



National Committee on American Foreign Policy

Assessing the Western Balkans in 2020 Summary of a Roundtable Discussion

September 16, 2020

By Stephen Whittaker

In 2018, the National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP), in cooperation with the East West Institute, published an analytical report and set of policy recommendations for the future of U.S. policy vis-à-vis the Western Balkans. While some prescriptions laid out by this report have come to pass, many continue to require careful attention from policymakers both in the United States and Europe. As such, the deepened uncertainty created by the COVID-19 pandemic and the continued interference of malicious external actors in the domestic affairs of Western Balkan nations, the NCAFP, in partnership with the Nizami Ganjavi International Center and the Foundation Shared Societies and Values Sarajevo believes it is a particularly apt moment to reexamine and assess the path forward for the region.

Coming together on September 16, 2020, a panel of distinguished former officials from the United States and the Western Balkans sought to chart out 2 key questions. First, how do these officials view the ‘state of play’ in the region given a series of recent developments? Second, what policy recommendations do they propose to address concerns raised?

Looking Forward, Standing Still

Beginning with a look back to the NCAFP’s 2018 report, many of the participants agreed that the core issues plaguing the Western Balkans, then, remain problematic today. Broadly, ethnic division and flawed institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, endemic corruption, and poor governance continue to hold back progress. COVID-19 has created substantial problems for slow-growing economies in many nations, and perennial emigration on the part of promising youth and entrepreneurs compounds already resource-strapped industries. The path for regional progress toward more resilient local institutions, let alone deeper integration with Western ones is far from smooth.

One subject that received particular attention was the recent meeting in Washington between the leaders of Serbia and Kosovo. The European Union has been a constant supporter of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue and they view the dialogue as a crucial, although frustrating, process. The appointment of a U.S. Special Envoy for this process was met with high praise, with many believing it indicated increased attention from American policymakers and might offer surprising success. What was not surprising to the participants, however, was that the recent meeting highlighted an obvious disconnect between European and American efforts. Furthermore, some even ventured into pessimism, framing recent American efforts as pure political gamesmanship that offered the most substantial rewards to the White House, rather than to either signatory nation.

Joining all of these concerns about the ‘state of play’ in the region is the prevailing fear, evidenced by the aforementioned Washington summit, that the United States and the European Union are, at best, misaligned, or, at worst, inadvertently working against one another with regard to the Western Balkans.

The Way Ahead

With the most pressing issues facing the Western Balkans identified in the first half of the discussion, the participants expressed their thoughts on general policy recommendations to help set the stage for future engagements. Notably, the desire for the United States and the European Union to again read from the same playbook took center stage. Though offering different particulars, a consensus formed that, no matter what policy direction is taken, the United States and the European Union must take it in concert.

Through guidance and constructive reinforcement of local efforts, the Western Balkans can be kept on a productive track. There is no single strategy for creating such a structure, but suggestions for deep engagement at the diplomatic working level, and for a veteran senior presence (engaged in shuttle diplomacy when and where appropriate) were well received. While this outside guidance and reinforcement is crucial, it should earnestly drive internal processes that demonstrate commitment to stated goals, and, ultimately, results. The participants agreed that the countries of the region must focus on reforms both economic and political to resolve the challenges they face. Additionally, some suggested that the European Union demonstrate flexibility in its accession requirements, as it has done in the past, to ensure that the governments and people of the region remain firmly invested in European structures and values.

Drawing from this belief that progress should be driven from within, several reform-gear recommendations also came to the fore. First, deepened assistance in the realm of rule of law and law enforcement would work toward the resolution of endemic problems such as organized crime and corruption. Further, an investment in civil society to encourage broader feelings of national representation, rather than representation along ethnic or rigidly political lines, will help to create a greater level of trust in government.

Finally, though several participants stressed that regional economies are not in immediate danger of collapse, a concerted effort to drive foreign investment in local enterprises remains vital. In the long term, European Union accession will help this process. However, it remains a double-edged sword. Though new opportunities will open in many ways, accession will also make the movement of people even easier. Therefore, support for local enterprises must be demonstrated early and often to anchor key contributors to important sectors of the economy.



THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE ON AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

ASSESSING THE WESTERN BALKANS IN 2020

SEPTEMBER 16, 2020
10:00 – 12:00
(US EASTERN STANDARD TIME)

SPEAKERS

The Honorable Susan M. ELLIOTT
President & CEO
NCAFP

H.E. Dr. Ivo JOSIPOVIĆ
President of Croatia
(2010-2015)

H.E. Dr. Zlatko LAGUMDŽIJA
Minister of Foreign Affairs of
Bosnia and Herzegovina
(2001-2003, 2012-2015)

H.E. Mr. Boris TADIĆ
President of Serbia
(2004-2012)

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