

Political Parties in South East Europe: Supporting Intra-State, Regional and European Consolidation?

Policy Recommendations ¹

Study Group Regional Stability in South East Europe

Reichenau, Austria
22 – 24 May 2014

Situation Analysis

In general, the party system in the Western Balkans and South East Europe bears the standard problem of modern democracy: the inadequate political representation of its citizens by the traditional party system. Local deficiencies multiply these problems. Most political systems in South East Europe represent “hybrid” or “unfinished democracies”: a large gap exists between officially declared programmatic goals and the political reality on the ground. Hence, most of the political scenes in South East Europe are characterized by ideological confusion and/or the lack of clear political ideologies. Very often, clientelism and nepotism replace value orientation. Authoritarian tendencies in some countries of the region (in particular in Macedonia) endanger the process of democratic institution-building. The cooperation between political decision-makers and the social partners is in many cases unsatisfying. Furthermore, there is a lack of transparency in regard to financing of political parties. Political controversies about status issues are still being used for political manipulation. All these impediments have caused a generally negative attitude of the citizens vis-à-vis their politicians.

Notwithstanding the fact that the inclusion of the Western Balkan countries into the EU and NATO integration processes has isolated extreme chauvinist parties and ideas, nationalism has remained an influential factor of mobilization in this region. Right-wing parties still tend to propagate state identities, which are mainly based on ethno-centric narratives, rather than on citizen's identities. Unresolved constitutional and political issues (e.g. the Sejdić-Finci case and other national issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina) as well as bad economic perspectives have overall led to permanent social frustration and in some countries to



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longing for strong authoritarian leaders. Segregated schools for pupils of different nationalities in former war areas plant seeds for upcoming national conflicts.

It is difficult for young people living in South East Europe to find and define their role in a domestic political system which follows clientelistic and partly still nationalistic patterns. In a situation of continued deep economic crisis and deindustrialization, a part of the young citizens in the region equates politics exclusively with access to jobs. However, some examples from the region – like the evolving social movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina – show that there is enormous political potential among young people in South East Europe. It is difficult, however, to foster their talents in a corrupt and dysfunctional political system. Educational and economic reforms are being seen as crucial preconditions for positive changes in the society and for preventing further brain drain.

During the last fifteen years, regional cooperation between political parties in the Western Balkans has increased significantly. There has also been a rise of activities started by European party foundations (in particular from Germany) and the EU Parliament (EP) that aim at supporting democratic transition and party cooperation in the region. Party foundations in their activities have focused on programmes that provide democratic value orientation and political education for the youth (summer schools, young leaders' programmes etc.). They are aware of the fact that they can only contribute to the consolidation of negative political structures if they support parties which do not follow democratic and civilized values.



The EP, through activities of its various working groups, rapporteurs and special delegations, has precisely followed the reform processes in South East Europe and has provided recommendations to bridge the gaps. Unfortunately, the parties from South East Europe cannot be fully integrated into the European party families before their countries become full EU member states. Social democratic parties in the region are practicing bilateral and multilateral cooperation. In the general, the picture is that institutionalized cross-regional party contacts are still rare with the exception of official governmental and parliamentary meetings.

The political parties in the Western Balkans and South East Europe are influenced not only by the European Union and other Western actors, but also by the Russian Federation. Especially some right-wing parties are critical towards the integration of their countries into the EU and NATO and prefer a political partnership with the ruling party in Russia.

Summary of Recommendations

Regarding the Performance and Political Substance of Parties

In order to contribute to the consolidation and further development of democratic institutions, political parties should have clear profiles and introduce proper long-term programmes which will be compatible with the country's EU and Euro-Atlantic integration agenda as well as with international political integration.

Generally, the debates and party programmes need to be based on current social conditions. Political parties in South East Europe should set their programmes along strategic goals. The

unity in messaging by internationals is key to encouraging the achievement of strategic goals by political parties in South East Europe.

Thus, a situation should be prevented in which – as a result of a short-term orientation of politicians – the society and the political system are in the state of constant politico-economical activities that are determined by the election needs.

