



## Security in the Western Balkans

Understanding the Regional Challenges; Knowing the Local Partners

Summary of Roundtable Findings, 13 April 2018

This roundtable, organised by **Aktis Strategy** and the **London School of Economics' Research in South Eastern Europe** programme (**LSEE**) discussed the range of 'old-new' security challenges in the Western Balkans and how to address them. The aim was to bring together various communities of policymakers to discuss 1) where the UK's priorities should lie in the region and 2) which local partners to work with.

### Background and Context

Policymakers in the UK and western countries have shown burgeoning interest in the Western Balkans (WB) in recent months due to lingering socio-political problems and several noteworthy developments. These include unresolved border (and ethno-national) disputes, the resurgence of right-wing and religious extremism, and growing interest in the region from national actors outside of the Euro-Atlantic alliance.

Recognising that democratic regimes in most countries in the region are a long way from consolidation, and are in need of meaningful external support, **Aktis Strategy and LSEE invited UK-based experts, academics and policymakers to discuss key security issues in the WB and how to best support states and actors in the region to tackle them.**

This summary report offers key findings and ways forward that were discussed against the backdrop of the UK's forthcoming departure from the European Union.

### Geopolitics and State Capture

The invited experts identified a number of key challenges facing WB states, including **pervasive state capture, corruption, organised crime, and a changing global geopolitical situation that has had knock-on effects on the region.** Speakers agreed that none of the security challenges in the region that have made headlines recently – such as Russian meddling, Turkish influence, radicalisation, and organised crime – are new; what has changed, however, is the external context in which these challenges must be understood and addressed, from Brexit to the troubling and worsening relationship with Russia.

From military support to disaster relief, experts agreed that **captured state institutions** have prevented effective service delivery, resulting in high levels of dissatisfaction among populations. In particular, as some speakers suggested, **state-owned enterprises** represent the worst form of patronage in the WB that should be disrupted.

While the growing external influence of Russia, Turkey, and the Gulf States has become a source of concern for the EU and NATO, caution must be exercised regarding the real leverage of these states over local politics and the economy. **There is still a public consensus that Euro-Atlantic integration is the only future option for the WB.** As such, the ills plaguing the WB are not the product of interference from external actors: bad governance, corruption and state capture have had the greatest impact on local economic development, the progress of reforms and the resilience of democratic institutions.

**Disaster relief** is an example of an intervention through which the UK can make a positive contribution – by building local capacities, monitoring and responding to civilian emergencies and demonstrating a commitment on the UK's part towards the local populations and their interests.

Despite this, there are indeed real threats from external sources, including various forms of radicalisation (not only religious) that have been a security threat in the region for decades. **How much of an impact these factors have must be seen as directly dependent on the resilience of local institutions.** There are signs of improvement in this regard: intelligence sharing, police reforms and the technical capacity of regional militaries have all improved in recent years, with some support to achieve these goals provided by the UK. Corruption, however, was assessed as lowering public trust in institutions (with the exception of militaries, which enjoy some of the highest levels of trust across the region).

## Public Attitudes

The speakers further discussed incentive structures for a variety of actors (from local administrators to state prosecutors) that could be introduced to improve service delivery, increase public safety, and enhance overall security. As **publics in the region remain predominantly Euro-optimistic**, focused on economic reforms and welfare rather than nationalism and authoritarian politics, the EU is a key partner to consider. However, there is also a growing

sense of isolation among the public due to the slow progress towards the EU, as well as limits to their free movement in some parts of Europe (such as the UK).

The public and its perceptions were highlighted as the key beneficiary whose **hearts and mind** can be won through targeted reforms, perspective for the future and improved service delivery.

The migration of young people to states with better economic prospects represents a worrying trend for the performance of local economies. Young people are leaving Albania and Bosnia, in particular, without any incentives to return. Although there are demographic differences between the WB and other regions (Kosovo has one of the youngest populations in Europe, for example), **there is a real concern that the current brain drain will have a lasting effect for generations to come.** Trends in human trafficking from the region have also changed in terms of demographics; the UK has seen larger numbers of educated women being trafficked as they seek new economic opportunities abroad.

The loss of young talent also means the loss of **key constituencies for peace and entrepreneurship** as they represent individuals who embrace the values of open and democratic societies. To combat this, domestic economic opportunities must be created that allow young professionals to progress in their careers without political interference.

## The Military and Police

**The military and police are additional constituencies to work with.** Militaries are held in high regard across the region; they are less often perceived as corrupt as they have historically functioned as repositories of national identity. Perceptions of the police are decidedly more mixed, from corrupt local forces to efficient investigative bodies such as the Bosnia *State Investigation and Protection Agency*, which has benefited greatly from British training and support. Investigative bodies, though, are often obstructed in their work by political elites that are not subjected to sufficient public scrutiny. **Participants noted that the police thus must be part of finding solutions.**

## The Role of the Judiciary

The principal stumbling block for the prosecution of high-level corruption cases is political meddling with judiciaries and interference with investigations conducted by the media. WB countries have recently experienced a great drop in their media freedoms by all measures. **Criminal networks influence the highest ranks of political office, with attendant – and increasing – effects on the ability of journalists to fill their role as an assertive check on power.** Better information-sharing and the collection of robust evidence proving high-level corruption can help address this issue. At the same time, journalists need to be protected in order to continue with their investigative work.

**Corruption** remains a key concern. Designing interventions is difficult because of political meddling and organised crime that penetrates the highest political echelons. Judiciaries in the Western Balkans are in many cases politicised, while journalists and civil society organisations face threats when pursuing investigations into corruption. Designing mechanisms to protect these actors remains a key priority.

The judiciary was highlighted as a potential key partner for change, especially for tackling regional criminal networks; **the case of the *Special Prosecutor Office* in Macedonia demonstrates how courageous judicial work can pave the way for broader governance reforms.** In Serbia and Bosnia, state judiciaries that have previously been unable to intervene in high-profile corruption cases have also increasingly attempted to do so. Despite political pressures, these institutions have made inroads towards asserting their independence. As such, support for judicial institutions is crucial in terms of technical support and to defend their independence against actors who seek to undermine it. Greater levels of public trust in judiciaries are important for increasing their resilience and their public voice.

## Civil Society as Service Providers

Civil society was described as substituting for the state as a service provider, including as a provider of health services. Speakers noted how the civil sector has changed over the past two decades; many organisations have established themselves as trusted and publicly recognised entities that are worthy of further support. While civil society has taken part in improving welfare across the region, it has so far been excluded from participating in policy designs and agenda-setting. Due to these factors civil society feels marginalised from key decision-making structures.

The roundtable agreed that **the United Kingdom is in a unique place to support the Western Balkans** as an actor that can offer valuable technical support in the region. The Western Balkans summit is thus an opportunity to outline a new vision for the region from a UK perspective.

## Next Steps: *Expert Working Group on Good Governance*

The key message delivered by roundtable participants was underscoring the pervasive and debilitating effects corruption has had on the development of the Western Balkan countries. In light of this, we propose the establishment of an ***Expert Working Group on Good Governance in the Western Balkans*** to discuss existing evidence and provide expertise on best practices for tackling corruption. This group of experts will meet every three months and will link corruption to different topics including organised crime, the media, law enforcement and the provision of public services, generating practical solutions and suggestions for international actors through periodic reports and updates.

The first meeting of the ***Expert Working Group on Good Governance in the Western Balkans*** will focus on how bad governance has facilitated the growing organised crime, arms smuggling and human trafficking in the region.