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BALKANS

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Introduction: The Balkans

In early spring 2024, the Pacific Council visited the Western Balkans, a unique and diverse collective of European countries. Initially overlooked as destinations for travel compared to neighboring Greece and Italy just across the Adriatic Sea, the Western Balkans are characterized by a blend of Eastern and Western cultures, housing remnants of the Greek, Roman, and Ottoman empires [1]. The Western Balkan region comprises six countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo, and Serbia [2]. Except for Albania, all members of the Western Balkans were a part of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which dissolved in 1991, causing the region to fall into a violent struggle ultimately leaving the region politically and financially stunted [3]. However, in an area still facing economic and political challenges, the Pacific Council observed marked transformations in the Western Balkans as North Macedonia and Kosovo are actively working toward gaining accession to the European Union (EU), and Serbia is engaged in broad modernization efforts ahead of Expo 2027.



[1] “A Walk through Western Balkans Cultural Heritage,” WeBalkans | EU Projects in the Western Balkans (blog), accessed June 18, 2024, <https://webalkans.eu/en/stories/a-walk-through-western-balkan-cultural-heritage/>.

[2] “Western Balkans - Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland - Gov.Pl Website,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland, accessed June 4, 2024, <https://www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy/western-balkans>.

[3] “Western Balkans | EEAS,” accessed June 4, 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/western-balkans_en.

Kosovo

The delegation began with a day trip from Skopje in North Macedonia to Pristina in Kosovo. North Macedonia acts as a conduit of travel between Kosovo and Serbia, as Serbia does not recognize border crossings between Kosovo and other countries. As such, Serbia does not allow continued travel into the country from Kosovo, preferring visitors enter via North Macedonia. Kosovo remains unrecognized not only by Serbia, but by many others including five EU member states, Spain, Slovakia, Cyprus, Romania, and Greece [4]. This reality is a roadblock for Kosovo joining the EU and prevents the Balkan region from achieving true peace following the violence of the Yugoslav Wars during the 1990s.



During the country briefing given by Ambassador Jeffrey M. Hovenier and his colleagues at the U.S. Embassy in Pristina, other significant challenges facing Kosovo were shared including corruption, rule of law, economic growth, and “brain drain.” To help combat these issues the U.S. mission in Pristina is focused on establishing Kosovo as a member of the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a membership acquired by a neighboring country, North Macedonia, in March 2020. The United States believes connections to the EU and NATO are essential for helping Kosovo overcome the roadblocks currently preventing economic and social prosperity within the nation.

[4] AJLabs, “Which Countries Recognise Kosovo’s Statehood?,” Al Jazeera, accessed June 18, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/2/17/mapping-the-countries-that-recognise-kosovo-as-a-state-2>.

The United States' integrated country strategy for Kosovo highlights three pillars:

1. Supporting Kosovo in European institutions
2. Building a 21st-century economy
3. Establishing good governance

The U.S. mission to Kosovo noted the fact that those living in the region have the desire to uphold the rule of law and limit corruption, but lingering mistrust in institutions in a post-conflict environment makes the transition difficult. However, looking to the future, if the implementation of Kosovo's integrated country strategy is successful, it has the potential to establish itself as a beacon of hope as a young, multi-ethnic democracy.

North Macedonia

Back in Skopje, the Pacific Council met with the now-former President of North Macedonia, Stevo Pendarovski and Special Foreign Policy Adviser, Ambassador Goce Karajanov. Delegates engaged in conversation around the country's presidential election as President Pendarovski was at the tail-end of his campaign for reelection against frontrunner Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova, who ultimately won the election with 65% of the votes in May of this year [5].



[5] "IFES Election Guide | Elections: North Macedonian Presidency 2024 Round 2," accessed June 16, 2024, <https://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/44443/>.

According to the Pacific Council's conversation with President Pendarovski, North Macedonia appears to have made strides as a member of NATO, and is following the path towards EU membership. However, the country continues to face high levels of outmigration, especially from young citizens seeking opportunities elsewhere in countries such as Italy, Germany, Malta, the United States, and New Zealand. This is due, in part, to North Macedonia's low wages limiting upward economic mobility, high inflation (around 9.4% at the end of 2023), and a high youth unemployment rate of 25.4%. The country also lacks funding for essential infrastructure projects making utilities like electricity less than reliable. President Pendarovski also faced backlash from citizens in his controversial decision to rename Macedonia to the Republic of North Macedonia in 2019 to improve relations with neighboring Greece, who had long opposed the country's former name, Macedonia. This decision, outwardly resisted by Siljanovska-Davkova, likely boosted traction for her campaign.