The programmes of party coalitions should meet the same quality criteria as the ones by individual parties and should not contradict each other for the sake of pragmatism.

The general impression is that many parties in South East Europe seem to be gender-blind or gender-neutral. Therefore, parties should be encouraged to make special efforts to enable and support the advancement of women, in terms of their public policy statements as well as in their own internal structures and procedures.

In their regular progress reports, the EU Commission should pay more attention and be critical concerning the contents of party programs and concrete policies in the sense that those should not violate basic European democratic values.

The EU – via its IPA funds –, European party foundations and other international stakeholders could support professionalization of parliamentary work by securing staff for MPs, offices for MPs or the construction of necessary facilities.

International stakeholders should not only support young people, but also new faces which provide fresh ideas irrespective of age, so the focus should not be restricted to young faces only.

Stereotypical and generalizing assessments about “the corrupt political class” should be avoided, in order not to discourage political newcomers. Individuals should be presented as positive role models.

Political parties in South East Europe should provide more transparency regarding their financial sources. Clearer financial regulations in most of the countries of the region are highly needed, in order to prevent misuse.

Regarding Strategies against Nationalism

An unfavourable economic development and clientelistic working structures are still fostering nationalism in South East Europe. In particular young people should be enabled and supported to easily start small companies with niche capabilities (IT services, design and fashion etc.). This would help to develop moderate and constructive attitudes among the citizens in South East Europe.

Each political party should place policies for preventing and punishing the use of nationalism and the instrumentalization of the past, which are often used for holding the society in tensions, all for the purposes of political entrepreneurship and daily political interests.

International party support should be as inclusive as possible but not “one size fits all”. The International Community should especially target moderate elements in big populist parties and incite internal transformation.

By taking up a pragmatic position towards former nationalist parties which have been passing through political transition, international stakeholders should keep a special affirmative stance on political parties that have acted in a constructive and non-nationalistic manner in violent and politically difficult times during transition.

The EU should support more distinctly financially and technically interethnic meetings of young people in the region in order to countervail increasing nationalistic tendencies.

The EU – supported by the US – needs to put all necessary efforts into solving the outstanding “status conflicts” in the region. This includes continuing the Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue in a consistent way, as well as starting a series of initiatives to solve BiH’s institutional-political crisis and to solve Macedonia’s conflict with Greece over the name issue.

Politicians who have been using expressions of hate as a political tool should be put on a blacklist by the EU and other international stakeholders. On the other hand, these stakeholders should also “reward” politicians, political parties and state administrations who demonstrate a proper stance regarding interethnic relations, the Holocaust and crimes committed by co-nationals during the last wars.

Religious leaders play an important social role in South East Europe. The rise of visible and substantial ecumenical initiatives could contribute to dismantle negative stereotypes between and about different ethnic communities in the region.



Regarding the Enhancement of the Role of Youth

Education is the most important field through which the youth in South East Europe can be positively influenced. Therefore, EU member-states in South East Europe and the EU in general should intensify university education programmes for students in Western Balkan states that have applied for EU membership. Ethnic segregation in school systems should be avoided. This represents one of the root causes for the maintenance of divided communities.

Young people from South East Europe should be encouraged to travel and thus gain different experiences. International stakeholders should support this endeavour by providing specific programmes.



Public-private partnerships, comprising of relevant state governmental and IGO actors in the public sector and businesses in the private sector, should be established to set up Regional Internship Programs to design, implement, and monitor multi-ethnic teams of youth from across the Western Balkans. These would work on development, reconciliation, and other cross-border issues (e.g. poverty, unemployment, education, health, civil society development).

Such a programme would allow and encourage Albanians, Bosniaks, Croats, Serbs and others to experience the value of working together on common issues – for example, as a response to economic underdevelopment, making the region more attractive to external economic and financial investment.

In the short term, the programme would provide the participants with the experience of working together across ethnic and religious lines and, most importantly, with jobs. In the long term, the programme would facilitate the development of infrastructure for regional problem-solving on various issues and enhance the attraction of the region to external economic and financial investment.

The importance of including the private sector in regional peace-building in the Western Balkans is obvious.

