

EUISS expert workshop Building resilience in the Western Balkans

A workshop organised by the EU Institute for Security Studies

Brussels, Thursday 16 February 2017

Venue: Scotland House – Rond-Point Schuman, 6

Context and objectives:

The European Union Global Strategy (EUGS) highlights strengthening state and societal resilience in the southern and eastern neighbouring regions, including the Western Balkans, as one of the guiding principles and priorities of the EU's external action. It conceptualises 'resilience' as the capacity of states – but also polities, societies and communities – to withstand and absorb shocks, recover and even bounce back from them. As states in the Western Balkans also face severe difficulties in terms of security, economy and governance, their ability to respond to such challenges clearly stands at the heart of the EU's foreign and security policy. When states and societies in and around Europe struggle, the EU itself is at risk.

The sources of vulnerability vary according to the different settings and political constellations; as a result, resilience-building strategies require tailor-made approaches. The concept of resilience promoted within the EUGS framework provides sufficient width and flexibility to devise specific implementation approaches for each individual region – in this case, the Western Balkans.

This expert workshop will seek to identify and analyse the various drivers of fragility in and for the Western Balkans and the kind of responses that may be needed from the EU and/or local actors.

The workshop will foster interaction between the academic and think-tank community, on the one hand, and policymakers and practitioners on the other. It brings together leading experts from across Europe, the Western Balkans and Brussels – including from the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Commission's Directorate-General for Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR).

Agenda

11:15-11:30 Registration and welcome coffee

11:30-11:45 Introduction

Antonio Missiroli, Director, EUISS
Zoran Nechev (EFB/EUISS)

11:45-13:00 Session 1: External drivers of fragility

It has long been assumed that the EU would take the leading role in the transformation of the Western Balkans. This assumption no longer remains unchallenged. While the EU's enlargement process has lost momentum, other external players – notably Russia, China, Turkey and the Gulf states – have come to play a more prominent role. Some of their activities may complement the EU's engagement, but others are likely to challenge or even undermine the Union's objectives. In addition, radicalisation and violent extremism have emerged as specific threats which cannot be tackled with domestic measures alone and which have the potential to seep across borders into the EU itself. How does increased geopolitical competition contribute to fragility in the Western Balkans? How could the EU react to the threat of radicalisation and violent extremism in the Western Balkans? Is there a shared perception of external threats and their domestic implications – and a shared vision of how to develop the kind of resilience needed for the Western Balkan countries?

Chair Sabina Lange (EIPA/EUISS)
Impluse 1 Dušan Reljić (SWP)
Impluse 2 Filip Ejodus (UOB)
Impluse 3 Predrag Petrović (BCSP)
Comments Clive Rumbold (EEAS)

13:00-14:00 Lunch break

14:00-15:15 Session 2: Internal drivers of fragility

More than two decades after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, most Western Balkan countries are still struggling to consolidate their democratic systems. The 2016 Commission Reports for the Western Balkan countries expressed concerns for 'backsliding' in terms of separation of powers, political interference in the independence of the judiciary, and a poor track record of fighting high-level political corruption. Some Balkan governments seem willing to silence critical media and to 'capture' state institutions. Indeed, public trust in the political system and state institutions is at a historic low. How can these internal challenges be tackled? What is the role of and the potential for civil society actors? Is there a risk that improving 'state resilience' comes at the detriment of 'societal resilience'? And how could the increasing polarisation of societal forces in the Western Balkans be addressed?

Chair Florian Trauner (VUB/EUISS)
Impluse 1 Florian Bieber (BiEPAG/UNIGRAZ)
Impluse 2 Milica Delević (EBRD)
Impluse 3 Corina Stratulat (EPC)
Comments Lora Ujkaj (DG NEAR)

15:15-16:30 Session 3: What kind of resilience – and what implications for the EU?

The EU's overall strategy in the Western Balkans lies at a crossroads. Its traditional approach and policy narrative is increasingly contested by competing external players and domestic political elites which espouse less liberal views. In implementing the EUGS, the EU may need to revitalise its regional approach while improving resilience in the Western Balkans. The longer its engagement remains lukewarm and its enlargement policy stalled, the greater the risk of losing out to other external actors. But if the EU reengages, it risks antagonising those segments of the public which oppose a further expansion of the Union. Is 'more of the same' the most likely outcome? If so, how will this impact on the EU's objective of building resilience in the region? Is there a common understanding of the concept of resilience between the Western Balkans and the EU? And what could be the role of other regional and external players?

Chair Igor Bandović (EFB)
Impluse 1 Srđan Cvijić (OSEPI)
Impluse 2 Thanos Dokos (ELIAMEP)
Impluse 3 Ana Juncos (UOB)
Comments Alexander McLachlan (EEAS)