



# EUROPEAN LEADERSHIP NETWORK

## SUMMARY NOTE

### ELN WESTERN BALKANS SECURITY ROUNDTABLE

On 27-28<sup>th</sup> June 2018 the European Leadership Network (ELN) hosted a roundtable discussion in the British House of Lords under the co-chairmanship of ELN Chairman Lord Browne and ELN member and former Albanian Defence Minister, Fatmir Mediu.

The meeting brought together former and serving officials from most Balkan countries along with Ambassadors, and representatives of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and of the UK Parliament.<sup>1</sup> Participants considered the political, security and economic conditions in the Western Balkans on the eve of the 9-10 July London Summit and discussed practical recommendations to promote stability and democratic reform. They also addressed the role of the EU, including the UK, in supporting the countries of the region and developing a deeper partnership. Their deliberations were informed by, and built on, the recent House of Lords report 'The UK and the Future of the Western Balkans'.<sup>2</sup>

Session One took stock of decisions and actions taken recently at the 17 May EU-Western Balkans Summit in Sofia and the progress made in the Berlin process. Further discussion points included:

- Is the present level of EU engagement enough to inject new energy into EU-Western Balkans relations? Will it make a positive difference to security in the region?
- Does 'connectivity' positively influence security? What further steps should international institutions and European states be taking?
- Progress on security, migration, geopolitical developments and good neighbourly relations?

Session Two focused on the steps that governments and international organisations could realistically now adopt. It sought to answer the following questions:

- How can growing EU-Western Balkans and intra-regional economic ties best serve security?
- What security steps are most urgent and which are most important? How can the latter best be advanced?
- Political co-operation: how can the London summit contribute to progress on regional disputes, strengthening democracy and gender equality, and overcoming the legacy of the 1990s?

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<sup>1</sup> The complete list of participants can be found below.

<sup>2</sup> The report can be accessed here: <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/lords-select/international-relations-committee/news-parliament-2017/balkans-report-publication/>.



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This note summarises the main takeaways from meeting. It has been prepared on the authority of the ELN team and does not necessarily represent the views of the ELN or any of the participants.<sup>3</sup>

## **Background**

All participants in the roundtable agreed that local customs, culture and shared values unite the region far more than the issues that set people and countries apart. Several speakers voiced their hope that history would not define the region's future, the outlook for which had significantly improved. The recent agreement between Greece and the Republic of North Macedonia regarding the latter's name and the renewed focus on the integration of the region were key indicators of positive change. The reinforced European political investment was welcomed, kick-started by Bulgaria and continued by Austria through their EU Council Presidencies.

Speakers highlighted the two main goals for the region – NATO and EU membership and full integration into the Euro-Atlantic community. These goals are binding forces not only between the countries of the Western Balkans and the rest of Europe, but also between the states in region. They also help overcome internal polarisation.

## **Main obstacles**

While participants celebrated the role and contribution of the EU, several speakers voiced concern that the Union may choose to treat integration as a series of boxes to be ticked rather than as a goal to be pursued. The main challenge was a lack of leadership and capacity in Brussels for engagement. One participant noted: "For progress, we need movement. For movement, we need leadership". If external partners could not offer better incentives to political leaders in the region, constituents in the accession and pre-accession countries might turn to populism and more radical solutions.

The increasing influence of Russia and Turkey was seen as a by-product of the lack of European strategic direction and energy in day-to-day engagement with the Western Balkans. Everyone acknowledged the EU's difficult context and the need to square the concerns of its own citizens with those of those who aspire to be its citizens. However, "the Euro-Atlantic community must fill the vacuum [of political direction and vision] or others will."

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<sup>3</sup> The ELN would also like to thank Mr. Destani for his generous support, without which this event would not have been possible.



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## Revisiting the nexus between economic prosperity and security

The discussion moved on to address some of the perennial problems in the region's search for stability and prosperity: divergences between countries in the region; good governance versus state capture; corruption and organised crime versus the rule of law; and the status quo versus change all remain challenges. While there was not complete agreement on the relative severity of these problems and their priority to be given to them, the links between the health of the political system and economic development were repeatedly stressed.

No universal formula for building confidence existed, as different countries have different domestic agendas. But participants all considered that a stable, growing and improving neighbourhood was the most effective driver of countries' individual development. The rest of Europe should preserve its neutrality and thus the credibility of its support. NGOs had an important role to play in providing safe spaces/fora for frank discussions, especially between regional businesses and commercial entities. Migration remains a big problem, even though countries of the region had collaborated well in 2015.

## Action points for the July Summit

Practical recommendations advanced by participants, included:

### ***Political***

Prioritisation, process, structure and monitoring of implementation are all important to get right, alongside substance. Political culture takes time to develop and leaders should be encouraged and supported as they gain experience and as political systems mature. In that regard, the importance of accountability and therefore stronger parliaments and judiciaries cannot be overstated. Parliamentary oversight and effective checks and balances are critical.

