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The EU-Western Balkans Cooperation on terrorism

Terrorism in Western Balkans

The fall of Eastern Block had grave consequences for Yugoslavia'sconstituent entities,as the awakening of national tensions, already obvious after Tito's death, made the disintegration unavoidable.

The plight of Bosnians Muslims after the beginning of the conflict in Bosnia had as a result a rising support from the international Muslim community, in order to ease the threats from war and the western imposed embargo.The belated reaction and the ineptitude of the West to end the conflict was seen as indifference against Muslims and paved the way for the penetration from Muslim countries and organizations in the region. The support was two-fold. On one hand considerable money contributions have been made through the establishment of network charities. On the other hand, mujahedeen fightersandmercenariesarrived in Bosnia to fight among their fellow Muslimsagainst the Serbs and Croats,as early as 1992.The Islamic foreign fighters have been estimated around 4.000- 6.000 in total, until the end of the war.

The Dayton Peace Accords was calling for the departure of all the foreigners due to a period of thirty days from the assignment of the agreement. Despite this provision,about 1.000 fighters didn't leave the country because the Sarajevo government granted citizenship and passports to them who had either married locally or claimed that they had no safe country to return toor even as a reward for military services.

Another reason for the rise of conservative Islam in the Balkans is linked with the fall of communism and the thereafter free practice of religion. From the 1990s onwards various foreign Islamic groups activated in the region,backed with money mainly from the Gulf states. Some of the groupspreached a hard line conservative Islam. The interaction of the region with international actors, especially from the Middle East, marked a gradual change at least to a small minority about religious affiliation and co-existence, which has become already more difficult after the painful memories of the 1990s conflicts.

After the end of the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo, the presence of peacekeeping forces, the influx of foreign aid and the prospects of integration to the Euro-Atlantic organizations had a positive effect in region's stability. During the previous decade the main terroristthreat was coming from other regions and the Balkans were considered to have a secondary role as a transit route and a rest place for terrorists.

The Arab Spring,despite expectations,led to chaos and disintegration in most cases and enabled the activities of various radical groups. Islamic State took advantage of the unfolded disintegration in Syria and achieved to control a vast region in Syria and Iraq. The call of ISIS to fellow Muslims to fight for the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate, the expulsion of western control and of the corrupted political elites and the renouncement of Sykes Picot division of Middle East had a major influence to many radicalized Muslims from around the world. Regardingthe Balkan region,around 900 foreign fighters travelled to Syria and Iraq. Bosnia & Herzegovina, the Santzak region, North Macedonia, Kosovo and Albania are considered the main hot spots for radicalization, recruitment and facilitation activities for foreign fighters.

Countering terrorism: Western Balkans responses to terrorism

Following the 9/11 and the Global War on Terror, the Western Balkans countries introduced reforms in legislation and institutional framework and adopted stricter security measures as a response to pressures from the terrorist threat and Western countries. During the previous decade, new public bodies were created in order to enhance counter-terrorism activities, to strengthen law enforcement capabilities and to coordinate the agencies responsible for the fight against terrorism. Moreover the Balkan countries adopted long term strategies to tackle the threat andharmonizedtheir criminal codes with UN and EU standards in terrorism matters.

Moreover, we have to mention theAmendments to the Citizenship of Bosnia-Herzegovina,which came into effect in 2005. The amendment established a state commission which was tasked with reviewing the status of any person who had been granted Bosnian citizenship between 6 April 1992 and 1January 2006. Despite the wide time frame, the commission examined the status of the mujahedeen fighters who came along during the Bosnia's warand revoked the citizenship of more than a 1.000 persons.The concerted effort to expurgate former Mujahideen from Bosnia was part of attempts made by the Bosnian government to be seen as a responsible supporter of the War on Terror and an ally of the USAbecause after 9/11, Bosnia found itself on the list of the 'second-front' of areas and countries associated with terrorism.

During the current decade,Western Balkans countries passed legal reforms against citizens who join military groups and participate in armed conflicts in foreign countries, as a response to the rising flowsof foreign fighters from the region to Syria and Iraq. The adopted measureswere necessary steps to counter the threat that returnees pose for the conduct of terrorist attacks.

Furthermore, various deradicalizationprograms have been developed in order to engage returnees and to counter topreventradicalization. Taking into account the poor economic conditions and high unemployment levels, youth consists the most vulnerable part of the population. The Western Balkans countries have to pay extra attentionto sermon at mosques, online terrorist propaganda and radicalization in prisons in order to prevent terrorism and violent extremism.

Western Balkans-EU cooperation on terrorism

The EU interest about terrorism is not a recent development. Already during the previous decade,the 9/11 and the rise of jihadi threat in Western Europe had a serious impact in Union's involvement in counter-terrorism. Western Balkans poses a region of high interest for the EUas one of the least stable regions in Europe. Focusing on terrorism, Western Balkans have become a place for military and training activities forislamist fighters, as well as a route through which foreign fighters from Western Europe have travelled to Middle East.

