Balkan Pitfalls

by Janusz Bugajski, Director of the New European Democracies Program
at the Center for Strategic and International Studies

The Western Balkans are becoming increasingly mired in political conflicts, social disquiet, ethnic disputes, and state fragilities that can precipitate a new phase of regional instability. At the same time, the major international players may be unprepared and ill equipped to manage or resolve the emerging conflicts. While the U.S. and NATO have scaled down their presence in the region, the EU's capabilities and effectiveness are coming under closer scrutiny.

The EU's most important soft power tool in its immediate neighborhood has been the solid prospect of membership for any European state that is constructing a democratic polity and developing a market economy. The provision of a precise roadmap to membership in a viable timeframe was a key motivator for the post-communist Central-East European (CEE) countries in maintaining their reform efforts during the past two decades. Unfortunately, EU soft power capabilities are waning for two reasons: first, internal resistance within EU states given their own economic and financial problems and their disappointment with the performance of recent members (as well as with several older members), **and** second, the unfulfilled qualifications of several current aspirants in South East Europe for EU accession. Indeed, Croatia may prove to be an exception in fulfilling its EU aspirations and the door may close to further enlargement after Zagreb enters the Union in mid-2013.

The EU's limitations as a hard power have been evident in its disjointed foreign policies and its restricted military capabilities. However, the Union's political and economic model may also be fading as an instrument of attraction if it resists further expansion or the prospect of entry becomes so distant that it is disregarded as unrealistic by local political leaders. The sentiment of closure has grown among EU publics during the era of austerity and as the debt crisis in several Mediterranean member states appears to be heading toward prolonged economic uncertainty coupled with social and political turmoil. Whether the democratic institutions of several southern European countries can withstand the growing economic and social pressures is a question that no one can answer with any certainty. Moreover, the negative impact of sovereign debt and budgetary pressures on the European Monetary Union and other EU institutions is now a subject of major concern.

In the Western Balkans, without the prospect of EU membership over the coming decade that can enthuse politicians and public alike, much of the political and economic progress achieved across the region since the wars ended in the 1990s could begin to unravel. Even with accession numerous problems will persist, but the risks of non-accession or long-term exclusion are more severe and prolonged. Potentially negative scenarios can unfold in the peninsula if a confluence of factors coalesces and internal problems become regionally interconnected. The most unsettling prospects can be outlined as follows.

Albania: The mayoral elections in Tirana, which took place in May 2011 but whose results continue to be contested by the two front-runners, have compounded the persistent grievances from the June 2009 parliamentary ballot and threaten to transform political polarization into outright civil conflict. Meanwhile, necessary reforms to meet EU accession criteria have stalled and the passage of vital legislation is blocked. Long-term paralysis and conflict between the two

major political parties could decrease institutional legitimacy, increase social frustration, raise the risk of economic decline, and further erode Albania's qualifications for EU membership. If Albania were to descend from political conflict to social unrest and state instability this may have negative consequences for the wider region by fueling the rebirth of dormant Albanian nationalism. Political leaders may deflect internal unrest toward national solidarity with Albanian populations in neighboring Balkan states experiencing disputes with non-Albanian governments.

Kosova: Social frustration is mounting in Kosova as evident in the recent electoral emergence of an opposition group, Self-Determination, which gained over 12% of the popular vote in the December 2010 general elections and whose domestic support is steadily climbing. Its program combines anti-corruption, full national sovereignty, the termination of outside supervision, and a note of pan-Albanianism that could resound more broadly among an angry and underemployed citizenry. Social unrest will be compounded by international isolation, Kosova's exclusion from the EU visa liberalization program, and Belgrade's push toward unilateral partition. Although public frustration in Kosova is not ethno-nationalist, it can assume such forms if Kosova is permanently blocked from the major international institutions, including the EU.

Kosova is in danger of becoming a frozen state as the number of capitals recognizing its independence has stalled at 75 and the new country is excluded from major international organizations because of Russia's blockage and Serbia's resistance. Belgrade is also pushing for a division of Kosova and government officials have proposed to Albania that a "historic agreement" between Belgrade and Tirana would entail Kosova's partition and absorption by its two neighbors. Such proposals are adamantly opposed by Prishtina and could encourage the government to deal more forcefully with Serbian separatism in Kosova's northern municipalities.

