

External actors and European integration in the Western Balkans

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The Western Balkans region has returned to the center of European policymakers' attention amidst increased concerns over geopolitical competition and inherent instability. The present study examines the major external players and their goals and policy tools in the region and – in spite of the EU's less than stellar performance at the Sofia Summit of May 2018 – calls for a consistent and committed approach to the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU.

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At a time when concerns over geopolitical competition and power politics are on the rise in Brussels and various European capitals, policymakers' attention has returned to the Western Balkans. After more than a decade of neglect, the EU has awakened to the possibility of the region once again becoming a hotbed of instability on the continent, with external actors fomenting divisions and exploiting simmering political, economic and ethno-religious discontent, or simply taking advantage of poorly regulated and corrupt investment markets. The aim of this paper is to introduce the major external players in the region as well as their interests and the policy tools they employ, with a focus on their significance for the EU. An introduction of the concept of geopolitics and the context of its present topicality is followed by sections devoted to each of the significant external players in the Western Balkans: the EU, Russia, China, Turkey and the Gulf monarchies. The study concludes with considerations on Europe's interests and some recommendations for action in the region.

1 Geopolitics and the current context

1.1 The concept of geopolitics

The concept of geopolitics, which has seen a revival in public debate in recent years, is historically charged in the German-speaking world. There, it connotes imperialist and racist ideologies, while in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, it is used in a value-free way for the structure of global relations between competing world powers. This latter understanding of the term informs the present observations.

For most of its history, the project of European integration progressed without the need for geopolitical considerations: In the post-war order – defined in Yalta in 1945 and dominant until 1989 – the U.S.-led NATO was the guarantor of Western European security, while the six founding members of the European Communities could focus on their soft power role and economic integration. This project was aimed at both surmounting war in Europe and integrating Western Europe into the transatlantic order.

The Yugoslav wars of secession in the 1990s – the first military conflict on European soil since 1945 – put Europe to a serious test. But even then, great power competition seemed to have given way to international cooperation. Moscow cooperated politically and militarily with the West, for example in the Balkan

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Contact Group. During the U.S.-led peace negotiations in Dayton, Ohio, Russia endeavored to facilitate a settlement between the parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Even though Moscow denied legality to the 1999 NATO-led Kosovo intervention against Slobodan Milošević's Yugoslavia with its veto in the U.N. Security Council, it was Russian President Boris Yeltsin's Prime Minister, Viktor Chernomyrdin, who convinced Milošević to give up Kosovo² after 78 days of unsuccessful NATO bombings. Thus helping the Western cause, Moscow saved the Western alliance from an embarrassing humiliation. In retrospect, this turned out to be the last instance of Russian support for Western intervention policy.

The EU Security Strategy of 2003 perfectly encapsulates the prevailing optimism of its time: *“Europe has never been so prosperous, so secure nor so free,”* the introduction reads (European External Action Service, 2003, p. 2).

1.2 Ukraine – the turning point

Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea unquestionably constitutes a turning point in Europe's security and defense policy. Ever since, the struggle over the fundamental rules of global order and spheres of influence has returned in full force. Balance of power politics backed by military force have eroded the significance of multilateral organizations oriented toward peace politics such as the United Nations and the OSCE.

The U.S.A.'s retreat from its traditional role as guarantor of international order and European security – starting already under President Barack Obama – has become state doctrine in Donald Trump's “America First” policy. The current U.S. President's transactionalist approach to foreign policy – viewing the U.S.A. as having made a number of deals with other countries which can be challenged and renegotiated as the needs of the moment require instead of emphasizing the complex network of relationships with traditional friends and allies or long-time enemies and rivals – further accentuated the need for Europeans to develop an independent geopolitical strategy. A multitude of new initiatives for a common security and defense policy, such as the recently approved PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation), bear witness to this realization.

The latest European Security Strategy of 2016 reflects the fundamental shift in Europe's geopolitical condition: *“Our Union is under threat. [...] To the east, the European security order has been violated, while terrorism and violence plague North Africa and the Middle East, as well as Europe itself”* (European External Action Service, 2016, p. 7).

Already in 2015, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, published a plain-talking document titled Strategic Review: *“Since the 2003 Security Strategy, the EU's strategic environment has changed radically [...] today an arc of instability surrounds the Union,”* it states (European External Action Service, 2015, p. 1).

