



Executive Summary



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RETURN OF THE BALKANS: CHALLENGES TO EUROPEAN INTEGRATION AND U.S. DISENGAGEMENT

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Political developments in the Western Balkans with a direct impact on regional security must be closely monitored. In several countries, disputes continue over the validity of administrative borders and the credibility of specific governments, and in some cases over the legitimacy of statehood itself. Democratic progress becomes problematic where state building is incomplete and contested. Furthermore, internally conflicted and externally contested states present challenges for European Union (EU) integration, where the focus of the EU must not only be on democratic consolidation and economic reform but also on institutional legitimacy, state building, and regional security.

Economic stagnation throughout the EU will have negative consequences for the Western Balkans. It curtails investment and credits, raises opposition to further EU enlargement, and reinforces Western Balkan reform fatigue. Such developments provide space for populists and nationalists who will benefit from economic stagnation and public frustration and trumpet xenophobia as a solution to mounting domestic challenges.

The political status quo controlled by entrenched parties coupled with growing economic inequalities, a lack of sufficient judicial reform, the pervasiveness of official corruption, a sense of injustice, and unfulfilled economic and occupational expectations among citizens all have a negative impact on stability. They deepen

public alienation, demoralization, resentment, and anger; increase crime and lawlessness; provide ammunition to new protest movements; and encourage extremism. Such sentiments can be turned against ethnic and religious minorities or toward broader causes such as border revisions and territorial acquisitions that fuel conflicts with nearby states and with international players.

The Western Balkan region has acquired a proliferation of precedents regarding national and territorial self-determination, autonomy, and secession that could be adopted by current or aspiring ethno-national leaders. Minority representatives in a number of states have viewed the fracturing of Yugoslavia and the independence of seven of its eight federal units as potentially repeatable precedents. Moreover, renewed conflicts over territory will be generated if domestic ethnic turmoil becomes increasingly interconnected among neighboring countries.

The EU's effectiveness as a promoter of reform will come under growing scrutiny if economic prospects in the Western Balkans diminish and disillusionment with the Union as an institutional destination increases. Although EU membership is not the panacea for resolving every conflict and eliminating all negative trends in the Western Balkans, the credible and timely prospect of accession into the EU helps keep democratic reforms on track as conditions for entry. Without such reforms, much of the progress achieved in

the Western Balkans since the end of the Wars of Yugoslav Succession (1991-99) can stall or even unravel, and U.S. disengagement from the region will appear premature.

The EU itself has entered a period of prolonged economic uncertainty, social turmoil, political dispute, and institutional confusion. While the Union's limitations as a hard power have been evident in its disjointed foreign policies and restricted military capabilities, its political and economic model may also fade as an instrument of attraction if it closes its doors to further enlargement and if the Union begins to splinter in the midst of the expanding economic crisis.

In recent years, the United States has been preoccupied with pressing priorities outside Europe and now plays a diminished role in the Western Balkans. While Washington has spent the last decade extracting itself from the region and allowing EU institutions to assume the leading role, renewed conflicts that are mishandled by an indecisive and divided EU could again pull the United States back into the region in dealing more directly with a spiral of instability.

A number of policies must be pursued in order to prevent a scenario whereby America's European partners call upon U.S. ground forces to participate in peacemaking or peacekeeping missions in the Western Balkans. Such priorities

must include more comprehensive strategic intelligence gathering, the identification of local and foreign political actors promoting instability, early warning signals regarding impending conflicts, a strong diplomatic response to any deterioration of political conditions in each Balkan state, and a firmer U.S. and Allied strategic commitment to bringing all countries in the region into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the EU.

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