What are the challenges of stability

in the western Balkans?

The Western Balkans is defined as including the nation states of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (henceforth referred to as Macedonia), Montenegro, Serbia, and Kosovo (if recognised as a separate state by the definer)[1]. This region has been through political upheaval throughout the last century, resulting in several wars during the 1990s. While the wars have ended and each resulting state has a democratic government, the legacy from these conflicts is an underlying cause of instability throughout the Western Balkans. Displaced persons and refugees are a serious issue even now, and this is linked to ongoing higher rates of poverty. There are disputes over territory as well as ethnic tensions which impact the ability to governments to form lasting regional relationships. Between this problem and that of the weakness of state institutions throughout the Western Balkans, corruption and organised crime are still a major source of instability in the region as well. It seems that the best mechanism for improvement is for each state to work towards EU membership, improving national standards and frameworks to ensure stability in the economic and political arena. While some states are well on their way to reaching this objective, issues such as Kosovo's independence threaten to disrupt this work in progress.

Only a few decades ago, the political layout of the Western Balkans was completely different, with the majority included under the state of Yugoslavia, Albania being the exception[2]. In December 1918 the Regent of Serbia Prince Aleksandr declared the creation of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and

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[1] CSIS-EKEM (2010)
[2] Benson (2001) p. 24

Slovenes[3]; just over ten years later this was renamed to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia[4]. There were further changes throughout the years, and it was only after World War II that Yugoslavia (then the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia) took its more modern formation of six equal republics[5].

The newly elected leader Josip Broz Tito, a war hero and multi-nationalist[6], is now credited with having kept this incarnation of Yugoslavia together until his death in 1980[7]. With his death, internal ethnic tensions grew; the economy was deteriorating due to disastrous financial decisions taken by the government in preceding years[8]. By the end of the 1980s, the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia had all but disintegrated[9], in part due to the rise of Milosevic in Serbia[10]. The indictment issued against Milosevic by the Hague in 1999 suggested that he endorsed a "Serbian nationalist agenda" and that his ultimate objective was to create a Serbian super-state incorporating territory from the other declared republics in the former Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia[11].

There were a number of disputes over territory; with the economic problems that the country was facing as well as the ethnic divisions that were becoming more and more apparent, it was inevitable that Yugoslavia would fall[12]. With up to seventeen separate ethnicities or nationalities[13] looking for a variety of

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[3] Benson (2001) p. 25
[4] Ibid. p 26
[5] Ibid. p. 89
[6] Shoup (2008) p. 333
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Biber (2010) p. 315
[11] Indictment (1999)
[12] Dragovic-Soso (2008) p. 3
[13] Szayna (2000) p. 128

political solutions, it was inevitable that Yugoslavia's disintegration would result in far-reaching bloody military conflicts. Serbians were looking to maintain the autonomy of Belgrade, with some support from Montenegro[14]; Croatia and Bosnia were both looking to secede, as well in conflict with each other over disputed territories[15]. There were a number of wars fought throughout the region during the 1990s, including the Croatian War of Independence, the Bosnian War and the Kosovo War[16].

These conflicts came to an end some years ago but one of the key causes of instability in the Western Balkan region are the remnants of these conflicts. There were an estimated three million displaced in the Balkans disputes of the 1990s[17]. Large numbers of displaced persons present a number of issues even to stable societies; in communities in such a state of flux as the Western Balkans were, these were greatly magnified. The majority of these persons were housed in public accommodation such as disused schools and factory housing, not intended for long term accommodation[18]. Other problems that they face as described by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) include difficulties in obtaining access to a range of public services, such as quality healthcare and education, and opportunities for any kind of employment or livelihood[19]. In the Western Balkans this situation is exacerbated by discriminatory attitudes towards the refugees due to ethnic differences[20]. In this kind of situation it is unsurprising that poverty rates are high. While the

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[14] Shoup (2008) p. 334
[15] Dragovic-Soso (2008) p. 6
[16] Benson (2001) p. 34
[17] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2012)
[18] Ambroso (2006) p. 142
[19] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2012)
[20] CSIS-EKEM (2010)

Western Balkans states present with less poverty than states in the Caucasus, every state is still well behind those in the EU, even traditionally poorer nations such as those in the Baltics and Eastern Europe in general[21].