1.3 Europeanization of the Balkans

The Balkan region, which was a flashpoint of European history already in 1914 and 1991, is once more the focus of competing geopolitical interests. While Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Romania and Slovenia are members of the EU, the so-called *Western Balkan Six* – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, the Former Yugoslav

² The designation “Kosovo” is used in this paper without prejudice to positions on status and in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

Republic of Macedonia (FYR Macedonia), Montenegro and Serbia – are yet to join. These aspiring EU members especially are the focus of a geopolitical struggle for political, economic and cultural influence. Admittedly, the interests of the different external actors in this game differ substantially.

The traditional partners – the U.S.A. and the EU – have been pursuing the transatlantic integration of the entire region to a varying degree. The goal is to complete the liberal-democratic transformation processes toward NATO and EU membership. This is a matter of overcoming structural political, economic and security challenges and ensuring the stability of this region often misunderstood as Europe's periphery.

The EU leans on the promise of membership to induce reforms and has built a dense network of regional agencies to support the process. Brussels thus acts mainly via conditionalities and financial inducements while the U.S.A., in contrast, prefers to use tougher means to put pressure on local leaders. This carrot-and-stick method was successful in FYR Macedonia, where the resignation of the corrupt former Prime Minister, who had been involved in a wiretapping scandal of unprecedented proportions, would probably not have happened without the EU's leveraged consistency and Washington's hands-on approach. U.S. sanctions against the President of the Bosnian Republika Srpska, however, have thus far not shown the desired result. This is perhaps also a consequence of Europe's disunity on how to handle the Moscow-backed secessionist leader.

The U.S.A., as one of the early players, still carries considerable military, economic and diplomatic clout in the region. Contrary to concerns, the U.S.A. has so far somehow retained parts of this influence during the first year of the Trump presidency. However, as a consequence of the evisceration of the State Department's funding and staff, the current American approach to the region seems to be driven mostly by past achievements and institutional continuity rather than an active foreign policy. In line with the overall militarization of its foreign policy, funding for diplomatic engagement has dropped sharply (under the fiscal year 2018 appropriations and budget request, foreign assistance funding levels for Europe and Eurasia have dropped 60% over fiscal year 2017) (Epstein et al., 2018, p. 13). At the same time, U.S. spending on military-to-military cooperation is set to rise under the National Defense Authorization Act for the fiscal year of 2019 (U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2018, p. 665ff).

The concerns over growing Russian, Chinese, Turkish and Arab influence notwithstanding, the EU remains by far the most important player in the Western Balkans, even though the EU has lost some of its appeal in recent years. Europe's dominant position becomes most obvious when looking at trade: The EU was responsible for 67% of imports to and 84% of exports from the Western Balkans in 2017 (European Commission Directorate-General for Trade, 2018, p. 8). The picture is similar when it comes to foreign direct investments in the region, where EU Member States are leading by far (Dabrowski and Myachenkova, 2018).

The Western Balkans is further closely linked to the EU via instruments such as the CEFTA free trade agreement and the Energy Union; these continually deepen the economic integration within the region and between the region and the EU while ensuring the adherence to European rules and norms. The so-called *Berlin Process*, started by Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2014, aims to promote judicial and public service reform connectivity, and the settlement of

bilateral and internal conflicts in the region with the involvement of governments as well as civil society – albeit with admittedly mixed results so far.

European financial institutions such as the EIB and the ERBD as well as the important Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) contribute much-needed funds to support reform efforts. However, the disbursement of these funds is consistently conditional upon adherence to European rules and regulations, not always in line with local elites' vested interests. Still, the EU has retained the most influence by far amongst external actors in the Western Balkans – be it in the economic, political or regulatory and legal spheres.

2 The big foreign players

2.1 Russia

The aim of Russia's activities in the Western Balkans is to defer the Euro-Atlantic integration of the region – ideally at low cost. While Russia has acquiesced to the region's eventual EU integration, it vehemently opposes further NATO enlargement.

Even though the Western Balkans is only of secondary strategic importance to Russia, it is part of its historic sphere of influence. Apart from continual cooperation in the fields of economy, energy, technical cooperation and – more recently – the media, Moscow builds on its Slavic-Orthodox ties to Serbia and the Bosnian Republika Srpska.

