



CENTRE FOR SECURITY COOPERATION

Security Sector Reform Pillar Conference on Security Challenges for Europe

Rakitje, Croatia

Introduction

The “Conference on Security Challenges for Europe” was conducted by RACVIAC – Centre for Security Cooperation in partnership with Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Office in Zagreb (KAS), Croatia, and George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, on 17 November 2020.

The purpose of this event was enabling open security policy and academic experts’ debates on emerging security challenges.

This year the Conference main objectives were to examine the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on international and Euro-Atlantic security, to share national considerations, experiences and responses and to highlight the role of strategic communication in the context of the ongoing coronavirus crisis information and disinformation campaigns.

Due to the pandemic of COVID – 19, the Conference was conducted online and gathered more than 60 participants, coming from various institutions of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Germany, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Slovenia, Portugal and

Turkey as well as Croatian War College.

Execution



In his opening speech, RACVIAC Director Major General (ret.) Jeronim Bazo welcomed the participants and defined this year's Conference's aim of emphasizing security policy implications of the coronavirus crisis as one of the greatest global challenges the international community was facing nowadays. In order to stop COVID-19 pandemic, officials from all around the world implemented many measures such as closing borders, prohibition of export of vital goods, reducing personal liberties and rights, mobilization of civil defence and military forces and passing enormous measures to support entire economies. Those challenges opened a huge number of questions to be examined by experts and policy makers

in order to provide solutions and visions of way ahead.

Mr Holger Haibach, Head of the KAS office in Croatia, indicated COVID-19 as the major threat and health issue of the whole world and South Eastern Europe as well. By now, attempts to stop pandemic have had mixed results, sometimes successful and at other times not so successful; so, until the utilisation of newly invented vaccines is widespread, the situation will stay the same. It was mentioned how necessary it was to bring people from scientific world, military and all different levels of society to come up with ideas and strategies to tackle the crisis.

Dr Matthew Rhodes, Area Studies Chair at George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies praised the cooperation among RACVIAC, Konrad Adenauer Foundation and Marshall Centre in sharing common commitment for increasing understanding and knowledge about international security challenges that affected our communities.

U.S. Ambassador to Croatia Mr W. Robert Kohorst emphasized the importance of sharing information and strengthening relationships between USA and countries of the European region. As an example, he mentioned the Marshall Centre's contribution to countering disinformation campaigns which are particularly challenging for countries of South Eastern Europe where other great actors have tried to undermine values and institutions with weaponization of information in order to expand their influence. Most importantly, as he pointed out, COVID-19 pandemic has provided another building block for the collective identification of vulnerability and shared potential solutions.

The Ambassador of Federal Republic of Germany to Croatia Dr Robert Klinke

stressed that COVID-19 was one of the most important challenges for German security policy along with the uncontrolled migration, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and the influence of radical Islamism in the form of the so called Islamic state. Especially, the problem with Islamic state has been postponed as priority during the coronavirus menace. The challenge also includes protests against Governments' coronavirus measures, denying the dangers for the internal security, and the anti-immunization lobby activities propagating conspiracy theories and often resulting in fake news, populism and disinformation.

The Conference keynote speech was delivered by Mr Timothy Judah, the Balkans correspondent of the Economist Magazine. It had been said that problems in SEE region were still complex, and additionally heightened with the pandemic of COVID-19. In his presentation, Mr Judah focused on security and geopolitics in the Western Balkans, emphasizing the role and influence of global actors. He talked about how pandemic of COVID-19 was going to affect state budgets, causing rivalry in prioritization of particular areas.

The panel discussion was dedicated to COVID-19 and its implications for regional and Euro-Atlantic security. The panel moderator Dr Valbona Zeneli, Strategic Initiatives Department, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies made a point that Europe was already in recession and the economic condition of South Eastern Europe had already taken terrible toll because of pandemic. Furthermore, she made an observation that SEE countries were greatly disadvantaged in comparison to the European Union countries. An example of that is that SEE lacks crisis management capabilities in terms of

overstretched public health care capacities (SEE countries spend barely 5% of GDP on average, compared to 10% that we see in the European Union countries). On the other hand, as Ms Zeneli said, every crisis offered opportunities and possibilities of implementing new changes. In this way, European transportation and production networks might be over dimensioned which could create new opportunities for the attraction of the European investments in the Balkans. However, there shouldn't be steep optimism because there were other countries that would take better advantage of this crisis situation.

