

AS CRISIS BREWS IN THE BALKANS, THE WEST LOOKS ON

Cameron Munter
(*Board of Contributors*)

Copyright: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/crisis-breeds-balkans-west-looks> Publication date at RIEAS web site: 1 September 2017

Insight, analysis and commentary from Stratfor's Board of Contributors and guest contributors who are distinguished leaders in their fields of expertise.

In the first six months of U.S. President Donald Trump's administration, five foreign policy challenges have dominated the national and international spotlight. China's expanding economic and military role, Russia's tenuous relations with Europe and the Middle East, ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Syria, threats stemming from North Korea and Venezuela, and Europe's future amid rising populist movements in the United Kingdom and France have taken center stage among the world's policymakers.

Through it all, it has been easy to forget that, not so long ago, much of the world's attention was fixed on the Balkans. As war raged on Europe's doorstep, many feared the resulting instability would ignite a wider conflict. The horrific fighting and lives sacrificed, particularly in Bosnia (from 1992 to 1995) and Kosovo (in 1999), eroded decades of achievement across the region. And the 1984 Sarajevo Olympics — a symbol of world peace and collaboration — seemed like a distant memory.

Today, the wars that brought an end to Yugoslavia are also fading from view. The last major act of violence in the area — the burning of the U.S. Embassy in Belgrade in 2008, an event I recall vividly having served as the American ambassador at the time — happened almost a decade ago. In the years since, the challenges of the Balkans have slipped from the front pages, as well as from the minds of most leaders with a stake in the region.

And yet, many of the underlying problems plaguing the Balkans are still unsolved. The Dayton Accords that ended the Bosnian war in 1995 provide a

rickety and often unworkable structure for self-governance; Serbia and Kosovo have not yet reconciled, a necessary step if both are to achieve their self-proclaimed goal of membership in the European Union; domestic challenges still linger in Macedonia and in EU member state Croatia; and the region's best and brightest are leaving in search of opportunity elsewhere. Meanwhile, the region's enormous potential for economic development, from tourism to innovation in information technology, is being explored only marginally.

Without question, geopolitical issues and ethnic tensions are bubbling to the surface in the Balkans once again — to the region's potential peril. The question is, will Western leaders take notice and step up in time?

Eager for Economic Aid

The good news is there's hope for progress, and in this case, it starts with the economy. The Western Balkans need economic support, as was made clear at a recent meeting of the Berlin process adherents in Trieste, which focused on regional economic integration. To this end, the European Commission plans to channel 48 million euros (nearly \$57 million) into new financing opportunities in the private sector that will promote connectivity projects, support the development of small and medium-sized enterprises and boost regional economic cooperation. These efforts are intended to establish a framework that could lead to deeper collaboration and away from beggar-thy-neighbor policies by countries competing for handouts from the European Union. At the same time, there have been many cases of business leaders who haven't let borders get in the way of their work, spurring the drive for closer collaboration ever forward.

External parties are making a mark on the region's economies as well. China, for instance, has shown significant interest in investing in the Balkans' infrastructure as part of its Belt and Road Initiative — an ambitious, multinational program that has become a policy priority for Beijing. China already has had a discernible impact on several projects in the region, including a high-speed rail line connecting Belgrade and Budapest; the Adriatic highway, which will link Albania, Montenegro and EU members Greece and Italy; and the port of Piraeus, which a Chinese company has purchased to create a shipping route from Greece through the Western Balkans to EU markets.

The Solution Starts at Home

But now, more than ever, the Balkans are interested in engaging more closely with the West to help address the region's budding problems. European leaders,

most notably Germany, continue to watch the region as Russia maintains its presence — to the consternation of some observers — in Serbia's energy sector. Despite its often-difficult relationship with the region, the United States will need to make its presence known there once again. After all, Washington has considerable interests in the Balkans, particularly the NATO-led Kosovo Force and foreign direct investments. (According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the United States invested \$147 million in the Western Balkans from 2003 to 2012.) Moreover, it is equally important that the people of the Balkans have a clear and accurate understanding of the consequences of the rising influence of China, which will be active in the region for years to come.

This is not to say that foreign actors are the panacea to the region's emerging issues. Rather, it's crucial that not only governments but also key societal players in the Balkans — from businesses to universities to nongovernmental organizations — work with outside forces to help shape the future of the region. Resolution begins from within.

Indeed, some measure of hope can be taken from the fact that Belgrade and Pristina have opened a dialogue intended to ease tension between them. Meanwhile, Macedonia's new government, which rose to power in June, has already made great strides in improving relations with its neighbors by addressing possible solutions to a dispute with Greece over the recognition of Macedonia's name; by pledging increased cooperation between Skopje and Tirana; and, after two decades of negotiation, by signing a friendship treaty with Bulgaria.

Nevertheless, this progress will need to accelerate as other problematic developments, including heightened flows of migrants to the region from Africa and the Middle East, exacerbate the rise of the Muslim, Croatian and Serbian nationalist voices that underpin ethnic and social discontent. The Western Balkans will better cope with these challenges only with assistance from the rest of the world.

The Balkans could still prove to be a surprising success story in the years ahead. But as the region drifts beyond the attention of prominent global leaders, its chances of sinking back into the instability of its past will only increase if the world continues to watch from the sidelines.