Moscow wields the largest influence in Serbia, the Republika Srpska and – until recently – in Montenegro and FYR Macedonia. Serbia, for example, has not joined the Western sanctions against Russia. Still, Moscow is on the defensive. In Montenegro, it was allegedly behind a failed coup attempt in the fall of 2016, which the Kremlin denies. Since the country's NATO accession in 2017, bilateral relations have cooled markedly despite significant Russian private investments in hotels and property along the coast. The recent democratic change in FYR Macedonia has substantially diminished Moscow's influence in this volatile state for the time being. The pending solution of the name issue with Greece – FYROM is set to become the Republic of North Macedonia – has paved the way to NATO membership and should eliminate the last roadblocks for the opening of accession negotiations with the EU.

2.1.1 Russia's economic influence

Moscow's economic influence in the region is highly circumscribed: While Russia was the largest trading partner of the Western Balkan Six at the turn of the century, the latter now import thirteen times as many goods from the EU and export nearly twenty times more to the EU (figures for 2017) (European Commission Directorate-General for Trade, 2018, p. 8). This is partly a consequence of the Western sanctions: Russia's real economic output shrank considerably in 2015 and 2016 and recovered only slowly in 2017 (*ibid.*). However, Russian-Serbian trade grew 12% in nominal terms in 2017 (compared to 2016), posting its first increase since 2014 (*ibid.*). This was mainly due to an increase in Serbian exports. According to wiiw data for 2016, they amount to one-third of total trade, pointing to substitution effects, allegedly also due to the EU sanctions against Russia, which Serbia has not joined.

Only in the energy sector does the Kremlin have considerable influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and FYR Macedonia, which are highly dependent on Russian gas (Vladimirov et al., 2018). And Russia does not allow for Slavic

solidarity: FYR Macedonia pays one of the highest gas prices in Europe. Serbia, for its part, has sold majority stakes in its state-owned oil and gas industries to Russian state-owned enterprises in 2007–2008 – reportedly far below market value. This is widely regarded as a favor in return for Russia’s support for Serbia’s position on Kosovo in the U.N. Security Council (*ibid.*, p. 22ff). The South Stream Pipeline project, which would have brought Serbia much-needed revenue from transit fees, was cancelled after Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014.

2.1.2 Russia’s special relationship with Serbia and the Bosnian Republika Srpska

The relatively modest economic interactions notwithstanding, the Kremlin is skillfully marketing itself as the generous Slavic-Orthodox brother and positioning itself as a spoiler of Euro-Atlantic integration. For Belgrade, Moscow’s support in the Kosovo issue is of the utmost importance; Serbia’s foreign policy strategy is thus geared toward keeping Russia happy while advancing its relations with both NATO and the EU. However, Serbia emphatically rules out NATO membership and tries to position itself as a neutral state in the tradition of the non-aligned movement. (This policy is certainly also a consequence of the NATO intervention in 1999, which led to Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence in 2008.) Serbia’s refusal to participate in the sanctions against Russia is undoubtedly straining the EU accession negotiations.

The Kremlin is skillfully orchestrating its frequent official visits and relatively marginal military aid to Serbia for maximum media attention. Not least for this reason, Russia is seen as the most important partner and supporter by a majority of the Serbian population, while the far larger EU support programs are hardly recognized by the public – due, in equal part, to Brussels’ traditionally weak self-promotion and a lack of presentation by the Belgrade government.

Furthermore, the Kremlin is fueling political tensions in the region via diplomatic gestures such as the ostentatious support for a referendum on the state holiday in Republika Srpska. The intended date of the state holiday commemorates the declaration of independence of Bosnia’s Serbs, a decisive trigger of the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. It is telling that not even Belgrade was ready to support the referendum, which was declared unacceptable by the international community and unconstitutional by Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Constitutional Court. The U.S. State Department responded to the actions of Republika Srpska’s President Milorad Dodik by putting him on the sanctions list in January 2017. Russia’s President Vladimir Putin, however, regularly pays court to the President of the small Serb entity, whom he received four times in 2016 alone. With much fanfare, Russia promised EUR 500 million to the near-bankrupt Bosnian statelet in 2014, none of which was paid out however (Higgins, 2018). In the meantime, the IMF had to step in to ensure the payment of state pensions and other public expenditures.

Overall, Russia’s influence in the region rests mainly on a skilled politics of symbols and the reinforcement of preexisting ethnic tensions. That said, if the EU managed to adequately communicate its substantial financial engagement in the region, Moscow could probably do little to compete with it.