The influx of internally diplaced persons and refugees in certain areas of the Western Balkans were also problematic in the political arena. For example, control of Croatia in the late 1990s was in the hands of an overly nationalistic government; they refused to allow return of Serbian refugees[22]. It was only with the fall of the nationalist governments in Croatia and Serbia in 2000 that the Balkans began to move towards democracy[23], and it would still be several years before the new states could be considered fully democratic. In the meantime, the dire situation of many displaced persons continued. International intervention and support has been extended from international and intergovernmental organisations such as the European Union (EU), UNHCR, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM)[24]. Over the past decade and especially in the past two years, the Western Balkan government has worked with these groups to resolve the issue; however ten percent still remain displaced[25] throughout the region. Certain programmes are now being implemented in an attempt to lessen the negative effects from the high number of refugees and displaced persons; specifically, towards improving employment

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[21] Global Finance (n.d.)
[22] Biber (2010) p. 38
[23] Ibid.
[24] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2012)
[25] Ibid.

opportunities, finding better long-term accommodation, and looking towards some persons obtaining permanent citizenship[26].

A number of theories suggest that ethnic tensions and prolonged discrimination within the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia were the underlying basis of the eventual disintegration and dissolution of the state in the early 1990s. One of these arguments is the *longue durée*, which suggests that aggression and hostility against other ethnicities is an intrinsic component to the South Slav mindset[27]. Another similar theory offered is the legacy of nationalist ideology being too fractious for a long-term solution in the Western Balkans[28]. While Dragovic disputes these arguments, pointing to historical periods of harmony as being in direct opposition of the first argument[29] and Serbian compromise in the early stages of the first Yugoslavia in opposition to the second[30], it seems clear that ethnic, regional or nationalist tensions played some part in Yugoslavia's dissolution. With the creation of each of the separate nation states in the 1990s, these tensions have been somewhat answered; however, discriminatory practices are still in occurrence and it is evident that the nationalist mindset has not been entirely eradicated. For example, there has been discrimination against the Serb minority in Kosovo since independence, particularly with regard to freedom of worship[31]. Another example is the imbalance of ethnic Macedonians compared to ethnic Albanians in the Macedonian police force[32]. The governments within the Western Balkans are

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[26] Ambroso (2006) p. 42
[27] Dragovic-Soso (2008) p. 2
[28] Ibid., p. 6
[29] Ibid., p. 3
[30] Ibid., p. 7
[31] CSIS-EKEM (2010) p. 3
[32] CSIS-EKEM (2010) p. 3

all working towards the cessation of such practices of discrimination, with Macedonia being the last Western Balkan nation to adopt anti-discrimination legislation in July 2010[33].

From these initiatives and efforts for displaced people and refugees and against discrimination, as well as the fact that every Western Balkan state has a democratically-elected government[34], it certainly seems that the region has recovered from the period of conflict in the 1990s. However, the region is overrun with weak states, which in turn are permeated by corruption and often organised crime[35]. A report compiled by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in 2011 show around 17% of citizens in the Western Balkans suffer some exposure to corruption in their daily lives[36] each year. Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina are particularly susceptible to public corruption[37]. Police officers and doctors are the most regular recipients of bribes, but a range of public officers such as those who deal with tax and education are also beneficiaries[38]. To quote Ugo Draetta and Sorin Sterie[39], "corruption has eroded the rule of law and the stability of democratic institutions, breaching fundamental rights and freedoms and undermining the trust and confidence of citizens in the fairness and impartiality of public administration". This point of view is echoed by Gyarmati and Stančić,[40] who state definitively that the "most significant structural problem of the Western Balkans is the weakness of state institutions" and continue on to suggest that this is the underlying cause to

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[33] Nistico (2010)
[34] Gjoni (2006)
[35] Gyarmati & Stančić (2007) p. 13
[36] UNODC (2011) p. 15
[37] Ibid., p. 16
[38] Ibid., p. 27
[39] Draetta & Sterie (2010) p. 217
[40] Gyarmati & Stančić (2007) p. 15

nearly all security concerns in the region[41]. It seems this was also evident to those policymakers in the EU who saw the necessity of stability in the Balkans and searched for an answer, finding one in the Stability Pact. The Stability Pact came into being in 1999 in an attempt to improve regional relationships and bring stability to the Western Balkans[42]. It proved to be a useful mechanism towards stability, with the establishment of a number of relevant initiatives in the first few years[43].