Lessons learnt from state-building campaigns suggested a number of concrete next steps:

- Political campaigns should receive state funding to reduce corruption in politics. Candidates should undergo substantive vetting and their resources disclosed for full transparency.
- Uniformed personnel should be seen as a key cadre for upholding the rule of law. Through workshops, centres of excellence and other sector-specific reforms they could be trained by professionals from Western Europe.
- Domestic reforms and the EU accession process should run in parallel so that legislation and newly introduced laws and policies meet European standards and membership criteria.
- The links between countries in the Western Balkans, comprehensive or not, should not be overlooked: "if one country in the region is failing, all are."
- The Serbia-Kosovo process should be given a deadline in order to incentivise negotiators on both sides. The international community should do more to bolster the recent Greece-North Macedonia deal.



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## *Economic*

The roundtable agreed that it was vital to focus on the development of intra-regional trade. To reduce the risks, participants recommended a focus on just a few projects. However, a strategic economic development concept would help to inform short-term decisions for the region.

Anti-corruption measures across all sectors were seen as a high priority, although not all speakers agreed that it was the top priority for their country. Energy and infrastructure development (on both the domestic and the regional level) would bring greater value-added for international initiatives. Energy infrastructure could thus serve as connecting force for services and goods, and successes in these two sectors would in turn provide the basis for future investment.

Other concrete recommendations included:

- Offering more opportunities for people-to-people contacts, especially youth contacts. Fostering better relationships between chambers of commerce would bring enormous value, in both economic and political terms.
- Investment in professional skills should be a priority. Increasing productivity and specialisation through education and vocational training would enhance economies.
- The digital future and entrepreneurship and support for local SMEs were discussed as further areas for investment.

## *Security*

External players are a worry for the region. Speakers saw most external actors as merely pursuing their own national interests, to the detriment of the region's. Religion, which is deeply woven into parts of the societies, is being manipulated and the potential for extremism to spread is increasing. Regional countries should therefore increase their national resilience. Europe and partners across the Atlantic had a role to play here, particularly in sharing lessons learnt and best practices.

Returning foreign fighters are another threat. Sharing intelligence data even on a regional level could substantially improve current operations. At the same time, the region perhaps has something to teach the rest of Europe about de-radicalisation and re-integration of people back into communities. Thus, it would be helpful to establish in the region an academy on Preventing Violent Extremism.

Finally, NATO has a vital stabilising role to play. Some experts suggested that NATO should immediately offer membership to Macedonia, a Membership Action Plan to Bosnia-Herzegovina and participation in Partnership for Peace for Kosovo. It should also consider the establishment of a regional Partnership for Peace forum in which countries could share experiences and best practices.



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## LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

1. Peter Bainbridge, Western Balkans Deputy Director at the UK Foreign Office
2. Lord Peter Bowness, member of the UK House of Lords, member of the OSCE Parliamentary Delegation and a Vice President of the Parliamentary Assembly
3. Vladimir Bozovic, Advisor of the Government of Serbia and adviser of Minister of Interior of Republic Serbia
4. Lord (Des) Browne, Chairman of the ELN, Vice-Chair of the Nuclear Threat Initiative, former UK Defence Secretary
5. Lazim Destani, Businessman and philanthropist
6. Ambassador Kostantin Dimitrov, Ambassador of the Republic of Bulgaria to the United Kingdom
7. Werner Fasslabend, Chairman of the Wilfred Martens Centre for European Studies Academic Council, Austria
8. Klodian Gradeci, CEO of TSO
9. Branimir Gvozdenovic, Deputy Prime Minister in the Government of Montenegro
10. Enver Hoxhaj, Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Kosovo
11. Zoran Jolevski, former Minister of Defence of the Republic of Macedonia
12. Jasmin Kahil, Chargé d'Affaires a.i of the Republic of Macedonia
13. Nataša Marić, Chargé d'Affaires a.i. Embassy of Serbia
14. Fiona McIlwham, Western Balkans Director at the Foreign Office
15. Joss Meakins, Research Associate at the ELN
16. Fatmir Mediu, former Defence Minister, Republic of Albania
17. Roberto Montella, Secretary General of the OSCE PA



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18. Professor David Phillips, Director, Peace-building and Rights Program, Institute for the Study of Human Rights (ISHR)
19. Mark Pritchard, MP for Wrekin, House of Commons, leader of the UK delegation to the OSCE PA
20. Ambassador Qirjako Qirko, Ambassador of the Republic of Albania to the United Kingdom
21. Denitsa Raynova, Policy Fellow and Project Manager at the ELN
22. Sir Adam Thomson, Director of the ELN, former UK Permanent Representative to NATO
23. Veljko Tomanovic
24. George Tsereteli, President of the OSCE PA
25. Tsvetan Tsvetanov, former Minister of the Interior, Bulgaria
26. Sofiya Tsvetkova, member of Minister Tsvetanov's delegation
27. Astrit Veliaj, MP in Republic of Albania