The yearning of Western Balkans countries to jointhe European Union and NATO has offered an important leverage for reforms generally, and inthe security field in particular. Prior to 2001, the main EU security concerns were the countering

of illegal migration and the combat against organized crime. If weexamine the Stabilisation and Association Agreements with the Western Balkans countries there are obvious differences in the field of counter terrorism. The Agreements before 9/11 (i.e. North Macedonia) included general provisions for prevention and combating crime including terrorism. On the otherhand, the Agreements with Albania, Serbia and Kosovo include specific articles for the suppression of terrorism and money laundering. Moreover, the strengthening of Europol responsibilities and capabilitieshave led to a more active role in the field of security sector reforms,an evolution that in the case of Western Balkans marked with theassignment of operational agreements.

The current EU strategy for the integration of Western Balkans, whichwas published on February 2018, refers to security and migration issues and calls for enhanced strategic and operational cooperationin order to address the current security and terrorism threats. Much work is already under way at EU level to help build capacities in the Western Balkans and facilitate international police and judicial cooperation to counter threats originating from organized crime and terrorism, including radicalization leading to violent extremism, the challenge of foreign terrorist fighters and the trafficking of firearms and explosives.

Furthermore,European Union supports an Integrative Plan of Action in accordance with the existing EU policies for the region,in order to ensure better results on cooperation in the field of terrorism and avoid duplication. In 2015,the Council adopted EU Western Balkan Counter-Terrorism Initiative Integrative Plan of Action (WBCTiiPA) 2015-2017.

The Initiative engages the EU members and affiliated European organizations, as well as various international/regional organizations and states from the wider Balkan region (Turkey, Moldova).

In addition, the Council decided to expand the scope of security cooperation with Western Balkans and adopted the setting up of the "Integrative Internal Security Governance", an umbrellaapproach with two pillars added together with the counterterrorism dimension. The other two pillars concern Serious Crime and Border Security, two extremely important security issues for the region and the European Union.

The WBCTiIpaInitiative has offeredimportant added value so far. Since the initiation of the program we can assess as more concrete and important deliverables, the creation of the regional list of foreign terrorist fighters and of the list of common risk indicators for early detection of radicalized citizens. Mainly, the program has contributed to a wider regional and EU-WB cooperation in the fields of information exchange and transfer of best practices and expertise and has facilitated the better utilization of human resources.

The Initiative has mobilized a wide number of regional and international organizations, which with their expertise has enabled the establishment of permanent schemes of cooperation between communities, police andcivil society. Additional comprehensive work has taken place in the field of education for the youth, as well as the religious leaders, imams and prison staff in order to enhance tolerance and co-existence and prevent and detect early signs of deviation which leads to terrorism and violent extremism.

Although many of the projects are implemented in a piloted form, they can contribute to concrete positive effects as the results from micro-level can beadopted in a full-scale in the future and enhance the capabilities to counter terrorist and radicalization threats.Except from the promotion of regional cooperation, the countries of the region work together with representatives of organizations to promote tailor made policies appropriate for each country.

After negotiations between all the relevant stakeholders the Integrative plan of Action for the period 2018-2020 was publishedon March 2018. The new plan aims to enhance furthercommunication and exchange of information between relevant stakeholders, and to promote prevention and implementation of CT/CVE strategies. According to the plan the main threats to be addressed are: (a) Illicit firearms; (b) Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs); (c) Facilitation of illegal immigration; (d) Forged and fake travel documents, (e) Organized property crime, and (f) Money laundering.

The Plan of Action builds on the results of the previous program and aims to address the weaknesses and enhance the positive results. In this direction the implementation of the current program is based on a dynamic approach,trying to ensure the best exploitation of the funds available based on assessment and evaluation.The overall goal is to improve the security in the Western Balkans and the EU

bypreventing and combatting violent extremism and terrorism. The development of "Prevent-Refer-Address" concept is an important step forward in the new framework. Itaims to establish inter-agency platforms, with the involvement of civil society partners at local level and intends to prevent, refer and address cases of radicalization leading to violent extremism or terrorism.

Conclusions

Western Balkans remains vulnerable to terrorism and radicalization because of the weak institutions, corruption and economic stagnation. Despite the rising numbers of radicalized youth, the vast majority of the population remains moderate and prefers a future into theEuropean Union instead of a caliphate.

During the first two decades of 21st century the Western Balkans countries have madeprogressincounter-terrorism but poor administration, widespread corruption and lack of resources still impede the full effectiveness of the adopted measures.

The integration of the region in the European Union is of great importance not only for economic but for security reasons as well. Due to the unstable and problematic nature of the political environment, Western Balkan countries have to pass a long period of reforms to become full members. Meanwhile,theEuropean Union has to be a supporter of good governance and enhance cooperation and the economic prospects in the region. Economic development can contribute to peace and security and counter radicalization and nationalistic tensions.

The prospect of a common future inside the EU must be a spark for reconciliationbetween religious moderates and it is crucial the countries of the region to support political integration, economic growth and address corruption as well as organized crime.

Balkan stability is necessary for European security. The rise of radical Islam, the persistent ethnic tensions and the wounds from the past are major factors of concern and make difficult the establishment of a stable environment,which is necessary for economic prosperity and long-lasting peace. EU has to reinforce its engagement in the region, based on successful initiatives in the field of security and counterterrorism,such as the ongoing security policy dialogue between the Union and

the Western Balkans. The Western Balkan partners from their part should be more closely associated to relevant security policy discussions taking place in the EU level.