.

Belgrade’s and Prishtina’s readiness to open a new chapter in their relations by starting a political dialogue, apart from Kosovo itself, could also positively influence inter-ethnic relations in other parts of the Western Balkans where a South Slavic population lives next to an Albanian one, as is the case in Southern Serbia and Macedonia. However, the problem of the Serbian dominated northern Kosovo that has turned out to be a “corpus separatum”, which is neither under full control of Belgrade nor of the international community and least of all the Kosovo authorities, could be a serious burden for a positive outcome. A compromise to be

¹ Policy Recommendations of the 22nd Workshop of the Study Group “Regional Stability in South East Europe” convened in Reichenau, Austria, from 13-15 May 2011. Contributions to this paper came from Ernst M. Felberbauer and Benedikt A. Hensellek, Austrian National Defence Academy, and John J. Kane, PFP Consortium of Defence Academies and Security Studies Institutes.

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achieved – with the support of the Euro-Atlantic community – in regard to this special case would eliminate a serious security problem in the region. On the other hand, preserving northern Kosovo as a “frozen conflict” in the long run could inspire again radical groups on the Albanian side to re-open the “Albanian issue” by questioning the territorial integrity of Serbia and Macedonia in those areas which are ethnically dominated by Albanians. Albania, in turn, is faced with increasing political tensions which could endanger some positive steps the country has made in the last 10 years in regard to implement international standards.

EU and NATO are deeply involved in different processes of conflict transformation and peace-building. Therefore, a continuous assessment of tools seems to be appropriate.

Estimations and Recommendations regarding Peace- and State-building in Bosnia-Herzegovina

More than a half year after the general parliamentary elections held in October 2010 this western Balkan country is still far from getting a functional government, which, after a five years period of political radicalization, is needed to return BiH to the path of Euro-Atlantic integration. Discordant positions of the international actors involved in the peace- and state-building process impede the overcoming of political stalemate in BiH.

The diplomatic initiative of the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, directed to Banja Luka in Mid May by the national actors in BiH was not perceived as a signal for launching a constructive dialogue in this country. Ashton’s visit to Banja Luka aimed at stopping Republika Srpska’s (RS) plan to organize a referendum against state judicial institutions and decisions that have been taken by the Office of the High Representative (OHR) in Sarajevo on the basis of the so called “Bonn Powers.” While officials in the RS have used the “dialogue between Brussels and Banja Luka” for internal propagandistic purpose, Sarajevo’s political elites were irritated about EU’s appeasement approach vis à vis RS President Milorad Dodik that have not led to an improvement of relations between Sarajevo and Banja Luka.

RS officials have stressed that the referendum is still an option if the structural dialogue on judicial reforms started with EU after Ashton’s visit to Banja Luka should not bring the desired results. The OHR, who announced sanctions against RS officials in case the secessionist policies should continue, was excluded from the first round of the “reform talks”. The same applied to the legal experts from Sarajevo.

This group has several times advocated a unified political approach of the western community present in BiH towards the process of peace- and state-building which is absolutely necessary in order to contribute to an improved political situation in this country. The ongoing process of restructuring the EU’s presence in BiH must not lead to its dissociation from the OHR – a trend that could have been observed during the past period of Valentin Inzko’s mandate as High Representative in BiH.

However, as long as the political process in BiH is dominated by nationalist issues and by continuing secessionist policies, there is a need for continuing – as a safety net – the presence of the OHR who should retain executive powers. The last political crisis connected to RS referendum plans showed proof of this necessity. Without a credible threat by the HR to impose sanctions against officials from the RS, the spring crisis most probably would have caused much more serious damage for the peace process.

EUFOR's executive mandate is a second element of BiH's security net and should be prolonged and the necessary strength for implementing such an operation should be provided. To reverse the current trend and provide an increase in efficiency, the EU, US and OHR should strive for a unified approach vis à vis the challenges in peace- and state-building.

Obviously, strong incentives for stimulating the peace process in BiH are lacking. In particular more international support for the weak civil society sector is needed in order to strengthen the social glue among the citizens of BiH who have been exposed to various political attempts at ethno-nationalistic mobilization.

A number of religious leaders in BiH are guilty of politicizing religious ideas for the purpose of strengthening nationalistic identities. As far as the Islamic community in BiH is concerned, preserving the multiethnic society in this country by moderates is the best way to secure the tolerant form of Islam. On the other hand, if BiH state institutions are to be further weakened through nationalist policies, this could increase the number of followers of Islamists.

Estimations and Recommendations regarding the Crisis Situations in the Serbian Part of the Sandžak³

Radical tendencies that can be observed in the Serbian part of the Sandžak region (officially Raška oblast) are a direct consequence of Belgrade's long-time policy to neglect the economic and political needs of the largely (Muslim-)Bosniak population. Furthermore, the preferential treatment of the "Islamic Community of Serbia" based in Belgrade compared to the Serbian government's more distant attitude vis à vis the "Islamic Community in Serbia", which is led by Novi Pazar's Mufti Muamer Zukorlić, plays an important role as well as Belgrade's strong support for RS political leader Dodik.