Dr Gordan Akrap, President, Hybrid Warfare Research Institute, Croatia, elaborated that COVID - 19 crisis was completely different from previous crises. Past crises had been projected in form of radicalization, terrorism, earthquakes or attacks on critical infrastructure and they had influenced only a few domains in human life. They had been limited by the area and time, and not everyone had been hit by the crisis or the problem. On the other hand, COVID-19 is a global crisis where citizens' behaviour is an extremely important factor in spreading the virus and fighting the pandemic. The problem with this crisis is a huge amount of disinformation causing distrust in the expert knowledge. One of the key measures is strategic communication or informing public in timely and efficient manner on actions for dealing with the crisis, including providing advice, instructions and reassurance on how to react, what to do and why. Unfortunately, election campaigns in the Western Balkans during the pandemic crisis reduced the public confidence in expert institutions, in terms of inconsistency in implementing the crisis measures. Another factor that produced similar result, as Dr Akrap mentioned, was outside influence in

form of different disinformation campaigns which had strongly affected trust with purpose of destabilization of governmental and public institutions. Those campaigns had impacted the Western Balkans as the newly established democracies had not been prepared enough to face them.



Dr Johannes Urban, Head of Security Policy, State Chancellery of Bavaria, didn't agree with the thesis that this pandemic represented great equalizer. He explained how COVID-19 pandemic was actually increasing differences and polarization and highlighting frictions. Based on the first wave challenges, ways to cooperate among various stakeholders had been identified with the aim of actually helping each other. One solution that was found was resource redistribution with the aim of taking back control of pandemic. Dr Urban put forth the question of stabilizing economic infrastructure because many countries would come out of this pandemic in a different economic status. Present situation in the world craves the stabilization of the international system and support from all parties as allies in order to deal with this pandemic in the best possible way.



Ms Daniela Braun, Policy Advisor for Foreign and Security Affairs, Konrad Adenauer Foundation, named the pandemic one of the 10 security challenges for Germany. Pandemics have the ability to threaten stability because they can cause enormous socio-economic stress for states. In this way, Ms. Braun pointed out, they can impact the militaries and defence resources. One of the examples was cancellation of this year's military drill which would have been the largest exercise in the Europe since the end of the Cold War. In demonstrating the seriousness of the situation, she explained how Bundeswehr would be ready to provide military medical personnel for civilian hospitals because of the rising demand. Also, as German defence minister announced, Bundeswehr will have critical role in vaccination strategy by forming 26 vaccination centres.



Ms Alida Vračić, Executive Director, Populari, Bosnia-Herzegovina pointed out at the disproportion in number of doctors and medical nurses in Germany, Austria and Western Balkans. Many doctors, nurses and medical staff came to Germany and

Austria from South Eastern Europe, because of better economic opportunities. In that way, Austria and Germany were better prepared for COVID-19 outbreak regarding the numbers of medical personnel than SEE countries. Apart from COVID-19 and lack of medical staff, SEE was also affected by immigration problem. Ms Vračić also mentioned the negative sociological side of COVID-19 from gender perspective due to the fact that violence was being on the rise. On the other side, COVID-19 had brought remote work opportunity for many branches where people could pursue work from home and have lower costs of living.



Mr Milan Jovanović, Senior Researcher, Digital Forensics Center, Atlantic Council of Montenegro, focused his attention on issues of spreading disinformation. This phenomenon has always been present but with pandemic it has escalated further. This is happening especially in conditions of overwhelming number of information from different sides as it is then difficult to discern true from false. In this way, many tabloids and media in SEE continuously and intentionally spread conspiracy theories, disinformation and false news about coronavirus. Some of those information are pushed purposefully to create distrust and weaken cooperation with the EU and strengthen relations with some other powerful subjects in the international relations. The main problem is that the facts are being replaced by the views of the crowd and this has somehow

erased the boundaries of facts on one side and speculations on the other side. This is evidence of the need for investing in better sources of information in order to get immunity to fake information.



Mr Iztok Mirošič, Ambassador at Large, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Slovenia, warned of the importance and challenges of preserving the democratic processes in South East Europe in times of COVID-19 restrictions. He expressed concerns about potential appearance of stabilocracy, referring to the misuse of concentration of executive power through disregarding the rule of law. This could imply imposing any and all possible measures to make situation stable without regard to democratic processes. Also, he articulated concerns of the EU foreign policy, in comparison with other powerful countries, for weak engagement in public diplomacy through visits of high ranking officials when offering help. This public diplomacy actions should represent contribution to the overall EU efforts to integrate the Western Balkans. At the end, Ambassador Mirošič warned about the importance of SEE to the security of the EU.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that coronavirus is not an ordinary challenge. It caused serious consequences not only on public health but also on economies

and accordingly, on the ability to fund the security needs. This crisis has displayed the necessity of continuous learning and adopting the best solutions which will increase resilience and enable our institutions to respond appropriately. Besides the public health related measures, strengthening public diplomacy and strategic communication emerged as the most significant areas of COVID-19 crisis management.

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