The Pacific Council also met with former Deputy Prime Minister for EU Integration for the Republic of North Macedonia & Ambassador of Macedonia to the United States, Vasko Naumovski, and Mr. Vasko Popetrevski, Journalist and Editor-in-Chief of 360 stepeni ("360 Degrees"). Both conversations explored the social landscape of North Macedonia and highlighted the foreign influence of countries such as Russia, China, and the Arab Gulf States. Russia and China primarily established soft power strategies in the region with the delay of North Macedonia's ascension into the EU. The delay presents an opportunity for both China and Russia to appeal to Macedonian citizens using tools of propaganda and misinformation, through traditional media and social media platforms. Disinformation has quickly become a concern in the Balkan region as most citizens get news and information online and from social media.

Later, Pacific Council delegates met with the Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM), Eric Meyer, and his colleagues from the State Department at the U.S. Embassy in Skopje for a country briefing. DCM Meyer shared the priority of the U.S. mission in Skopje is to create a stable Western Balkans, which can be achieved through the three pillars outlined below:

1. Ensure the Balkans stay on the Euro-Atlantic map
2. Support North Macedonia as an active NATO member
3. Overcome challenges to EU membership

In addition, a couple of key areas were highlighted as essential to supporting national growth including combating corruption and energy diversification. Energy diversification is of particular importance as North Macedonia relies heavily on gas from Bulgaria and coal burning for energy production, impacting the country both economically and environmentally. Efforts are also being made to increase regional trade, support enhanced cybersecurity, and improve regional media and journalism through the USAID and Public Affairs departments.



Concluding the Pacific Council’s time in Skopje, delegates participated in an informational session at the M6 Educational Centre, with CEO Elena Mladenovska Jelenkovikj, who gave a tour of the non-profit facility. M6 hosts training programs on business topics ranging from women in leadership to digital marketing and career growth. M6 also hosts mentorship programs and consulting services for regional companies to support local businesses and train local entrepreneurs.

Serbia

Leaving Skopje, delegates traveled to Belgrade in Serbia, where the Pacific Council attended a country briefing at the U.S. Embassy, led by Ambassador Christopher R. Hill. Ambassador Hill formerly served as special envoy to the Kosovo crisis and was a member of the negotiating team that brought about the Dayton Peace Agreement, ending the Bosnian war [6]. For his contributions to the Bosnia peace settlement and work on the Kosovo crisis, Ambassador Hill earned the State Department’s Distinguished Service Award and the Robert S. Frasure Award for Peace Negotiations [7].



The country briefing highlighted Serbia as a particularly challenging country to work in, given its low opinion of U.S. international policy and perceived NATO aggression following the Operation Allied Force bombing in 1999. Anti-Western narratives are commonly shared by local and national governments and a “balanced” foreign policy is promoted to uphold relationships simultaneously with the U.S., U.K., China, and Russia. There is a described resistance to the “European path” in Serbia presenting a challenge to Western

influence in the region. As such, the main tools of public diplomacy used in Serbia are U.S. Exchange programs and International Leadership programs allowing citizens to understand Western modes of governance and democracy.

Economically, foreign direct investment (FDI) keeps Serbia’s currency stable. FDI in Serbia is evident via the presence of the Microsoft Research and Development Center, Rivian offices, Russian oil refineries, German vehicle software development centers and tire factories, and Chinese copper mines, steel mills, and Huawei offices. However, outside of FDI, the econo-

[6] U. S. Embassy in Belgrade, “Ambassador Christopher R. Hill,” U.S. Embassy in Serbia, March 31, 2022, <https://rs.usembassy.gov/ambassador-christopher-r-hill/>.

[7] “Christopher Hill,” accessed July 7, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/people/christopher-hill?lang=en>.

my is rather stagnant, and there are efforts by the U.S. government to promote local business and relieve citizens who are impacted by existing patronage systems.

