

Is radicalisation in the Western Balkans a major threat for the EU and the US?

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The EU must help ‘anchor’ Western Balkan countries by supporting their Nato and EU integration prospects, argues Eli Hadzhieva.



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On the eve of Macedonia’s name change referendum on 30 September, the Western Balkans are once again in the spotlight.

Yet, few focus on the security implications of this referendum, which could destabilise the region if Macedonians reject the name change deal.

Such instability at the heart of Europe, fuelled by foreign forces, could lay the ground for increased

jihadism and radicalisation not only in the region but in Europe as a whole.

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A recent conference organised by the European Foundation for Democracy (EFD) with the support of the US Mission to the EU, heard that the Western Balkans had only witnessed two isolated attacks in 2015 and 2017 in comparison to large-scale attacks, which recently took place in France, Belgium, Germany and the UK.

However, the emergence of other forms of non-violent radicalisation in the Western Balkans following the demise of ISIS remains a threat. To counter this, EFD aims to enhance transatlantic cooperation and coordination on prevention of radicalisation and support for democratic values in the region.

Malign foreign influence and hybrid warfare continue to raise concerns, as they feed non-violent extremism, undermine democratic transitions and derail many Western Balkan countries from their aspirations to join Euro-Atlantic structures.

Full integration of the Western Balkans to the EU and NATO would play against the national interests of Russia, Iran and Gulf States such as Saudi Arabia, who view the region as an opportunity to expand their sphere of influence in order to weaken the West.

"It is high time that the EU and the US take these security risks seriously and engage in concerted efforts based on grassroots projects and prevention activities rather than embarking on unfruitful research projects led by a few big NGOs."

The upcoming referendum, which represents a historic moment for Macedonia in its drive to join NATO and the EU, is a testament to such influences, with Macedonia's President Gorge Ivanov calling for a boycott on the referendum and foreign actors, such as Russia, using propaganda and intelligence activity to organise and finance opposition to stall the deal.

The poorly coordinated EU-US efforts in terms of prevention of radicalisation in the region are limited in comparison to the longstanding presence of Middle Eastern players infiltrating Balkan societies to spread radical ideologies.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, Gulf-funded efforts, especially backed by Saudi Arabia, are known to generate a tendency towards ultraconservative Wahhabi and Salafi ideologies as opposed to the traditionally moderate Islam, akin to Sufism, practiced by secular Balkan Muslims.

It is high time that the EU and the US take these security risks seriously and engage in concerted efforts based on grassroots projects and prevention activities rather than embarking on unfruitful

research projects led by a few big NGOs.

Instead of ceding to right-wing populism and fears around immigration, the West should embrace this strategic region.

The new EU strategy for the Western Balkans adopted in March this year is a step in the right direction thanks to the fact that it focuses on integrated internal security governance, which covers broader security issues across social, economic and educational sectors, and involves a coordinated approach among different stakeholders as well as at national levels.

However, more remains to be done to enhance multi-ethnic and liberal democracy as well as the rule of law in the Western Balkans.

The EU could help anchor the region to European values such as freedom, democracy, respect for human dignity and human rights and gender equality.

This can only be achieved by supporting the prospects of Western Balkan states for Nato and EU integration, which still remains the essential engine to drive the reforms needed to counter dangerous tendencies towards radicalisation in the region.

About the author

Eli Hadzhieva is the founder and director of Dialogue for Europe

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