One of the initiatives put in place through the Stability Pact was the Stability Pact Anti-Corruption Initiative (SPAI) in 2000[44]. The focus of SPAI was to use European guidelines and framework to assist the Western Balkans in their attempts to eradicate the widespread governmental corruption[45]. There are a number of methods that have been employed in these attempts, such as monitoring by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the implementation of national anti-corruption policies[46]. Reforms have been widespread throughout the Balkans[47] but the 2010 UNODC report on corruption mentioned previously proves that the threat of corruption in government has not yet been eliminated[48].

The eradication of corruption is a key issue and as suggested by Gyarmati and Stančić, quite possibly the most important one for the future of democracy in the Balkans. Democratic governments have the responsibility to implement

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[41] Ibid.
[42] Koessler (2010) p. 17
[43] Ibid., p. 18
[44] Draetta & Sterie (2010) p. 217
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid., p. 218
[47] Ibid., p. 226
[48] UNODC (2011)

strict economic and political standards[49]; if this does not occur, it puts the state at risk of being left out of the international economic and political system, which only can lead to increased poverty and less opportunities for employment and education[50].

Increased corruption in government has also been shown to be linked to an increase in organised crime[51]. There are cross-border and multi-ethnic collaborations in drug trafficking throughout the region[52], and surplus weaponry from the conflicts is taken and distributed to African conflict zones[53]. The drug trafficking is of real concern; the most direct route to Europe from the Afghanistan poppy fields is through the Western Balkans, and with the inadequacies of the legal systems in Albania and Kosovo specifically, these states feature on regular drug trafficking routes[54]; the other states in the region all have ongoing difficulties with drug trafficking as well[55]. Human trafficking is also a key issue in the area, with up to 2000 women estimated to be involved in the industry in Serbia alone[56].

It seems that the negative effects of organised crime on nation states striving for democratic governance are numerous. Firstly, the prevalence of organised crime decreases the legitimacy and credibility of governments. If organised crime is rampant in a state, it suggests corruption at the highest levels of government and an inability to maintain political and security standards within

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[49] Gyarmati & Stančić (2007) p. 15
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid., p.18
[52] Anastasijevic (2006) p. 3
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid. p. 6
[56] Anastasijevic (2006) p. 8

the state, therefore rendering the perception of the state as weak and corrupted – not a state that more stable states wish to work alongside in the political or economic realm. This in turn leads to worsening poverty, which decreases faith in the government by its citizens.

Omand discusses this state of affairs in his book *Securing the State*, in which he theorizes that the key components of national security and therefore stable government are recognition of vulnerability, reduction of risk, and lessening impact of any kind of security situation[57]. Woodward[58] presents a relevant ideal; that "effective states are necessary for genuine stability and that state formation, by definition, occurs within a state system, so that relations with neighbours and the regional environment are an inseparable element of effective state-building". A combination of these theories suggests that stability can only be ensured by recognition of a state's vulnerability and consequent development of processes to reduce risk, likelihood and impact, which in turn can only occur through effective state-building including development of regional relationships.

This would suggest then that the key to lessening instability in the Western Balkans is the advancement of the democratic process. This is an ongoing development in the Western Balkans and has been since the 1990s. Džihić and Segert assert that the instigation of democracy can often present a challenge to the stability of a state, with the often overwhelming impact of economic, political and social reform[59]. In the democratization of Slovenia this was not the

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[57] Omand (2010) p. 59
[58] Woodward (2003) p. 15
[59] Dzihic & Segert (2012)

case[60]; unfortunately the same cannot be said for the majority of the Western Balkan states. Croatia and Macedonia have probably seen the smoothest democratization process, which is evidenced by their candidate status to the EU[61]. Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina are at the other end of the scale, with ongoing residual ethnic tensions[62], and the development of the Kosovo democratization process has been overly lethargic[63].