Serbia: Although the democratic coalition government in Belgrade has staked its political future on EU accession, the maximum Serbia is likely to achieve in December 2011 is EU candidate status. With general elections scheduled by the spring of 2012, this may not be enough to diminish public anger with economic stagnation and rampant corruption, a factor that is astutely exploited by Serbia's nationalist opposition. As elections approach and political conditions in neighboring Bosnia-Herzegovina continue to deteriorate, an expansionist nationalist angle may begin to impregnate public discourse in Serbia and raise support for Bosnia's and Kosova's territorial division. This would place additional weight on the governments in Sarajevo and Prishtina to demonstrate that they are defending the integrity of their respective states against inside and outside pressures, thus raising the political temperature with Belgrade.

Bosnia-Herzegovina: The optimum objective for leaders of the Serb Republic inside Bosnia-Herzegovina is statehood. To achieve such a goal, the formation and functioning of the state government in Sarajevo is obstructed by Serbian officials. The political stalemate is compounded by disputes between Bosnian and Croat leaders within the second entity, the Bosnian Federation. Warnings are periodically sounded by Bosnia's Serbian officials about holding entity referenda on various questions that would restrict the prerogatives of the central administration in Sarajevo. There is a clear danger that this could escalate into demands for separate statehood. For Bosniak Serbs the possibility of EU membership is becoming less convincing than the prospect of independence from Sarajevo.

Moves toward separation and eventual union with Serbia are likely to spark a strong reaction from the Bosniak Muslim population that now forms an absolute majority in the country. In the worst case scenario, a local incident or a Serbian withdrawal from state institutions in Sarajevo

can provoke violence as Bosniaks will conclude that the Serbs are being rewarded for attempted genocide in the 1990s by gaining their own state without effective international opposition. In the absence of a NATO military presence and with a weak EU contingent, political disputes could rapidly escalate into armed conflict. The attempted partition of Bosnia-Herzegovina would certainly encourage other Balkan secessions by territorially compact and disgruntled ethnicities.

Macedonia: Skopje's stalled progress toward the EU will increase opportunities for political disputes to assume ethnic dimensions. The biggest danger for the country is if the Albanian Macedonian parties begin to compete with each other not for a share of government portfolios in coalition with the Slavic Macedonian parties but over programs for federalization, autonomy, or even separation and union with Kosova or Albania. The focus in Skopje on national identity, historical heritage, and the cult of Alexander the Great will increasingly alienate Macedonia's Albanian population, numbering over a third of the national total with majorities throughout the western part of the country. For them, Macedonian nationalism and conflict with Greece is not an appetizing substitute for EU and NATO membership. The specter of Bosnian and Kosovar partition, coupled with Macedonia's isolation from the EU, stagnant economic prospects, and rising youth unemployment can propel the process of state fracture.

It is also worth pointing out that long-term economic distress and social turmoil in several south European states, especially in Greece, can have negative consequences for the Western Balkans. It will curtail international investment, credits, and loans, and thus contribute to generating political, social, and ethnic tensions throughout the peninsula. It will also encourage EU enlargement fatigue if not exhaustion, which in turn will reinforce Western Balkan reform fatigue and a retrenchment into national enclaves coupled with moves toward alternative foreign partners such as Russia or Turkey.

This is the complex puzzle that cannot be solved by the U.S. or the EU acting alone if indeed it can be resolved at all. It would require a much more determined drive by the EU with U.S. political complementarity to incorporate the entire Western Balkan region, without excluding any unstable gray zones, and accompanied by clear membership tracks for all aspirant states. Unfortunately, although such an approach exists in EU policy declarations it is clearly unpopular throughout the Union where leaders and tax payers are weary of acquiring new problems and potentially new candidates for major economic rescue packages.

Short of such firm commitments, economic prospects in the region are likely to diminish and spur the out-migration of unemployed or alienated citizens. Disillusionment with the EU will also escalate and the Union's effectiveness and viability will come under increasing question at a time when the U.S. is preoccupied with more pressing crises outside of Europe and feels it can only play a secondary role in the Balkans. The scenarios outlined above would certainly undermine reformist leaders and once again raise more conflictive nationalist elements to the forefront. They will benefit from economic stagnation and public anger and can trumpet ethnicity and xenophobia as solutions to mounting domestic challenges and perceived internal and external threats. Such a future would translate into another wasted decade of crisis prevention and conflict management by the major international organizations instead of institution building, economic development, and international integration for the entire Balkan Peninsula.