

POLICY PAPER

**BALKING THE BLUNDERS IN THE BALKANS:
THE WESTERN STRATEGY**

Filip Tesař, Jan Havránek

November 2004

**Ústav mezinárodních vztahů
Nerudova 3
118 50 Praha 1**

This authorial text has not been edited.

Balking the Blunders in the Balkans:

The Western Strategy

Filip Tesařⁱ and Jan Havránekⁱⁱ

Summary

Since the beginning of the 1990s, the West was obliged to deal with several crises in the Balkans and pledged to a complete reconstruction of the post-war situation in the region. During this demanding process, the Western countries however maximised their traditional stereotyped attitudes towards the Balkan countries. Both the European Union and the United States have typecast the Balkan states according to the extent of the internal problems of these states, and according to their own ability to deal with such issues.

Despite the good intentions behind the acting of the West, this process resulted in a mixture of shambolic strategies that have made the Western presence in the region very complicated. The West has been gradually losing its military and managing respect, given its reluctance to pursue the proclaimed objectives. Such disinclination to act has played into the hands of the local bosses, who very soon found out how the system can be abused in order to satisfy both their electorate and the Western custodians.

Nowadays, it is clear that such a hesitant attitude of the West towards the Balkans is no longer sustainable. A significant change in the Western strategy towards the Balkan countries is required, should the integration of the Balkans into the Western structures (i.e. NATO, EU) be successful.

There are currently two possible scenarios for the Western presence in the region:

- **Partial and insignificant changes** will be undertaken. This will lead to conservation of the current situation in the international protectorates of Bosnia and Kosovo, and to a painful integration of the Western Balkans into NATO and the EU. The tension in the region will not decrease. The Western military / police presence in the Balkans will need to be preserved, if not strengthened.
- **A complete change of the attitude**, as suggested in this paper, will have a positive impact on the transformation process in the Balkans. A long-term, comprehensive strategy is very likely to end with the integration of most of the Balkan countries into NATO and the EU. Such changes will also help to resolve the status of Bosnia and Kosovo and the situation there. The West will regain its ruined reputation.

Both the EU and the Balkans will benefit from the active involvement of the West in the region. A Western withdrawal from the Balkans would be counterproductive, for it would mean a changeover to a costly, passive protection from the instability. With regard to the increasing US engagement in the Greater Middle East, the civil / military management in the Balkans will renege upon the EU.

ⁱ Filip Tesař is the Senior Researcher at the Prague-based Institute of International Relations (IIR), and a Ph.D. candidate at the Charles University, Prague.

ⁱⁱ Jan Havránek is the Vice-Chairman of the Association for International Affairs (AMO), Prague, and the Program Coordinator of the Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI).



1. Main Issues

The real goals of the Western presence in the Balkans have been insufficiently discussed, and the outcomes of the Western acting in the Balkans were very often half-hearted.ⁱ Not only there is no general agreement between the EU and the US on what should be the aims of the Western presence in the region. There is even no clear EU strategy towards the Balkans as a whole. This can be clearly seen on the results of the Western military engagement, the operations in the field of civil management and the general political performing of the West.

The reasons for the problems in the military sphere reside in unsatisfactory structures of the NATO decision-making process a command. NATO deterrence is thus diminished. This causes that the potential of the NATO presence and the process of NATO enlargement have both been used for stabilization of the Balkans only to a limited extent.

The problems occurring in the civil management reflect the contradiction in the Western idealistic policy and its pragmatic goals. Such contradictions, together with the lack of flexibility in the Western acting, resulted in fractional solutions, weakening the authority of the Western-led missions.

The above-mentioned issues will be discussed in this paper. While assessing the involvement of different international actors in the context of the long-standing insecurity in the region, the following seems to be the sought-after action: **The EU should realize that it cannot disengage from the responsibility for the development in the Balkans. It should define a comprehensive strategy, which would enable the EU to fully take on the responsibility.**

2. Western Perspectives

Traditionally, the West has been shaping the internal political scene of the Balkan states. Coming under external (i.e. Western) influences, the Balkan region was divided into spheres of interests of the major powers. After the Second World War, the relation of the Balkan countries to NATO and the Soviet Union determined the political division. **Greece**, despite a very strong anti-Americanism among the Greek population, became a member of the Alliance. **Yugoslavia** officially declared neutrality, but both NATO and the Warsaw Pact were regarded as enemies. The rest of the Balkan states (**Bulgaria, Romania, Albania**) were members of the Warsaw Pact (yet Albania left the Pact, and Romania broke off its activities).

