



**EUROPEAN
LEADERSHIP
NETWORK**

Building better security
for wider Europe

ELN Balkans

Parliamentary Project

Roundtable on Regional Security

Challenges and Cooperation in

Southeast Europe

May 2023

Introduction

The European Leadership Network's roundtable on Regional Security Challenges and Cooperation in Southeast Europe was the project's first in-person event held in the Balkans. It brought together parliamentarians from the region and the wider Euro-Atlantic area with the goal of fostering better parliamentary oversight on security matters in Southeast Europe.

The roundtable comprised two sessions: the first session delved into regional security concerns in Southeast Europe, while the second centred on the pivotal role of parliaments in enhancing energy security in the region, especially the Western Balkans. The discussion was under the Chatham House rule, ensuring an open exchange of ideas whilst protecting the anonymity of the speakers.



Session 1: Regional security issues in Southeast Europe

The introductory remarks described the project, the ELN's unique position as a network of over 400 leaders from across Europe was highlighted, and the organisation's ability to bring together individuals from different political backgrounds, including adversaries, to build bridges and foster dialogue was commended. Europe's fragile security was acknowledged, underscoring the importance of initiatives like the Balkans Parliamentary Project in facilitating cooperation amidst challenging circumstances.

The session's moderator set the stage by acknowledging the Western Balkans' movement towards European Union (EU) integration and the common vision shared by parliamentarians in the region. It was noted that the region's prosperity and stability were of vital importance to the broader European continent. Participants

appreciated the goals of the Balkans Parliamentary Project, highlighting the potential impact of parliamentarians coming together to address regional security concerns.

Several key challenges facing the region were identified. The state of democracy and the rule of law emerged as primary concerns, with discussions revolving around the rise of strongman governments and the need for more robust institutions. Corruption, illegal trade and organised crime were identified as significant threats, further exacerbating the challenges for democratic governance. Religious differences were also acknowledged as a major challenge that required careful consideration and engagement.



The Belgrade-Pristina dialogue took centre stage, with participants emphasising the importance of finding a common understanding to resolve this long-standing issue. The session also addressed ongoing issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina, corruption and polarisation in Montenegro, the political crisis in Bulgaria, and concerns surrounding corruption and organised crime in Albania.

The participants further discussed the impact of geopolitical shifts on regional security, especially, the Russia-Ukraine war and Chinese influence on regional security and stability. The EU was identified as a significant point of reference for addressing the region's challenges, with most countries looking towards EU integration as a means to enhance security and stability.

Participants offered valuable insights into the security landscape in Southeast Europe, making the case for a fresh approach. The EU's 2003 European Security Strategy, which emphasised prosperity, security, and freedom, was contrasted with the Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy, which was formulated in 2016, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Russia's fully-fledged military

invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 further underscored the urgency of reevaluating security in Europe.

The US role in European security was also highlighted, with participants acknowledging the importance of the US as a partner in promoting stability, while concerns were raised regarding the influence of China in Southeast Europe. Participants noted that energy security emerged as a critical aspect of regional stability, given the high dependence on Russian gas in the region.

Session 2: Strengthening energy security in the Balkans

The discussion was designed to focus on the critical role of parliaments in enhancing energy security in Europe, particularly in light of the ongoing energy crisis. With a special emphasis on the Western Balkans, participants highlighted the challenges posed by high energy prices, the need to diversify energy sources, and the urgency of transitioning to renewable and green energy alternatives.



Many speakers noted the impact of the full-scale Russian military invasion of Ukraine together with the Kremlin's decision to cut gas supplies, which has led to soaring energy prices. Europe spent over €800 billion in 2022 to subsidise energy, yet energy prices remained twice as expensive as before the Russian invasion. The EU's reliance on Russian energy supplies – particularly oil, gas, and coal – was a major vulnerability. The February 2022 escalation of the war brought home the importance of diversifying energy sources and reducing dependence on a single supplier.

In terms of gas supplies, Norway, Algeria, and Egypt have stepped in to fill the gap left by Russia. However, challenges related to transmission capacity remained, and the focus on reducing gas consumption posed obstacles. Participants stressed the

need to prioritise energy efficiency, particularly in industrial and residential buildings, to decrease gas consumption.

The session considered the EU timeline for the energy transition and the urgency of ramping up efficiency measures, deploying renewable energy sources, and transitioning to green hydrogen by 2030. Opportunities for importing hydrogen from countries such as Chile, Australia, and Northern African nations were mentioned. The role of the US and Qatar as major liquid natural gas suppliers was also recognised, alongside the environmental concerns associated with shale gas production.

The specific energy security challenges and opportunities faced by the Western Balkans differ in a number of important regards from those of the EU. Structural issues, coal shortages, hydropower failures, and EU-induced price increases were identified as key factors contributing to the energy crisis in the Western Balkans. Nevertheless, speakers recognised the region's potential for a faster and more cost-effective transition to clean energy due to its less energy-intensive industries. Such a transition would depend on strengthening grids, improving storage capacity, and enhancing interconnectivity within the region. The adoption of renewable energy sources like solar, wind, and geothermal energy was highlighted as essential for achieving a 100 per cent clean energy future. Cooperation and cross-border investments were seen as crucial elements in realising this goal.

The roundtable also examined the implications of the European Raw Materials Act and the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) on the Western Balkans. Participants emphasised the need for Balkan countries to introduce carbon taxes and consider deploying renewables to facilitate the energy transition and ensure their energy security.

Lastly, the discussion addressed the perception of nuclear energy and the importance of investing in gas infrastructure in the Western Balkans region. Some participants recognised the potential of nuclear energy as a green alternative. Others cautioned that such initiatives raise security concerns and, importantly, it would require 10 to 15 years to implement. Small modular nuclear reactors might form part of the solution but rely on relatively new technology. In light of the new € 3.5 billion deal to promote gas-fired power plants, pipelines, and liquefied natural gas terminals in the Western Balkans, participants advocated for balanced investments in gas infrastructure alongside renewable energy projects.

In summary, the roundtable highlighted the urgency of strengthening energy security in Europe, with a particular focus on the challenges and opportunities faced by the Western Balkans. Diversification of energy sources, reducing dependence on Russian fossil fuels, accelerating the adoption of renewables, and investing in infrastructure were identified as key actions to address the energy crisis and facilitate the region's transition to a sustainable energy future.

The opinions articulated above do not necessarily reflect the position of the ELN or any of its members. The ELN's aim is to encourage debates that will help develop Europe's capacity to address the pressing foreign, defence, and security policy challenges of our time.



**EUROPEAN
LEADERSHIP
NETWORK**

The European Leadership Network (ELN) is an independent, non-partisan, pan-European NGO with a network of nearly 200 past, present, and future European leaders working to provide practical real-world solutions to political and security challenges.

European Leadership Network
8 St James's Square
London, UK, SE1Y 4JU

secretariat@europeanleadershipnetwork.org
europeanleadershipnetwork.org