

The strategic importance of the Western Balkans and Italy's role

Piero Fassino, MP

Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Foreign and European Affairs

Chamber of Deputies

The well-documented, in-depth remarks we have heard so far paint a picture of this significant portion of the Balkan peninsula that we call Western Balkans as a restless land yearning for recognition, stability, and a future.

Six countries, with undeniable reciprocal bonds, overlapping traditions, ethnicities, languages, and religions. Each country has something of its neighbours', but they are all individually unique. This distinctive originality does not lie in ethnic purity, but rather in a plurality of populations, languages, and religions, as shown by the fact that while the co-existence of different religions and ethnicities was ferociously attacked in the 1990s, it remains today as an inescapable fact and characteristic.

While so far the Western Balkans have been a region of forced co-existence, they must become the land of accepted co-existence: not imposed, but acknowledged as a distinctive, historical trait of regional identity. A value, in other words. In fact, multi-ethnic and multi-religious coexistence should be considered the *genius loci* of the Balkans.

For this awareness to be widely shared, the region's neighbours have a role to play. Over and above helping safeguard co-existence, they must make an additional effort: assisting these countries in strengthening integration and cooperation, both with one another and with the international bodies that aim to promote their development, stability, and peace.

The Balkans must be approached with great prudence. This prudence was lacking in the aftermath of the break-up of Yugoslavia, with the consequences we all know. We must learn from history instead of repeating its mistakes. We cannot afford to be superficial.

And history tells us that this region has been characterized by strong ethnic identities but weak statehood. If we look back through historical maps, we will only find nation states in the Balkans in the last 100-150 years. Apart from the short-lived experiences of the Bulgarian and Serbian nations in the Middle Ages, the region moved almost seamlessly from the Roman to the Byzantine, Ottoman, and Austro-Hungarian empires, the last of which broke up just over a hundred years ago. This history of nations and empires is what shaped the present-day peninsula, a mosaic of ethnicities, religions, cultures, and alphabets, a frontier land between East and West, Europe and Asia, Christianity and Islam, the Catholic and Orthodox churches.

It is this history that explains the return of a growing, active presence of Russia and Turkey in the region, as if harking back to 19th century geopolitics, when the small Balkan nations sought

protection and security from one regional power or the other. This geopolitical setup would bring back ghosts and nightmares we want to banish forever. The Western Balkans – the entire Balkans, I would say – should instead be considered as a whole. Carving them into spheres of influence, as if we were back in the 19th century, would be a harbinger of constant instability.

Geography, too, explains the Balkans' renewed strategic centrality. While in the 19th century this centrality was born out of the dream of a great Berlin to Baghdad railway project, today the region is home to other ambitious infrastructure projects: the pan-European mobility corridors promoted by the European Union; and the New Silk Road linking China with Europe, whose land route runs through Istanbul and whose sea route runs through the Chinese-owned port of Piraeus. Turkey's and Russia's projects in the region are also increasing.

While China's role in the Balkans is not historically comparable to that of Russia and Turkey, we must not forget the People's Republic of China's strategic, political, and commercial links with Enver Hoxha's Republic of Albania. In all likelihood, China has today once again developed its own Balkan strategy.

And while considering the strategic importance of the Balkans, which arises out of their geographical position, we must not forget that while the physical border of the Western Balkans is the Adriatic Sea, its geopolitical border is the Eastern Mediterranean, the most bitterly fought-over body of water of our time, due to the discovery of huge deposits of natural gas. Heightened tensions between Greece and Cyprus on one hand, and Turkey on the other, cannot but resonate across the Balkans: one need only think of the historical and religious ties between Serbia and Greece.

These are the many reasons underscoring the strategic importance of integrating the Western Balkans into Euro-Atlantic institutions. This goal was indicated as early as the Dayton Accords as the way to overcome the many conflicts that have affected the region historically, and to guarantee stability and security for the Balkans and the continent as a whole. And while NATO has sped up integration, the European process launched in Thessaloniki in 2003 has been far slower. This has caused frustration and disappointment in Balkan public opinion, and threatens to re-awake nationalist impulses and nostalgia. For this reason, the launch of negotiations with Serbia and Montenegro - and Albania and Macedonia in the months to come - is a positive development. By the same token, normalized relations between Serbia and Kosovo are desirable, together with a more cohesive Bosnia. These are both necessary conditions to boost prospects of integration in Pristina and Sarajevo.