After 1989, the West became a major “partner” of the Balkans. Nowadays, after a period of violent conflict in former- Yugoslavia, the West classifies the Balkan countries according to their **political and economical stability**:

- **Romania and Bulgaria.** Despite the relative poverty in these countries, both are perceived as stable. Illegal migration from these countries is not taken as a significant menace.
- **Croatia.** Compared to the latter, the internal problems of Croatia are “more serious” (nationalism, remnants of the former regime, etc.), however they “can be managed.”

ⁱ By the term “West”, we understand especially the European Union and / or the major European powers (France, Germany, UK), and the United States. In some cases, referring to the West also includes NATO as another key player in the Balkans. The term “Balkans” primarily means the Western Balkans, i.e. the states of the former-Yugoslavia (excluding Slovenia), and Albania. Other Balkan countries (Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania) are also mentioned in relevant cases.

- **Serbia and Montenegro, Macedonia.** Domestic problems are even more critical than in the case of Croatia and they require “a lot of assistance.”
- **Albania.** The least stable and the poorest country in the region, and in Europe (together with Moldova), feared as a major source of illegal migration and organized crime.
- **Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo.** International protectorates, incapable of fulfilling standard state functions. International financial assistance and military and administrative presence is needed. In the past, Bosnia served as a base for Islamic radicals, and Kosovo remains a source of illegal migration and organized crime.

Both for Europe and the United States, the Balkans represents an unstable component of the Western security environment, and threats stemming from the region are threats to transatlantic security in general. Despite of that, no general strategy has been so far elaborated. Neither the EU, nor the US has agreed on the common strategy with its transatlantic counterpart. None of them have even managed their relation towards the local elites. The United States was the player who enforced its goals by power, whereas the Europe was seeking for more complex solutions.

3. Key Actors

3.1. Europe / The European Union

The current position of the EU in the Balkans must be viewed as the positive result of a difficult learning process experienced in the 1990s, and the West European attitude to the Balkans is nowadays precisely determined by particular interests that were formed during this process. On Europe's Balkan agenda, the following issues are predominate:

- **Massive migration** (as a consequence of civil wars, or newly as a result of human and civic rights violations);
- **Organized crime** (i.e. drug trafficking and distribution, sex trade and, organization of illegal migration, evading);
- **Activities of Islamic radicals** (e.g. supporting of the Muslims in armed conflicts, creation of the bases for further operations of the Islamic radicals in Europe, spying against NATO members, etc.)

The countries that are not regarded as jeopardy to the European Union with regards to the issues mentioned above can be found among the candidate countries.

Enlarging the European Union to the Balkans is often proclaimed as a natural step after the accession of ten new members. This perception may, however, turn out as wrong, and cannot be taken for granted. So far, the idea of European accession has been strongly present in many political proclamations regarding the Balkans.

This fact, however, proves that idealistic proclamations very often and repeatedly cover particular interests. As a result of this, the EU often orientates itself towards its own short-term interests, but in the end, it finds itself in a tow of proclaimed, idealistic objectives. Yet this does not necessarily mean that it is willing to meet the obligations entailed.

Since 1991, European diplomacy towards the Balkans has been generally unwilling to act, and incapable of enforcement as a means of minimizing the possible threat and thus becoming dependent on various events (e.g. war, progress towards European integration, relations to the US, etc.). Diplomacy was burdened by its traditional methods.

After the last EU enlargement, the EU borders on the Balkans. Four new Central European members (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Slovenia), together with Germany, Italy and Austria have their own national interests in the Balkans. This will contribute to a stronger South European Dimension of the Common Foreign and Security Policy.

3.2. United States

In the 1990s, the US intervened thrice in the events of the disintegration of Yugoslavia, always as a subsequence of the European inability to achieve concrete results (1992, 1994-95, 1998-2000). After 2000, there was a meaningful shift in the US policy towards the Balkans.