The activities of the International Community appear to be dominated by the public sector and civil society, with the private sector playing little, if any, constructive role. This must change for economic development to take hold in the region!

One example of a regional reconciliation project would be the encouragement of professors and teachers to use (already existing) common textbooks that convey a factual description of the political escalation processes and wars in the 1990s.

Regional projects that are aimed at achieving a “negotiated consensus” would not necessarily mean “one truth” on, for example, “who started the war?”, but on the various – in some cases, competing – narratives that should be included in such a book, leaving it up to the reader to make her or his own determination of what the “truth” might be.

Such a programme would further the development of the experience and Culture of Regional Communication, Cooperation, Coordination, and Collaboration (the „4 Cs“) – thereby facilitate reconciliation and making the region more attractive to external economic and financial investment.



Regarding the Role of EU and other International Stakeholders

EU institutions (in particular the Commission, the European Parliament and the Council) are encouraged to be more precise and explicit in their statements on and the assessment of EU integration related progress or lack thereof in individual candidate and potential candidate countries in the Western Balkans.

While EU institutions and representatives tend to be sufficiently candid during meetings with their interlocutors in the region, public statements on such meetings by and large do not or insufficiently reflect the detail and frankness of discussions nor the way in which key messages were delivered.

In some blatant cases the method of publicly “naming and shaming” should not be excluded as a strategic choice.

The European Commission’s annual progress reports on candidate and potential candidate countries should be “revamped” to (a) render them more explicit and hence more easy and attractive to read as well as more “digestible” and (b) aim at fully harmonised terminology and wording between individual reports, thus allowing for effective and rapid comparison between the countries concerned.

In a similar vein, the European Parliament’s country-specific resolutions that follow up on the Commission’s annual progress reports would benefit from (a) an effort to streamline the use of terminology; and (b) as far as possible, a common logical structure, whereby similar issues are dealt with in similar parts of the various resolutions and (c) improved drafting, thus avoiding reader-unfriendly lengthy paragraphs and unnecessary and at times confusing repetition which is often the result of a wish – and need – to “accommodate” multiple amendments to the draft text.

EU institutions and/or representatives should avoid sending potentially wrong signals by not reacting at once to (inter alia) unambiguous cases of expressions of hate and flagrant breaches of the rule of law. In such instances, there is room for improved swift cooperation, consulting or fine-tuning with other key stakeholders including the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media and the CoE Commissioner for Human Rights.

The EC, EP, and the Council should coordinate more closely to improve their strategic communication and outreach programme to candidate countries in South East Europe in order to make the very real benefits of EU membership understandable to the man in the street.

The European Union and regional or sub-regional actors should conduct opinion polls of people in the region to determine what their views are on, for example, EU membership, needs of the region, remaining tensions in the region, etc. By that way, the intervention of the international stakeholders would not be only “top-down,” but include the voices of the citizens in South East Europe which, at present, seems to be rather rare.

The value of regular opinion polling is that it would track the reactions of citizens throughout the region to the various programs and initiatives undertaken and implemented by the EU, World Bank, regional/sub-regional actors, US, Japan, and others with regard to physical, social, political, and economic development and psycho-emotional reconciliation.

Such feedback would provide the international supporters of consolidation in South East Europe with knowledge about what has been successful, and why; what has not been successful, and why; and what still needs to be done, and why and how.

Confronted with increased disillusionment in the region concerning the International Society and in particular the EU, Brussels should ask governments and NGOs in the respective countries to formulate realistic critics as well as pleas or demands vis-à-vis the EU.

Pre-accession funding should be conditional on countries implementing the recommendations in the European Progress Report, especially with regard to internal political dialogue.

European party families should install a permanent dialogue with their sister parties from South East European candidate countries, even before these countries will join the EU.

¹ These policy recommendations reflect the findings of the 28th RSSEE workshop on „Political Parties in South East Europe: Supporting Intra-State, Regional and European Consolidation?“ convened by the PfP Consortium Study Group “Regional Stability in South East Europe” from 22-24 May 2014 in Reichenau/Austria. They were prepared by Predrag Jureković; valuable support came from Ernst M. Felberbauer and Edith Stifter (all Austrian National Defence Academy).