Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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# Can the US and the EU stop a new wave of instability in the Balkans?

Benighted politics are once again haunting the Balkans. This month's semi-official funeral in Belgrade for the convicted war criminal Ratko Mladić, whom many Bosnian Serbs still honor, has dredged up past traumas and reignited nationalist tensions.

Diplomatic relations between Serbia and Bosnia are deteriorating, casting further doubt on Serbia's already semi-stalled accession to the European Union.

Worse, while Europe and the United States used to be mostly aligned in their support for the tenuous political process in Bosnia, that is no longer the case. Whereas previous US presidents might have been accused of being overly interventionist, Donald Trump's administration has shown no interest in the region's delicate political processes whatsoever.

Its sole concern is to advance narrow economic interests, and this has meant tolerating or even supporting hardline Serbian nationalists in Bosnia.

For example, the Trump administration has thrown its support behind a gas pipeline that would connect the Croatian coast to Sarajevo (the Bosnian capital).

At first glance, such a project makes sense, given its potential to alleviate the region's dependence on Russian gas.

But when contracts may suspiciously be awarded to a previously unknown company whose leaders have "personal connections to Donald Trump," warning lights start flashing.

## The US would look the other way

Warning lights are flashing on the political front, too. Bosnia will hold elections this October, and depending on the outcome, hardline Serb forces may join with hardline Croats to change the country's governance framework.

The timing for such a gambit is ideal because the US obviously would look the other way.

But should it succeed, the Bosniak (Muslim) community is bound to feel threatened and will respond accordingly.

That would increase the risk of a downward spiral that could profoundly destabilize the country.

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Moreover, Serbia will also hold elections in October. After years of mass student protests, the government is facing a coalition of opposition parties united under one banner.

With the outcome still far from certain, one can easily imagine a scenario in which President Aleksandar Vučić's populist regime simply declares victory, triggering even more instability.

The situation in Kosovo is no calmer. Reconciliation talks between Serbia and Kosovo have stalled, and local authorities in the divided town of Mitrovica have yet to be given responsibility for the bridge linking the Serbian and Albanian districts, owing to fears of what might follow.

More broadly, the country's political system is deadlocked, and anger over the Kosovo Specialist Chambers' recent conviction of Hashim Thaci, a former military leader who served as president of Kosovo from 2016 to 2020, has further alienated the country from its previous international partners.

## Hope has not been vindicated

None of these developments would necessarily be destabilizing on its own. But taken together, they risk creating a critical mass of nationalist sentiment.

The central idea behind the peace processes a quarter-century ago was that a combination of

EU accession talks and reconciliation facilitated by various international tribunals would gradually bring stability and cooperation to the region. But that hope has not been vindicated.

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Equally disappointing, the proceedings led by international tribunals at The Hague have been so grotesquely drawn out as to have no chance of promoting reconciliation. They may even be making the situation worse.

Tiny Montenegro is still on a promising trajectory, but whether its EU accession bid could survive a new whirlwind of regional turmoil is far from certain.

If Serbia has an interest in destabilizing its neighbor, it can easily do so.

## No easy solutions to address the rising tensions

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Each country has its own political processes, but the risk of mutually reinforcing spillovers is high.

With the US focused solely on private economic interests, and with the EU distracted by Russian aggression and US unpredictability, the prospects for coherent international policies to restore stability, promote reconciliation, and support integration are bleak.

This doesn't mean we are heading toward a new round of Balkan wars. But even limited skirmishes could be sufficient to push the entire region onto a more uncertain and dangerous path.

Political leaders, particularly in Europe, must heed the alarm. The Balkans brought major wars to Europe twice in the previous century, and they could easily create instability in this century, too.

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