American diplomacy, unlike the European, was more flexible in negotiations, and more predisposed towards enforcement. It was focused on achieving immediate goals, and preferred a step-by-step strategy. It was also strongly influenced by national lobbies (especially the Albanian lobby).

Compared to Europe, the US has been more perceptive of the potential threat of Islamic terrorism in the Balkans. The Balkan region represents a strategic link between Europe and potential or current points of crisis (The Gulf and the Greater Middle East). For this reason since 1994/95, the US has acted to prevent the existence of a Balkan haven or transit for international terrorists.

Since the fall of Milosevic's regime in 2000, the United States has been turning the regional leadership responsibilities over to the European Union. The crisis in Macedonia in 2001 led to the EU's first military operation.

The US remains supportive of the current trends: the integration of the Balkan states into the EU, because it offers credible guarantees of the US interests and investment in the region.

3.3. Local Political Elites

The Particular interests of the Balkan countries and their elites are very often contrary to those of the West. Although Western engagement in the Balkans was generally justified by the effort to help, it was clearly determined by precise objectives.

On the other hand, the Balkan elites profess universal and common European values, in order to get the financial, political or military support of the West. Such support was consecutively used in domestic disputes and/or in conflicts with the neighbours and national minorities. The elites very often act according to their immediate interests, although there are exceptions that can be found in the governments, e.g. among top economists.

Personal benefit and the struggle for power are frequently motives for participation in local politics, and also determine strategy in relation to the West: the more the vision of integration recedes, the more assistance the country usually needs. Simultaneously, elites are resistant to controls regarding the utilization of the assistance and to the interference into their monopoly of power.

The objectives declared by the West are attractive for the Balkan political elites only under certain circumstances: only if this can bring them more secure or long-lasting political benefits. Such orientation also guarantees a certain benefit for the West. Appeals for the public do not usually take the right effect, as they address the part of public of a pro-reform, democratic and antinationalist profile.

4. Military Aspects

4.1. A Diminished Deterrence

Western military power has lost much of its deterrent abilities dating back to the past Balkan missions. The actions of the German contingent in Prizren, Kosovo, during the unrest in March this year perilously reminded us of the behaviour of the Dutch battalion in Srebrenica in 1995.

This leads to speculations as to whether the EU, and perhaps the US, has undertaken a greater commitment than it is ready to carry. The key question here remains whether we are willing to risk the lives of our soldiers or not, because there is no other way between these two options.

For the meantime, potential enemies are aware of the fact that the readiness and willingness of the West to risk the lives of its soldiers is low. Therefore, the factor of deterrence works only to a certain extent – no one in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo or elsewhere will fight due to fear of NATO intervention, not because of respect for units currently deployed in the field. Being unable to fulfil their deterring function, these units are only a substitution for an outlying force. Their presence alone cannot prevent low intensity conflicts.

If we show that we are willing to take risks, it would strengthen our authority, yet would not automatically solve existing problems, such as the ethnic disturbances in Kosovo or in Macedonia.

If we desire that the EU and NATO forces regain their former authority, the Balkan strategies of NATO and the EU must be built not only upon consensus in governments and parliaments, but also on general domestic consensus within those countries dispatching troops for military operations there.

4.2. Decision-Making and Command

NATO's command structures have failed several times in the Balkans. In March 1999, the intervention in Yugoslavia began with a delay of few days. This allowed Milosevic to get Kosovo under immediate control, leading to systematic ethnic cleansing. In July 1999, the Command in the American sector in Bosnia underestimated its intelligence and allowed the Russian deployment in Kosovo.

In March 1999, it turned out that the system of command for Kosovo, drawn up by the national troops, and not seen from a strategic perspective, is not functional when it comes to concurrent strikes in different locations. Selected units were blocked, and the possibility of redeployment was strictly limited (some units even refused to submit themselves to the military headquarters in Kosovo).

Lack of communication among the Western countries, poorly defined objectives and unresolved relations between national governments and the mission's headquarters caused the relation between NATO and the national governments to begin to resemble the relations between the UN and national governments during the war in Bosnia.

