

Threat of war increases in the western Balkans

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The political and social crisis in the Balkans is exacerbating conflicts between the successor states of Yugoslavia, heightening the threat of another war in the region.

The entire region has been in a state of acute crisis ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the civil war in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, which was fuelled by the United States and Germany. Hardly any country in the region has a stable government. Corruption and crime are endemic and the largest part of the population lives in catastrophic conditions.

Journalist Norbert Mappes-Niediek, a Balkan specialist, remarked recently on broadcaster *Deutsche Welle*: “Europe is the powder keg. But the Balkans are the fuse. The conflicts are what is most dangerous. They cannot be isolated. And precisely in the present situation, in which the world has become so unstable and there is no longer any predominant power, it is all the more easy for the conflicting parties in the Balkans to seek allies among the greater powers. This is a situation like 1914. This, most of all, should give grounds for fear.”

According to the Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research (HIIK), 18 conflicts can be observed currently in the region.

Dusan Reljic, head of the Brussels office of the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, said on broadcaster Deutschlandradio Kultur: “Relations between the Yugoslav successor states in the Balkans have not been as bad for over two decades. In the Balkans—in Bosnia, Serbia and Kosovo—leading politicians are thinking about how to redraw the borders again, and even talk of the danger of a new war.” According to Reljic, nationalism in the Balkans does not have “a life of its own,” but is an expression

of social and economic conditions.

Florian Bieber from the Centre for East European Studies at the University of Graz said, “The idea of a liberal democratic consensus no longer exists.” The crisis of democracy in southeast Europe was visible to everyone.

Kosovo is one of the clearest examples. Formerly part of Yugoslavia, and independent since 2008, Kosovo is an economic and social disaster area. Basically, Kosovo produces little. Over 90 percent of all necessary goods are imported. For years, the amount of cash coming into the country from Kosovans working abroad is higher than that generated in Kosovo itself. Unemployment stands at nearly 50 percent; among young people it is over 70 percent.

The perspective for joining the EU, as promised by Brussels a few years ago, lies in the distant future. Last spring, a half-hearted Association Agreement was negotiated, which is totally unrealistic in view of the conditions necessary for its fulfilment.

A precondition is that Kosovo makes measurable progress in the fight against corruption and organized crime. Since the government, big business and the security forces are deeply involved in these activities, every attempt has been doomed to failure. At the same time, there are influential forces, such as the strongest opposition party in Pristina, urging the union of Kosovo with Albania. The political situation in Kosovo is extremely acute. Last year, there were violent clashes between the government and opposition in parliament. Head of state Hashim Thaci is seeking to channel internal conflicts through an aggressive stance towards Serbia. Last Tuesday, he submitted a bill to increase the size of the army to 5,000 and 2,500 reservists.

This produced such violent reactions in Serbia that NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg was obliged

to intervene. He urged Thaci to establish “direct contact” with Serbia. Kosovo is a de facto protectorate of the Western powers, in which KFOR soldiers are stationed.

Serbia is also witnessing growing nationalism as the social crisis in the country deepens. Serbia has been negotiating accession to the EU since 2014, and has already implemented some of the “reforms” demanded by Brussels. However, given the general crisis of the EU, most member states are increasingly distancing themselves from an actual accession. Brussels has noted Moscow’s influence on Serbia with concern. While Belgrade receives \$10 million in aid a year from Moscow, it gets over \$190 million from the EU.

The United States and almost all EU member states favour a rapid recognition of Kosovo by the United Nations, but Moscow has used its veto in the Security Council to stop the country joining the UN.

Serbian President Tomislav Nikolic has even threatened to personally march into Kosovo at the head of the army, because the Albanian majority there is allegedly planning war against the Serb minority.

In Serbia too, the collapse of the economy is the reason for the rise of aggressive nationalism. In this context, the SWP warns against leaving six western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia) to their economic fate. “Calculations by the World Bank say that even if these countries had six percent growth a year, they would only reach the EU average in 2035—provided that the EU countries had no growth.”

Bosnia, which declared independence 25 years ago, is now commonly referred to as “failed state.” As in Kosovo, poverty, crime and corruption are all pervasive. A country with 3.5 million inhabitants has 150 ministers and 600 parliamentarians who are consciously stoking up conflicts between three ethnic groups.

Bosnia applied for EU membership in February 2016, but its prospects are considered poor. Some 600 EUFOR soldiers are still stationed in the country to prevent outbreaks of social or ethnic tensions.

Macedonia is on the verge of civil war. The political elites have been fighting amongst themselves for months. “In normal times,” the *Economist* recently wrote, “the world tends to ignore Macedonia and its 2m people, a quarter of them ethnic Albanian. But the

world is not ignoring Macedonia now. Western politicians are rushing to Skopje, Russia is issuing warnings and Serbian newspapers proclaim that war is coming. ‘Geopolitical relevance is returning to the Balkans,’ laments Veton Latifi, an analyst.”

In February, followers of former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski protested; although the right-wing politician had won the parliamentary elections in December, he has not been able to form a government majority.

Last week, President Gjorge Ivanov refused to give the social democrats a mandate to form a government, although they can form a majority in parliament along with three Albanian parties. He could not agree with this coalition, Ivanov said. It pursues a programme that was devised abroad and endangered the country’s unity, he said. In this way, he is stoking up nationalistic sentiment against the Albanian minority in the country.

The extreme tensions in Macedonia and neighbouring Albania, and the possible interference of Russia, means European and American representatives are reacting nervously. The EU’s foreign policy chief, Federica Mogherini, and representatives of NATO and the US State Department urged Ivanov to reverse his decision.



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