

# WESTERN BALKANS AT THE CROSSROADS: ASSESSING THE INFLUENCE OF EXTERNAL ACTORS

## CONFERENCE AND PRESENTATION OF RESEARCH OUTCOMES WESTERN BALKANS AT THE CROSSROADS: ASSESSING THE INFLUENCE OF EXTERNAL ACTORS

**Date:** 26 April 2019

**Venue:** Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic

In the past couple of years, the former Yugoslav states that are not (yet) members of the EU or NATO have been confronted with a wave of rising ethnic and social tensions, authoritarian impulses and corruption scandals leading to democratic backsliding and social unrest in a number of cases. These vulnerabilities appear to be exploited by external actors for the purpose of increasing their leverage to achieve tactical and strategic gains. The Balkans have historically been a zone of great-power rivalry. Stagnating European and shrinking US involvement in the past decade and too distant prospects of the integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures have expanded the window of opportunity for other external forces to step in. Will the recent EU and NATO initiatives (new EU strategy for the region, infrastructural projects, re-stated commitment, accession/moves on the NATO tracks) prove to be sufficient to reverse the trend?

The conference is co-organized by Prague Security Studies Institute and the Institute of International Relations under the auspices of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, and in cooperation with the Foreign Ministry's Department of Foreign Policy Analysis and Planning. It aims to assess the influence of all external actors playing role in the region in the changing global context marked by worsening of Western relations with Russia, fears of Chinese economic expansion, increasingly tense relations with Turkey, and increasing presence of the Gulf. In this context, it will discuss current challenges and vulnerabilities of Western Balkans countries as well as foreign policy objectives and strategies of external actors and how these are interconnected. It seeks to get together senior EU and NATO officials, Balkan experts, policy-makers, diplomats, academics and researchers as well as specialised journalists to approach the topic from a variety of perspectives instigating a fruitful debate.



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## PROGRAM

08:30–09:00 Registration

09:00–09:10 **Welcoming remarks**

**Petr Lang**, *Program Director of the Prague Security Studies Institute & Ondřej Ditrych*, *Director of the Institute of International Relations*

09:10–09:20 **Opening remarks**

**Tomáš Petříček**, *Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic*

09:20–11:00 **Western Balkans at the crossroads of external influences—Long-standing alliances or recent geopolitical games?**

The Balkans have always lain at the crossroads of various, *and often contradictory*, foreign actors' interests and strategic goals. In the changing global context marked by increasingly troubled EU and US relations with its non-Western counterparts and Western Balkans' position of a gate-way to Europe, the region, which remains largely not integrated into the EU, has again become an attractive playing ground in the global geopolitical game. The panel will look into strategies, foreign policy objectives and modes of conduct of all relevant external actors addressing the following questions: Has the engagement of the EU and US shrunk, or are they present in the region as they always have been? How has the presence of Russia and Turkey in the Western Balkans evolved over the years? What is the state of mind of citizens towards external actors? Is the threat of foreign influence in the Western Balkans overstated?

Moderator: **Ivana Cvetković Bajrović** (*Senior Program Officer, National Endowment for Democracy, United States*)

Speakers: **Pieter Feith** (*Consultant, European Institute of Peace; former ICR/EUSR Kosovo, Netherlands*)

**Maxim Samorukov** (*Deputy Editor, Carnegie.ru, Russia*)

**Hamdi Firat Büyüç** (*Analyst and Journalist, Balkans Investigative Reporting Network, Bosnia and Herzegovina*)

**Marko Ivković** (*Serbia Resident Senior Program Manager, National Democratic Institute, Serbia*)

Commentary: **Kristof Bender** (*Deputy Chairman, European Stability Initiative, Austria*)

11:00–11:15 Coffee break

11:15–12:45 **Implications for the role of international organisations in the Western Balkans**

Once overwhelmingly regarded as facilitators of transition from authoritarianism to liberal-democracy, *international organisations and their representatives have recently been accused of prioritising stability over democracy and thereby fostering the rule of the local autocrats*. This panel will reflect on the role of international organisations in the geopolitically contested region of the Western Balkans by discussing the following questions: Have international organisations really conformed to autocracy in the Western Balkans? Is their continuing presence impeding the liberal-democratic development in the Western Balkans countries? How much is the relation between prominent international organisations and the Western Balkans states and societies strained because of the continuous crisis in the EU? What links or relationships have international organisations established with the brewing social frustration and popular discontent in the Western Balkans? What are the lessons learned from the international organisations engagement in the Western Balkans?

