

European powers extend offensive against Russia into Balkans

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The European Council summit meeting of the European Union (EU) heads of government last week accused Russia of destabilising the Balkan region.

The declaration will sharply increase the worsening tension between Russia and the Western powers over Ukraine and Syria that has seen the militarisation of large stretches of Russia's European frontiers and a flood of NATO troops in eastern Europe. In addition, the deepening economic and political crisis of world capitalism is exacerbating divisions between the European powers and the United States, especially since the election of Donald Trump to the presidency—presaging an escalating drift towards protectionism, militarism and war.

Under these conditions, the contemporary situation in the Balkans, like that in eastern Europe, the Middle East and South China Sea, increasingly echoes the period before the First World War over 100 years ago.

At the summit, Donald Tusk, the newly re-elected president of the European Council, said the Balkans were “vital for Europe.”

“Tensions and divisions have got out of hand, partly because of unhealthy external influences, which have been destabilising several countries for some time,” he said. “I will propose to leaders that we take action.”

Tusk's accusations of unhealthy external influences were directed at Moscow, but it is the Western powers that are responsible for the region's destabilisation and the resulting social and economic disaster, increasing ethnic tensions and growth of militarism.

The major imperialist powers, particularly the US and Germany, deliberately engineered Yugoslavia's break-up in the 1990s, in order to isolate and target Serbia as the regional power considered to be the main obstacle to the assertion of the West's control over an area of geo-strategic interest. They were indifferent to the tragic consequences of their piecemeal break-up of the Yugoslav

federation, which history has proven would inevitably lead to civil war and create new ethnically based states incapable of providing a progressive solution to the problems facing the Balkan people.

The Bosnian war of 1992-1995 and the 1998-1999 Kosovo conflict both saw NATO military intervention, culminating in the deployment of 60,000 soldiers under Operation Joint Endeavour and the bombing of Serbia's capital, Belgrade.

The EU first offered the promise of eventual EU membership in 2003. Croatia joined in 2013, but Montenegro and Serbia have only started formal talks and Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia are yet to begin. Then in 2014, European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker declared that the EU would not accept new countries during his five-year term of office. Moreover, the concept of a union in Europe has been thrown into crisis over the impoverishment of Greece, Britain's vote last year to exit the EU, and then the new Trump administration's attacks both on the EU and on Germany in particular, as a trade competitor.

But even as Berlin and Paris are proposing a two-tier/two-speed model involving a select group of countries becoming more integrated while other countries are relegated to a more peripheral relationship, the EU felt it politic to strongly suggest at the summit that the Balkan countries are tantalisingly close to membership. Indeed, in the week prior to the summit, the EU's foreign policy chief, Federica Mogherini, made a whistle-stop tour of the region, declaring, “I'm working to see every single one of the Western Balkans partners move forward on the reform path, towards the European Union, to ensure the process is irreversible. Regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations remain essential in this context.”

In reality, in every country she visited, Mogherini was confronted with the fact that regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations remain further away than ever.

Serbia and Croatia are involved in what is regularly described as a “mini arms race,” verging on the “brink of war.” Both countries are renewing their military hardware and considering the re-introduction of conscription.

Mogherini found her speech to the Serbian parliament on March 3 drowned out by chants of “Serbia, Russia, we don’t need the [European] Union!” by right-wing Serbian Radical Party nationalists who feel emboldened by the overtures of Trump to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Of all the relationships Russia has with the Balkan countries, Serbia has been the closest. In 2013, a joint declaration on a strategic partnership was signed followed by a military cooperation agreement leading to the first-ever combined Serbian-Russian military exercise. For this reason, Serbia has refused to support Western sanctions against Russia, but there is increasing pressure to do so as a condition of EU membership. Its ability to balance between the EU and Russia is rapidly narrowing.

Serbia’s relations with Kosovo have deteriorated further. In January, the first train to be sent from Serbia to the Serb-populated enclave in northern Kosovo was daubed with “Kosovo is Serbia” slogans in 21 languages. Kosovo President Hashim Thaci has accused Serbia of attempting to use “the Crimea model” to annex the enclave. Last week, he introduced legislation into parliament to transform the country’s lightly armed Kosovo Security Force into a national army without a change to the constitution that would require the consent of the 11 Serbian MPs in the 120-member chamber.

At the same time the Kosovan parliament called for the suspension of the “normalisation” dialogue with Serbia, until France rejects a Serbian extradition request for former Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) commander Ramush Haradinaj and releases him. The KLA functioned as a US proxy force prior to and during the Kosovo war.

International recognition of Kosovo’s independence remains stalled. It has been recognised by 114 countries, but not by Serbia, Russia, China, Israel, Iran, Spain, Greece and others.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the European Commission’s latest progress report on the country’s EU membership prospects says the country’s institutions are virtually non-functioning. It is more than 20 years since the civil war there was ended by the 1995 US-brokered Dayton agreement, but the country remains divided into two semi-independent ethnically based entities—each with its own president, government, parliament and police overseen by an unelected United Nations-appointed High Representative with semi-dictatorial powers.

In Montenegro, Mogherini’s speech to the parliament was boycotted by pro-Russian opposition parties opposed to the country joining NATO, probably in May. The Putin government has warned that NATO enlargement in the Balkans is one of the greatest threats to Russia’s interests. Tensions have soared over an alleged assassination plot following last October’s elections against former President Milo Djukanovic, who has steered Montenegro towards NATO. The police arrested 20 people including two “nationalists from Russia,” accusing them of the attempted assassination. The Montenegrin special prosecutor insisted there was no evidence that the Russian government was involved.

However, by February 19, the UK’s *Sunday Telegraph* published a front-page article quoting British government sources saying “the planned coup was one of the most blatant recent examples of an increasingly aggressive campaign of interference in Western affairs.”

Prime Minister Theresa May then stepped in pledging to curb Russia’s “destabilisation” of the region and increasing the UK’s involvement, including hosting the 2018 Western Balkans Summit.

As Mogherini was visiting Macedonia, she was confronted by thousands of people taking part in daily protests against the formation of a new coalition government including three ethnic Albanian parties that are calling for Albanian to be designated as a second official language.

The scale of the tragedy in the Balkans has led to calls for its further restructuring along ethnic lines. Former UK diplomat Timothy Less, in his *Foreign Affairs* article, “Dysfunction in the Balkans: Can the Post-Yugoslav Settlement Survive?,” suggested the need for a new “map” of the region based on a Greater Croatia, Greater Serbia, and Greater Albania. Such calls can only lead to further tragedies.



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