Zukorlić's demand for political autonomy of the Sandžak goes beyond religious rights of the Muslim community in Serbia. He is strongly backed up by the Sarajevo Grand Mufti Mustafa Cerić. This fact underlines the existing links between political and religious developments in BiH and Sandžak: By agreeing tacitly to policies of the RS leadership that are aimed at further undermining BiH as a state, Belgrade increases ethno-religious mobilization among the Bosniak population in the Serbian part of the Sandžak, which is politically controlled by Zukorlić.

Belgrade should continue to develop its latest policy of conducting a dialogue with religious leaders from Novi Pazar in order to relax the tense situation in Sandžak. By supporting credible political representatives of the Bosniak population from Sandžak, the space for ethno-religious manipulation could be diminished. In addition, a more supportive policy by Belgrade for improving political relations inside BiH would be useful regarding local Bosniak perceptions in the Sandžak.

Estimations and Recommendations regarding Kosovo

The political dialogue between Belgrade and Prishtina that was launched by the EU in March this year on technical issues to improve the living conditions of both, Kosovo-Albanians as well as Kosovo-Serbs, could help to overcome the stalemate in the bilateral relations which followed Kosovo's unilateral independence in February 2008. The outcome of this process

³ Some of the estimations and recommendations in the Sandžak chapter represent only the views of the author and were not agreed in the Study Group.

would be a win-win-situation and positively influence regional relations. On the other hand, failure would most probably re-enforce ideas of territorial partition and negative repercussions for the regional environment would result.

Political representatives of the Kosovo-Albanians as well as think tank analysts from Prishtina assess that Serbia would be the only side that could profit from this dialogue because it would result in faster EU membership and leave Kosovo still far behind in the EU integration process. The talks have been hindered so far by a lack of strategy on both sides regarding where this dialogue should lead and the absence of a clear policy of the EU.

Areas of interest for both sides, in which solutions during the dialogue should be achieved, are: the exchange of documents, de-blockade of Kosovo in the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), clear custom regulations to reduce smuggling, clarification of property rights and privatization issues as well as a visible presence of the European Rule of Law Mission (EULEX) in the north of Kosovo to end the lawless situation.

Although Kosovo is not affected more than other countries in the region by serious crime, organized crime and corruption represent huge structural problems for the overall development in this young state. While the Kosovo Police has proved to be functional, this is not true of other law enforcement institutions – judges and prosecutors. In many cases their work has not been in accordance with professional criteria. Therefore, there is still a strong need for international support in capacity-building.

However, the biggest problem for Kosovo's peace process remains the unconsolidated political and legal situation in Kosovo's north. A close co-operation between EULEX and KFOR is necessary in order to end the Transnistria-like situation in this area by establishing transparent rule of law institutions. Ongoing measures of restructuring KFOR through downsizing the number of troops should take this necessity into consideration. Moreover, EU representatives in their talks with Belgrade politicians on Serbia's future membership should demand a constructive policy by the Serbian government vis à vis the north of Kosovo.

Estimations and Recommendations regarding the FYR of Macedonia and Albania

Beside severe structural problems (unemployment rate >30%), FYR of Macedonia is affected by enlarged ethnic gaps between the majority population of Macedonians and Albanians as the second largest group (25%). With the exception of the government party Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), Albanian parties in FYR Macedonia are no longer fully behind the Ohrid Agreement, which ended the civil war-like fights in summer 2001. Albanian nationalists demand the establishment of a bi-national Macedonian-Albanian state – a political goal that has met with disapproval from all Macedonian parties.

The FYR Macedonia has remained a fragile state that would need more economic and political support from the Western community, otherwise this successful case in preventive diplomacy could become a crisis case again. At present, the goal of making FYR Macedonia a NATO and EU member is the strongest common interest of the two largest ethnic communities in this country. As it was argued by this Study Group several times before, more support from the Euro-Atlantic community to resolve FYR Macedonia's name dispute with Greece is necessary, in order to lift Greece's blockade of its neighbour in the process of EU and NATO integration.

Albania, a young member of NATO since 2009 and aspirant for EU candidate status, is endangered in its reform process by a new wave of political polarization between the two major political forces, the Democratic Party of Prime Minister Sali Berisha and Edi Rama's Socialist Party. Both political leaders tend to extreme positions and have problems accepting democratic standards in their political competition. The latest political controversies linked to unclear results of the local elections in Tirana in May underpinned this problematic behaviour.

The EU and particularly NATO should continue with their demands vis à vis the Albanian politicians to implement high democratic standards. In realistic terms, a final breakthrough in the reform process is not very probable while still having this "old generation" of Albanian politicians in leading positions. Therefore, the Euro-Atlantic institutions should be much more engaged in identifying promising young politicians in Albania who should be supported with educative measures and by sharing experience.