2.2 China’s interests in the Western Balkans

While Moscow is actively trying to undermine the region’s Euro-Atlantic integration, China views a successful EU accession of the Western Balkan Six as serving its

strategic goal of easy access to the central European EU members. On the issue of NATO membership, Beijing seems to entertain an agnostic view. However, like Serbia, Russia and five EU Member States, China does not recognize the independence of Kosovo. China's engagement in the region is based in geo-economics and is part of two larger geopolitical initiatives:

- the *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI), which aims at constructing a network of energy, trade and transport infrastructure connecting Asia, Africa and Europe, and
- the *16+1 format* through which China is seeking to assure policy coordination for its massive financial engagement in Eastern and Southeastern Europe. The 16+1 format is designed as a regional initiative; by transgressing established boundaries – the 16 include both EU members and candidate countries – China tries to forge a new political geography in the region to safeguard the implementation of the European part of the BRI.

The Western Balkans is an important transit route for Chinese goods arriving in Europe at the Greek port of Piraeus – the largest Chinese investment on the continent in the context of the BRI initiative to date and currently the fastest-growing container port in the world. Furthermore, the region presents Chinese companies with an opportunity to make initial investments and develop references in a part of Europe not yet fully aligned with the strict rules and regulations of the EU but with the prospect of joining the block in the foreseeable future.

2.2.1 China's significance for the Balkan Region

In the Western Balkans, China's engagement has been met with both approval and skepticism: The 16+1 format, initiated in 2012, as well as the BRI present opportunities to attract much-needed investment in infrastructure and the economy. Publicized Chinese construction projects as part of the BRI amount to roughly EUR 12.2 billion in loans for 16 Central and Southeastern European countries between 2007 and 2017 (Grievesson et al., 2018). Within these projects, the Western Balkan countries accounted for the majority of funds: 29.4% alone was earmarked for projects in Serbia, 20.7% for Bosnia and Herzegovina and 7.4% for Montenegro (ibid., p. 17). Most of the projects are in either energy or transport.

Infrastructure loans under the BRI often come with long maturities (20 years) at low interest (2%) and are not tied to political or human rights conditionalities, which are typical for EU funding (Tonchev, 2017, p. 4).

Serbia is China's key partner in the Western Balkans and profits the most from Chinese loans and direct investment. More than EUR 5.5 billion, mostly in the form of concessionary loans, have been approved for infrastructure and energy projects (B92, 2017) such as the Sino-Serbian Friendship Bridge in Belgrade (EUR 170 million) (Hollinshead, 2015), the expansion and renovation of the Belgrade-Budapest railway or the Kostolac thermal power station. But also in Montenegro, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, highways and railways are constructed and upgraded with Chinese loans (Tonchev, 2017, p. 2ff).

Critics complain that the desired knock-on effects of Chinese investments for the local economy often remain marginal; infrastructure projects have mostly been realized by Chinese companies and with Chinese materials imported free of duties and tariffs under special agreements. In some cases, such as in the Sino-Serbian Friendship Bridge project, state-owned enterprises awarded with contracts are obliged to employ Chinese workers. Furthermore, corruption, rising sovereign debt

and political dependencies connected to Chinese loans are the subject of concerns (ibid., p. 2). China's "debt trap policy" is cause for concern as evidenced in parts of Asia and Africa.

2.2.2 China on the fast track in the Balkans

Chinese engagement in the Western Balkans has elicited uneven reactions from the EU as well. While it is often consistent with professed EU goals and needs, it simultaneously has the potential to undercut European norms and regulations and to undermine European unity.

Thus, Chinese investments in transport infrastructure are largely in line with EU goals formulated since 2014 under the Connectivity Agenda of the Berlin Process; at the same time, the skirting of EU public procurement rules and environmental law in many of these projects raise concerns. Currently, there is a suit pending against the awarding of the Pelješac Bridge in Croatia to a Chinese consortium allegedly offering state-backed dumping prices; tellingly, 85% of the funding for the bridge is provided through EU funds (European Commission, 2017). This example is paradigmatic for the kinds of issues arising when a highly regulated, liberal economic zone interacts with state-directed enterprises operating in a political fashion.

If the EU succeeds in aligning BRI projects – not only in the Balkans – with its own rules and in coordinating them with its infrastructure plans, the synergies could be significant. Hence, charting the right course in its overall relations with China stands amongst the greatest geopolitical challenges for the EU.