Afterward, the Pacific Council visited the University of Belgrade's Political Science Department and Dean and Professor of Political Science, Dr. Dragan R. Simić, where the delegation gained insight into the current state of Kosovo-Serbia relations and Serbian foreign and military policy. The Political Science Department additionally emphasized the importance of the Fulbright scholar program in helping Serbia develop both hard and social science programs within the country as well as the University's relationship with U.S. institutions, namely Clemson and the University of Ohio, which boast their programs focused on the Balkan region.



On the final morning of the delegation, Pacific Council delegates met with the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić accompanied by Ambassador Christopher Hill. President Vučić is a controversial political figure in Serbia, elected under the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), President Vučić initially aligned himself with the far-right Serbian Radical Party (SRS) [8]. It is argued that President Vučić came to power with the erosion of democratic institutions within the country, and the government’s repossession of public institutions and the media. His supporters claim the President’s level of control and leadership resulted in the growth of Serbia into a developed European nation [9]. Vučić maintains he is interested in Serbia joining the EU, however, he retains close ties with China and Russia which present barriers to ascension. The ongoing Russia-Ukraine War adds additional roadblocks for Serbia joining the EU, given its relationship with Russia. It was shared during the meeting that while Serbia condemns the actions of Russia in the current war, as well as Russia’s annexation of Crimea, Russia remains a “traditional friend” of Serbia, and as such upholds historical ties.

During the meeting there was a large focus on Expo 2027, the first world exposition to be held in the former Yugoslavia. Goals for Serbia leading up to Expo 2027 include:

- Economic development
- Infrastructure improvement
- Accelerated modernization
- Increased living standards

There is hope that Expo 2027 will position Serbia as a prime investment destination and that more countries will be incentivized to join the Open Balkans Initiative, an effort to improve economic, social, and cultural ties across the Balkan region, which was co-created by Serbia.



[8] “Aleksandar Vucic: The Man Who Remade Serbia,” December 10, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67654166>.

[9] Ibid.

Concluding the delegation, the Pacific Council met with Sofija Todorović, Director of the Youth Initiative on Human Rights (YIHR), and Radoš Đurović the Executive Director at the Asylum Protection Center. YIHR is an NGO founded in 2003 with branches in Croatia, Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina [10]. YIHR emphasizes using conversations about the past to inform future policy. The organizational pillars include a regional focus, an emphasis on young people, diversity, connection, activism, and knowledge. Organizational activism by YIHR includes efforts like “Ask the Prime Minister,” a grassroots effort sending volunteers to ask community members their feelings about policies enacted in the 1990s and allowing them to reflect on their role in responsibility for the victims of violence during that time. Sofija noted that while it is difficult to relive memories of the past, knowledge is necessary to engage in activism and to create a more informed community that can hold its governmental institutions accountable for their past actions and future promises.



[10] “YIHR - Youth Initiative for Human Rights,” YIHR, accessed June 17, 2024, <https://yih.org/>.

Radoš Đurović shared his experience working at the Asylum Protection Center (APC), a grassroots organization working with asylum seekers and migrant communities in Serbia. APC provides several essential services including psychological support, legal services, social assistance, educational resources, workshops and activities, advocacy campaigns, and other offerings to ease integration and prepare migrants & refugees and their communities for cohabitation [11]. Serbia is a point of transit for thousands of refugees seeking asylum in Northern Europe. Approximately 82% of refugees in Serbia come from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. Due to the strict control of Serbia's northern border, many refugees find the journey to Northern Europe and the process of family reunification difficult. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) estimates that a large proportion of asylum seekers in Serbia are children sent by their parents from countries like Afghanistan to escape conditions of conflict. APC is an essential organization to assist those in transit from conflict-affected areas.

Conclusion

Over five days, delegates gained insight from diverse perspectives including heads of state, non-profit directors, ambassadors and embassy team members, professors, and journalists allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the Western Balkan region. This delegation allowed Pacific Council members to better understand regional political narratives, the international implications of U.S. involvement in all three countries, and the ability to learn the culture of a region with a distinctive history.

We would like to express our gratitude to those who met with our delegation and to those who provided support throughout this trip.