4.3. NATO Enlargement and Regional Security

Partnership for Peace (PfP) activities were the first step of the West that demonstrated a will to integrate the Balkan countries. Presently, there exists the danger of converting the NATO enlargement process into the creation of a "*cordon sanitaire*" around the most critical flashpoints of conflicts.

- **Romania, Bulgaria.** States more or less stable internally are members of the North Atlantic Alliance.



- **Albania, Croatia, Macedonia.** These states are less stable than the latter, however still regarded as “reliable” and “credible.” A reward is their membership in the Pfp.
- **Serbia and Montenegro.** Its membership in Pfp is hindered by poor communication between these republics.
- **Bosnia & Herzegovina and Kosovo.** These international protectorates, the most critical regions in the Balkans, have been sources of large-scale emigration are now surrounded by the security environment of the West.

Such security cooperation also brings a positive effect – regional stability. Its drawback is that the geo-strategic aspects sometimes prevail against the countries’ ability to fulfil the role ascribed to them by the West.

For the Balkan countries, NATO enlargement has a different meaning, and regional security is not perceived as a primary benefit. NATO membership is particularly understood as a milestone on a country’s path to EU membership. It is sometimes taken as a precondition of EU membership, or as confirmation of the country’s qualification to join. Local elites are very likely to use the rhetoric of integration and cooperation to gain more influence through electoral mandates and shows of support from the West (EU, NATO). This also puts the EU under pressure, since the Union “should” accept the candidacy of a NATO member.

5. Civil Management

5.1. Pragmatism or Idealism?

The basis of the EC/EU representatives’ attitudes towards the Balkans (especially its Western countries) has been pragmatic, although their behaviour must be assessed as “idealistic.” The reason for this lies in the personal convictions of Europe’s representatives and their visions. For example, many West European politicians believed that peace holds the same value for all warring parties. Yet this certitude originates in the specific experiences of Western Europe after WW2. On the contrary, most of the politicians in the countries of former Yugoslavia saw the war as a means of gaining and retaining personal power. For a long period of time, the conflicts in former-Yugoslavia were considered spontaneous, and political interests were not perceived as the main cause of these wars.

From the very beginning, the EC/EU approach was based on mediation, which was only slowly replaced by an active diplomacy. The EU and its representatives, similarly to the US, used the three following instruments of diplomacy for achieving their proclaimed goals:

- ***Preferring a certain political stream or party.*** (During the wars, Germany favoured Croatia, the USA Bosniaks. After Dayton, the EU and US favoured the Bosnian social democrats against the nationalists). This approach leads only to short-term, irregular results. It is successful when there is a strong will for change on the internal scene, ideally in combination with other impulses (e.g. the death of the Croatian president Tudjman).
- ***Creation of an artificial internal consensus.*** (E.g. establishing the Muslim-Croat Federation in B&H). There is a threat here of the means becoming a goal, which cannot suffice. This approach is more efficient when based on contracts (The quality of such agreement is the ascendant criteria. Most illustrating is the example of the Ohrid and Dayton accords, the former signed by political parties and the latter by representatives of selected nationalities).

- *The elimination of local political elites from decision-making.* Such an approach can be misleading and may lead to the creation of new, parallel structures. This would mean replacing cooperation with confrontation. Similarly, this approach can bring the inhabitants benefits that the local elites are not ready to secure, for it would upset their monopoly of power. In this case, the Western actors are becoming direct participants in local politics, thus hindering its development.

5.2. The Lack of Flexibility in Western Political Strategy

The Western approach to the Balkans is permanently burdened with several defects. Very often, it takes too long before a concrete goal is set. In addition, consensus on these objectives is usually delayed in comparison to contemporaneous development. Moreover, these aims remain persistent whatever the circumstances. Modifying or abandoning these aims is then the result of consistency, and not of adapting to the given conditions. The goals declared either change under political pressure or, in worse case scenarios, are not required at all. The important (and difficult) decisions are postponed, yet no solutions are found in the meantime.

Persisting with rooted preconceptions, and thinking in collective categories (frequently referring to Albanians, Serbs or Croats in general) also contributes to inflexibility in the Western policy towards the Balkans. A costly error is the mechanical transference of the experience from one area to another (e.g. from Bosnia to Kosovo, from Central Europe to the Balkans, etc.), without fully readjusting to local needs.