2.3 Neo-Ottoman Turkey

While the Western Balkans does not play a preeminent role in Turkey's foreign policy, the country's neo-Ottoman involvement in the region is on the rise. The Western Balkans holds threefold significance for Turkey: in security policy, for its proximity and potential instability, economically, due to its large growth potential and, in socio-cultural terms, thanks to its shared history and cultural affinity dating back to the 500 years of Ottoman domination of the region.

In the 1990s, NATO ally Turkey played an important role in the stabilization of the region. As a representative of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ankara was a constructive partner of the West. Since 2000, Turkey has facilitated trilateral meetings with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, acting as an important contributor to the process of reconciliation of the former adversaries.

Today, Turkey exercises its influence in the region primarily through soft power means, such as development aid (EUR 128 million in 2015) (Yildiz et al., 2015) and cultural and education programs in countries with substantial Muslim communities. Trade relations are growing slowly but steadily. While the EU remains the most important trading partner and investor for all Western Balkan states (the total trade volume between the EU and the Western Balkans is 17 times higher than between Turkey and the region) (European Commission Directorate-General for Trade, 2018, p. 8), the stalling accession negotiations have encouraged Turkey to intensify its initiatives in the region. Trade between Turkey and the Western Balkans grew eightfold between 2002 and 2017 in nominal terms.³

³ COMTRADE.

Turkey's economic and political relations in the region focus mainly on Muslim states such as Albania (where, in Tirana, the largest mosque in the Balkans, funded by Ankara, has recently been inaugurated by the President of Turkey), Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. Turkish development aid has a strong emphasis on the preservation of the Ottoman cultural heritage and education. The conflict between President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Gülen movement has created spillover effects since many of the Turkish schools in the region were Gülen-affiliated.

Beyond the region's Muslim realm Ankara has been trying to improve its relationship to Serbia as the strategically most significant state in the region.

2.3.1 Turkey as an alternative?

In anti-Western and Muslim circles, Ankara is seen as a counterweight to the EU and the U.S.A. During the 2017 visit of the Turkish President in Sarajevo, a number of pro-Erdoğan and anti-EU protests sprang up in Sarajevo. In the run-up to the 2018 elections in Turkey, Sarajevo was the only European location where President Erdoğan was able to address his European electorate. There are concerns in the EU that the authoritarian and illiberal style of the Turkish leader could become a model for Muslim (and other) politicians in the Balkans. However, the model effect of authoritarian governments *inside* the EU seems more problematic for the Europeanization of the region. Orbán-style governance would easily fit into the regional traditions of authoritarian rule and could – upon joining the EU – arguably reinforce the illiberal camp in the EU.

Turkey plays an important role for the security of the region through its control over migration flows toward Europe; another migration crisis could severely undermine the security of the Western Balkans.

Overall, Turkey's influence on the Western Balkans varies between countries and should not be overdramatized. In a way, Turkey's activities in the region are contingent upon Brussels. The future role of Ankara depends to a large degree on its relations with the EU and Europe's standing in the Arab world.

Contrary to Russia, however, Turkey is not necessarily in opposition to European interests in the Western Balkans.

2.4 The Gulf monarchies – business and Islam

The Gulf monarchies, above all Saudi Arabia, were important actors during the Yugoslav wars of secession, supporting Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina through various channels. Allegedly, the Saudi royal family alone spent hundreds of millions of dollars on humanitarian aid and arms as well as on mobilizing Muslim fighters (Burg and Shoup, 1999, p. 339).

Since then, Saudi Arabia has propagated the ultra-conservative Wahhabi interpretation of Islam in the Western Balkans. In Bosnia and Kosovo, Islam schools, mosques, and local NGOs partially assume state functions such as education and social security for the poorest parts of the population. Saudi Arabia's religious influence is often associated with the large numbers of foreign fighters from the region that have travelled to the warzones of Syria and Iraq. According to Europol, between 800 and 900 people from the Western Balkans have joined the Islamic State, and Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina head the European list of foreign fighters per capita, with Albania in fourth place (Beslin and Ignjatijević, 2017).

Meanwhile, the UAE – specifically Dubai and Abu Dhabi – have made headlines with spectacular investment projects. Be it Buroj Ozone City, a resort town for up to 40,000 inhabitants in Bosnia and Herzegovina estimated to cost upwards of EUR 4 billion (Brunnwasser, 2016), or the highly controversial Belgrade Waterfront project – the Gulf States have discovered the Western Balkans as an investment opportunity.

