



“SOUTH EAST EUROPE IN A MULTIPOLAR ERA” INAUGURAL CONFERENCE OF THE GERMIA HILL FORUM

European Council on Foreign Relations &
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The Germia Hill Forum is a joint initiative launched by the European Council on Foreign Relations and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kosovo, with the support of the British Council and the British Embassy in Pristina. The inaugural conference was convened in November 2011. The two-day event gathered more than a hundred leading policymakers, diplomats, foreign policy experts, intellectuals and journalists to discuss how EU's internal crisis is affecting its foreign policy in general and South East Europe in particular.

The 2011 edition of the Germia Hill forum was the first, large-scale event of its kind in Kosovo since the country declared its independence in 2008. As most countries of the European Union were represented, the forum was also successful in bringing together for the first time in Kosovo people from Georgia, Israel, Moldova, Russia, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine. As ECFR fellow Daniel Korski put it in his concluding remarks: *« it was refreshing to see how a country that used to be only a policy consumer is now becoming a policy producer as well »*.

The fragmentation of Europe and its consequences

The ongoing Euro crisis puts the vision of the EU as an influential regional and global actor under severe strain. In the first session of the conference, panellists tried to figure out what were the foreign policy challenges facing the Union in times of profound internal crisis.

Speakers pointed out reverse social mobility, social instability, rise of populism and nationalism as symptoms of a « shrinking Europe ». While the EU economic policy is the first topic on the agenda, European foreign policy has become a derivate of domestic problems.

In such a context, some experts argued, the Union could indeed be seen as a liability for the Balkans as its economic difficulties have knock-on effects on aspirant members of the region. Nevertheless, in the overall, Eastern enlargement was a success and has not undermined but in fact still adds to EU's credibility.

In the view of some panellists, a multi-speed Europe - which is practically in existence across several policy areas - could be a chance to forge ahead with the expansion towards Yugoslav successors and Albania. Yet such a development raises many questions as regards the qualitative integration of the region in terms of good governance and healthy socio-economic development.

New powers in South East Europe

In the second session of the conference participants tried to ascertain if the EU's internal difficulties were turning the Western Balkans into an arena of global competition.

Despite some recent investments especially in energy infrastructure, most experts did not see either Turkey or Russia as credible alternative power poles in South East Europe. It appears that Turkey has the ambition but not necessarily the resources to fulfil its multi-dimensional agenda in the region. In the case of Russia, the Balkan Peninsula is of peripheral interest behind CIS countries and the challenging relationship with China. On China, speakers concluded that there doesn't seem to be a clear-cut strategy for the Western Balkans. Yet, as the Great Wall car plant in Bulgaria shows, hopes are now high for increasing Chinese investment not only in infrastructure but also in manufacturing.

Even if comparably lower than those of the EU, emerging countries' investments might mean that some options are available to the Western Balkans in the short term. All future studies of the region should be careful to map those shifting options and opportunities in a comprehensive manner as they arise.

European security and the new transatlantic relationship

The closing session of the conference was dedicated to discussing challenges and prospects for EU's cooperation with NATO in the region and further afield. How do Europe's present difficulties and the momentous developments in the Middle East and North Africa affect the transatlantic relationship? What have been the effects of NATO enlargement to the Western Balkans?

Speakers pointed out that the euro crisis has become a liability for the United States. Pessimistic presentations argued that austerity in Europe combined with a currently empty transatlantic relationship and the U.S pivot to Asia leave no hope in the short-term for a coherent security approach in the Mediterranean.

The negative consequences of these mid-term trends are already here for Europe, as EU's peacekeeping operations now function with limited resources and the viability

of European battle groups is also challenged. Also, since the EU and the U.S seem to have alienated Turkey, the latter cannot act as a security subcontractor in the MENA region. As one participant remarked, the EU, as a security guarantor, is not relevant anymore, which emphasizes the urgent need for a collective overhaul of the European defence & security sectors.

Conclusions

As a power, the EU is losing both absolute and relative weight. Also, what we used to think as our neighbourhood's issues (governance and democratic legitimacy) have now become our own. Therefore the EU risks becoming unattractive to other regional actors like Russia and Turkey. To cope with this risk, EU foreign policy must focus on diplomatic consolidation with regional heavyweights.

Nevertheless, for most of the participants, in the Balkans the EU remains the only relevant power. As the second session showed, even if the mainstays of EU's policy towards the region are not well defined, Turkey, Russia and China are not reliable alternatives yet. These old and new actors are yet to produce a competing narrative capable of challenging EU's promise in the region. As ECFR fellow Dimitar Bechev put it in his concluding remarks: « *in this neck of the woods, multiplicity does not mean multi-polarity* ».

Brussels remains indeed the long-term beacon and this reinforces the idea that Europe, especially in times of internal trouble, should not give up on its core external priorities and remain strongly committed towards the region as a whole.