5.3. The Political base for the EU/UN Representatives

The representatives of the European Union and the United Nations directly active in the Balkans (primarily the High Representative in Bosnia and the head of UNMIK) do not have enough political support at their disposal.

If they are in dispute with the local elites, it leads inevitably to creation of a dysfunctional relation between a quasi-government (the West) and a quasi-opposition (parallel structures). The heads of the missions cannot then fall back on the institution or political entity that installed them and could buttress their position. Furthermore, this is strengthened by an overly consensual method for their selection: these positions are often occupied by top officials, who – though consensually accepted – are not prepared to exercise their authority over poorly working structures. A frequent rotation of these heads of missions (very often occurring in Kosovo) leads to a massive change of regular staff, and consequently to a discontinuity of governance.

Since both representatives are selected within the European Union, delegating the missions' management straight to the EU would seem to be a suitable solution. Such a change would secure a continuity of the missions' staff and would draw even more of the EU's attention to the Balkans. It would also help to clarify the competences of the international missions and the local authorities. And since a functional democracy and market economy creates the basic conditions for an EU entry, it would be possible to harmonize the programs of integration with the existing mandates of the OHR and UNMIK.

Specifically, this would mean preparing Bosnia and Herzegovina for entering into Association Agreements with the EU. The pledging of Kosovo's entry into the EU does not appear as urgent or necessary; standardizing relations (e.g. with regards to legal travel to EU countries) would, however, have a positive impact on further developments of the protectorate.

6. Conclusions: A New Strategy Needed

The West allies have been struggling for peace in the Balkans for more than a decade, dealing with problems as they have been coming. Nowadays, it is clear that the European Union is the Western power that can take up the responsibility for the political and economical development in the Balkans. The security aspects will still have to be shared in a close cooperation with NATO. Our general recommendations for the Western presence in the Balkans are:

- I. In order to improve and/or not to worsen the above-discussed state of events, the Western powers, i.e. the EU and the US, should clarify their remits, powers, and their commitments, and set a long-range strategy.
- II. One of the first steps should be the reform of the existing OHR and UNMIK mandates, which would kick off the real integration of the Balkans.
- III. The Western strategy, under the EU leadership, should be set according to the following five criteria:
 - ***The goals, and not the means, should be universal.*** Clear goals should be identified at the very beginning, together with a general consensus on these goals between (and within) the EU and the US. Attention should be paid to the fact that these goals are essential, although the means of implementation may vary. The means should remain means, and not become the objectives; otherwise the West will become hostage of its own policy.
 - ***Reassessment of the position.*** The approach here must be based on a realistic, repeated assessments of the West's own position. Goals must be set or modified according to this evaluation, with regard to the willingness to fulfil them. The reasons for the Western presence in the Balkans (i.e. integration and development) should remain clear. This involves a reassessment of the West's interests in the region.
 - ***Involvement of the local elites.*** It is necessary to respect the various interests of the local elites, without excluding critical analyses of their motives. Communication with local representatives addressing particular questions should be enhanced. In the context of general Balkan activities, particular problems should be handled together with other regions dealing with similar issues. The process should involve a gradual delegation of responsibility for the region's future to the local politicians. Enhancing regional co-operation should not remain a "magic formula" purposely used by the West as a means of bringing the stability into the region; it should become a precondition for integration. Successful EU / NATO candidates should naturally hand on their experience to the countries remaining outside these bodies.
 - ***Consistency.*** A single-track approach of the EU member states to the Balkans should not be tolerated, and the EU should act unanimously if agreement regarding definite objectives has been achieved. A maximum of agreement on these issues between the EU and the US is very desirable. Consistency in relations to the local partners should be absolute, and all relationships should encompass positive promises and possible sanctions (these must be immediately accomplishable, otherwise they would lead to an even bigger deprivation of the West's authority).
 - ***Changing the methods of negotiation.*** If Western representatives are employed in negotiations, they should play the most active role. This requires reaching the maximum consensus at the very beginning, together with a simplification of the

mechanisms, and the selection of such assignees/representatives who possess certain preconditions for such negotiations. The negotiators should be well acquainted with the problems of the Balkan agenda, and should be ready to adapt the negotiations to changing circumstances.