Apart from real estate, infrastructure and defense projects, investments in agriculture play a significant role. Etihad Airlines invested over USD 100 million in credit in Air Serbia (Insajder, 2018) and the UAE has invested heavily in the Serbian arms industry, for example in the development of state-of-the-art missiles (Dahlan, 2014). Kuwait is investing heavily in tourism and other Gulf States are putting large sums into the region's agricultural sector to ensure the security of food supplies.

In contrast to Saudi money, these investments are not about spreading religious ideology or cultural influence but long-term return on equity. However, even these investments are not uncontroversial since they are often accompanied by massive corruption, as the numerous scandals surrounding the Belgrade Waterfront project demonstrate.

3 Summary

In spite of the less-than-optimal outcome of the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Sofia in May 2018, Brussels and some EU Member States are showing increasing much-needed interest in the Western Balkans. One can only hope that the region will be getting the attention it deserves. However, focusing on the above-mentioned external actors, who certainly pose a challenge for the region's stability, seems all too convenient. After all, it was to a large degree the negligence of the EU that has enabled them to gain a foothold there and exploit the vacuum left by crisis-ridden Brussels.

In the wake of the financial, euro and banking crises as well as Brexit, an EU entirely consumed by its internal problems has lost sight of the Western Balkans. At the same time, socio-economic conditions have worsened in many states of the region in the wake of the financial crisis. A large trade deficit with the EU and unsound fiscal policies have contributed to growing public debt while liberalization measures and reforms undertaken in the framework of EU convergence are responsible for the loss of many jobs in the formerly protected public and state enterprise sectors. Meanwhile, access to funds from the European structural adjustment programs and the Strategic Investment Fund that could cushion the repercussions of necessary reforms remains closed to the candidate countries. A comprehensive pre-accession strategy remains absent: Bulgaria and Romania, but also Croatia, should serve as cautionary examples. Above all, however, the EU must reform its own institutions before taking on enlargement. A purely additive-technocratic enlargement cannot succeed; on the contrary, it would only damage the European project.

Undoubtedly, the EU's increased appreciation of the problem is related to the fast-paced Chinese investment drive and heightened concerns about Russian influence. Sensitive issues like radicalization, terrorism and unregulated migration also play a role. However, the silent exodus of hundreds of thousands of young people who have run out of patience has remained widely unacknowledged. For example, over 56% of people originating from Bosnia and Herzegovina currently

live abroad (Kovacevic, 2017). Emigration is aggravating the political and economic stagnation of the EU candidate countries and in turn reinforces the ethno-nationalist discourse in their home countries. This is a vicious circle that needs to be broken.

The Juncker Commission has finally awakened and is launching initiatives; furthermore, the EU presidencies of Bulgaria, Austria and, subsequently, Romania ensure that the region will remain on the agenda until at least mid-2019.

2018 could have been the European year of the Balkans – if, that is, proposed strategies, plans and concepts had been resolutely acted upon. In February, the Commission presented a new Western Balkans Strategy giving Serbia and Montenegro indicative accession dates provided they fulfill their reform commitments. Albania and FYR Macedonia – under its new name of the Republic of North Macedonia – were set to be invited for accession negotiations. These and other regional issues were discussed at the first EU-Western Balkans summit in 15 years in Sofia. Overshadowed by the U.S. exit from the Iran nuclear deal, the message of the summit was anything but clear. Due to the ongoing controversy regarding the status of Kosovo, the Western Balkan Six (WB6) were categorized as “partners,” which many viewed as a downgrade of sorts, owing to Spain’s opposition to treating Kosovo as an equal in the WB6 group. In addition to Madrid, France and the Netherlands reiterated their long-standing skepticism toward enlargement in general.

As a result of the Sofia summit, the requisite political re-commitment, expressed in the Commission Strategy for the EU to retake its natural place as the Western Balkans most important partner and logical destination has again been called into question. The Sofia legacy is anything but encouraging. Instead of a stronger coordination of the manifold, fragmented and at times politically questionable European initiatives – ranging from the Berlin Process to the Regional Cooperation Council to the Energy Union – a consistent approach vis-à-vis the emerging external actors in this geopolitically sensitive region seems to be even further away. Especially in light of the illiberal, authoritarian tendencies in certain Member States, an opportunity was missed to complement the Franco-German reform plans for the euro area with stronger commitments to the rules of liberal democracy and social market economy in order to lay the foundations for welcoming the Western Balkan Six into an institutionally streamlined and politically strengthened Union.

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