To put it simply, the strategic importance of the Western Balkans has five main drivers, all of which fall under the heading of security.

The first, as I hinted at, concerns energy. The stability of the Western Balkans is essential in order to ensure a plurality of energy suppliers, which in turn is crucial for the energy security of

Europe and Italy. This includes both the issue of gas pipelines and that of the extraction of natural gas from the Eastern Mediterranean, which could be liquefied in the ports of the Adriatic and shipped all over Europe.

The second driver concerns military security. Now that Montenegro and Albania have joined NATO, the chances of other regional powers establishing military bases on the Adriatic Sea and jeopardizing Europe's and Italy's security space have been averted. It must however be acknowledged that these new members require constant care and attention in political terms. History teaches us that in the Balkans nothing can be taken for granted, and more importantly, nothing is irreversible.

The third driver concerns security against threats of religious terrorism. We know that in the recent past the Western Balkans have seen instances of Islamic radicalization that have led to the emergence of terrorist cells and the recruitment of Islamic State fighters. This region, which has lived through years of wars and tensions, risks becoming a hotbed of rampant extremist and anti-Western organizations unless it is adequately supported and accompanied by international organisations in its process of rebirth.

An additional and more recent strategic driver regards what we might call migratory security. Indeed, the "Balkan route" has been one of the main routes for refugees fleeing Middle Eastern wars in recent years, generating significant tensions. In the current geopolitical climate, migration can be used by regional powers to pressure neighbouring countries with a view to destabilising them. Given the weakness of their statehood, as discussed earlier, the Western Balkans are particularly vulnerable to such pressure.

The final geopolitical and geostrategic challenge posed by the Western Balkans is that of democratic security. It reflects the fragility of regimes that are formally democratic, but tend to constrain the rule of law to become autocratic regimes with little regard for political opposition and the independence of the media and the judiciary. Such an outcome would not only jeopardize the hoped-for entry of the six countries of the Western Balkans into the Atlantic Alliance and the European Union, indeed it would further destabilize Europe as a whole.

Finally, I will touch upon Italy's role. With its history of credibility and friendship, Italy must be able to leverage its significant economic role in the region to help meet those demands for recognition, stability, and an assured future I referred to at the beginning of my remarks.

Italy must consider the entire Balkans, and the Western Balkans especially, as an area of priority strategic interest to be fostered both through bilateral relations and with an outlook towards their integration into the international and multinational organisations of which Italy is a member.

However, this requires Italy to make a qualitative leap in terms of structuring its presence, with

a constant and thorough political and diplomatic effort. The Italian Republic has no hegemonic ambitions in the Balkans, and most importantly it has no enemies there. We are the first- or second-largest partners of the countries in the region and we have been and are contributing with our military to stability and peace in the region.

If the stability of the Balkans is a key strategic interest for Italy, it must also strengthen the instruments that support its economic projection - from the Italian Trade Agency to national and bilateral chambers of commerce, and encompassing public bodies such as SACE and SIMEST - to facilitate that qualitative leap in trade and direct investment. At the same time, it must aim for greater integration between Italy's and the Western Balkans' respective markets and economic systems, in the awareness of the need for a common destiny.

There is no doubt that the heart of the matter lies in the still unresolved diplomatic and political issues. In addition to the well-known Berlin process to bring the six countries of the Western Balkans into the European Union (in which process Italy is involved together with Germany, France, Austria, the United Kingdom, Slovenia, and Croatia), Italy can also play a leading role in fostering fuller cooperation between the CEI (Central European Initiative) and the AII (Adriatic and Ionian Initiative). Both initiatives should be centred more decisively on the Western Balkans, with the goal of buttressing the accession path for these countries to the European Union and NATO.

We must be confident. The agreement that led to Greece's recognition of North Macedonia is a step towards détente in the Balkans, the pre-condition for any initiative aiming to stabilize and integrate the Western Balkans.

Of course, the current pandemic will unfortunately have severe economic, financial, and social consequences that risk slowing down the integration process for the six Western Balkan countries.

This should not, however, distract us from our goal, in the awareness that there will not be full security in Europe until we achieve full integration in the Balkans. And a 100 years after the attempt at Sarajevo, it is high time for the Balkans to be and feel like a full-fledged member of the European family.