It seems to be common consensus that not only is democratization the best way forward for the Western Balkans, but that the best mechanism of implementing democracy in these states is through the process of obtaining membership of the European Union[64] [65] [66]. The requirements for membership are numerous and strict; reforms of the entirety of the state systems are generally required, as well as the implementation of new frameworks and standards to ensure the democratic process[67]. It is necessary to meet European standards and values in a number of areas, specifically "democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, protection of minorities and a market economy"[68].

This integration into the EU was originally launched in an attempt to counter continuing violence in the region in the mid 1990s, as well as to improve regional relations[69]. This was linked to the Stability Pact, which recognised that EU membership would be a major motivation for reform[70]. As mentioned, each

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[60] Ibid.
[61] Gyarmati & Stančić (2007) p.13
[62] Dzihic & Segert (2012)
[63] Ibid.
[64] Gyarmati & Stančić (2007) p.16
[65] Woodward (2003) p.15
[66] Rehn (2010) p. 14
[67] Woodward (2003) p. 15
[68] Calic (2005) p. 2
[69] Rotta & Mozur (2010) p. 23
[70] Ibid., p. 24

of the Western Balkan states is at a different stage of the EU membership process. This is to be expected, as reforms have been implemented at different rates across the different states; however, in a way this contradicts the original purpose of the process, as it divides the nation states once more[71]. Each state continues on its path to reform, and Croatia especially can hope for EU membership sooner rather than later[72].

One potentially expected result of the reforms to EU integration that has not necessarily materialised as hoped is the functional strengthening of relationships between the Western Balkans states, particularly in the creation of actual cross-border institutions for economic and security purposes[73]. While there are initiatives and programmes in place, Gyamarti suggests that these are generally only for show and that there is no real substance to them[74].

In theory, development of inter-regional cooperation can only improve the stability of the region as it can foster advances in regional security against such threats as drugs and human trafficking; it can improve the credibility of governments in the international political arena; and it can provide a stronger platform from which to campaign for inclusiveness into international and intergovernmental organisations. The EU itself is an indication of this, as it is markedly more influential in international relations than each state as a whole[75].

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[71] Ibid., p. 29
[72] Calic (2005) p. 1
[73] Gyarmati & Stančić (2007) p. 6
[74] Ibid.
[75] Calic (2005) p. 10

Probably the most obvious example of difficulties of inter-regional cooperation in the Western Balkans is the case of Kosovo. Kosovo was a flashpoint in the region throughout the twentieth century, as Serbia laid a historical claim to the area[76] while Italian-occupied Albania controlled it throughout the Second World War[77]. Presently, it is approximated that over 80% of the 2 million people in Kosovo are ethnic Albanians[78]. Kosovo is considered to be the geostrategic centre of the Balkans[79], which accounts for how hotly-contested the territory is by the Albanians and Serbs. The region was fought over by the Albanians and Serbs in from February 1998 until June 1999, with the eventual result of the conflict being Kosovo finally declaring independence on 17 February 2008[80]. This has not been the final word in the conflict; as over 100 United Nations states have not officially recognized Kosovo[81]. Serbia in particular has "refused" to recognise the 2008 declaration[82] which could cause issues for its EU membership in future. The EU Enlargement Commissioner has recently advised Serbia that improvements will need to be made in the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo before any real progress can be made on the EU integration path[83]. The EU and other international organizations see this as the best route to stability in the region[84].

In conclusion, the Western Balkan states have much to work towards if they are all to be realistically considered for membership to the European Union; once

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[76] Janjić (2003) p. 94
[77] Ibid.
[78] Janjić (2003) p. 93
[79] Ibid.
[80] Headley (2012) p. 253
[81] Ibid.
[82] Associated Press (2012)
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid.

their candidacy is assured, it is likely that simply due to the development of values and standards in line with those of the EU, the stability in each nation state will have greatly improved. Issues such as corruption and organised crime present a continued challenge to these states, and it is only through strengthening governments through reform that these issues can be truly addressed. The states also need to continue to work with other governments and international organisations such as UNHCR for persistent progress in the realm of finding solutions for displaced persons and refugees; as well as improving education and employment opportunities, this plan of action should both lower poverty rates and reduce ethnic tensions. While the wars of the 1990s left the Western Balkan states in turmoil, it seems that with a focus on the future, the challenges to stability in the Western Balkans can be answered.

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