Moderator: **Tomáš Dopita** (*Senior Researcher, Institute of International Relations, Czech Republic*)

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Speakers: **Janina Hřebíčková** (Formerly Multilateral Expert in five IOs in Iraq and the Western Balkans; currently Special Envoy for the Western Balkans, MFA, Czech Republic)

**Jolyon Naegle** (Former Head of Political Affairs Office at the UN Mission in Kosovo, Czech Republic)

**Sonja Licht** (President, Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence, Serbia)

**Adnan Huskić** (President, Center for Election Studies; Sarajevo School of Science and Technology, Bosnia and Herzegovina)

Commentary: **Ioannis Armakolas** (Assistant Professor, University of Macedonia; Editor in Chief, Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, Greece)

12:45–13:45 Lunch break

## 13:45–15:15 Western Balkans' perspective — Mapping foreign influences and local vulnerabilities

Presentation of the key findings of the year-long project “Western Balkans at the Crossroads” led by PSSI and supported by the National Endowment for Democracy. The Western policy makers and experts tend to observe the increasing influence of Russia, Turkey, China and the Gulf in the Balkans with great suspicion and concern. While some in the Western Balkans share their fears others see the economic, political or military cooperation with the non-Western world as an opportunity for their countries. The panel will explore different strategies and aims of non-Western external actors focusing on the ways how they approach and exploit specific socio-economic contexts and vulnerabilities of individual Western Balkan countries. It will address the following questions: Which means do non-Western actors employ and what are the particular manifestations and consequences of their involvement? Are external engagements undermining the fragile internal stability of the Western Balkan countries? Are their strategic interests and modes of conduct contradictory to the European and US ones or is it possible to find a common ground?

Moderator: **Thomas Kulidakis** (Balkan Commentator for the Czech Radio and Czech Television, Greece)

Speakers: PSSI researchers from the region working on the project

**Srećko Latal** (PSSI researcher; Regional Editor of the Balkans Investigative Reporting Network, Bosnia and Herzegovina)

**Hana Semanić** (PSSI researcher; covering Montenegro; Central European University, Hungary)

**Maja Bjeloš** (PSSI researcher, Serbia)

**Vesa Bashota** (PSSI researcher, Kosovo)

**Martin Naunov** (PSSI researcher; UNC-Chapel Hill, North Macedonia)

Commentary: **Arlinda Rrustemi** (Strategic Analyst, Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, Netherlands)

15:15–15:30 Coffee break

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## **15:30–17:00** New external actor in the South East and Central Europe—Comparing the role and perception of Chinese investments in the Western Balkans and CE region

Presentation of the research outcomes of the project “Comparative analysis of the approach towards China: V4+ and ‘One belt one road’” supported by the International Visegrad Fund.

China’s emergence over the last two decades as one of the world’s major economies has had a transformative impact on international relations. The countries of South East and Central Europe are expected to play an important role in the European element of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a global infrastructure project intended to link markets around the world together in a China-centric trading network. This is especially relevant given both their own expanding consumer purchasing power and the fact that they hold the key to overland routes connecting China to its largest export markets in Europe. What are the trade dynamics between selected countries of South East and Central Europe vis-a-vis China? Do Chinese investment projects in the region represent a threat or opportunity? To what extent does the EU regulatory framework influence Chinese business practices and can investment screening mechanisms prevent potential takeovers of strategic industries?

Moderator: **Kateřina Procházková** (*Journalist, Sinopsis, Czech Republic*)

Speakers: **Stefan Vladisavljev** (*Program Assistant, Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence, Serbia*)

**Bruno Surdel** (*Expert, Centre for International Relations, Poland*)

**Jonáš Syrovátka** (*Program Manager, Prague Security Studies Institute, Czech Republic*)

**Matej Šimalčík** (*Executive Director, Institute of Asian Studies, Slovakia*)

**Tamás Peragovics** (*Junior Research Fellow, Institute of World Economics, Hungary*)

Commentary: **Filip Jirouš** (*Editor, Sinopsis, Czech Republic*)

## **17:00–17:10** Concluding remarks – **Jan Šnidauf**, *Chief Advisor to MFA, Czech Republic*

17:10–18:00 Glass of wine, *Large dining hall*

Student conference will take place on the sidelines from 13:45. Students will present their research on the Balkans with the best contribution winning a small donation for their research in the field. The jury will consist of civil society, MFA and academia representatives.