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SECURITY MATTERS

Defending democracy – democratic defence

Editorial

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A war is raging in Europe. In Ukraine, people are fighting for survival. In Europe and beyond, there is fear of escalation. Whatever the outcome, the war will change our continent permanently. Among the many questions being brought to the fore by the war, are certainly the defence of democracy and democratic defence.

Ukraine defends democracy, as well as its livelihood, sovereignty, and independence. The Russian leadership has underestimated the transformation that has taken place in Ukraine since its independence in 1991. With many ups and downs, Ukraine has developed as a young and vibrant nation, determining its own destiny and seeking cooperation with partners globally. Ukrainians' choice of democracy in 2004 and again in 2014 has been met with fierce resistance by a Russia that has been moving in the exact opposite direction; no political opposition, a curtailed media, and suppression of any divergent views from government policy. Meanwhile, other former Soviet neighbours with democratic and European integration ambitions have also suffered Russia's democratic pushback and aggressive meddling. Currently, most of Russia's neighbours avoid passing judgement on the invasion for fear of direct retribution.

In the European Union (EU), we are re-learning the hard way that democracy needs constant nurturing and defending, both at home and in our relations with neighbours. In defence of democracy, we are already understanding the negative consequences of our energy dependency on authoritarian states, and are reassessing the way we do business with authoritarian regimes. The often-assumed trade-off between condoning authoritarian regimes and human rights violations to earn short-term stability and economic gain has proven to be counterproductive. At the same time, we are starting to think how we can intensify and accelerate the process of European integration without excluding anyone. Daunting tasks that only need wait on negotiations, a ceasefire, the end of war in Ukraine, and the aversion of escalation.

At the same time, democratic defence is clearly an essential element of democracy. Russia's leadership is completely dominated by intelligence and military leaders who are not influenced by political or public scrutiny. It is this small circle of decision-makers at the top of the Russian security sector and Russian leadership who have sought war, not the average Russian civilian or soldier. Clearly, the fewer the people who have control over military and other security agencies, the higher the chances of these forces being misused.

In Ukraine, representatives of the democratically-elected Verkhovna Rada are risking their lives to meet and carry out their work of law-making, oversight, and representation. Whereas most Russians have no clue of what their government is doing, the Ukrainian people are acting to defend their country. They do so with the guidance and support of the Ukrainian armed forces that are under control of the Ukrainian government and parliament.

The Russian attack and Ukraine's defence show the importance of democratic management and oversight of security and defence. It is a careful balancing act, where military expertise is used and respected while civilian direction and oversight are guaranteed.

At the Centre for European Security Studies, we have sought to contribute to democratisation of defence and security in Europe since 1993. Our last activity in Ukraine was via the BOS security sector oversight project in 2019-20, working closely with the parliament, ombudsman, accounting chamber, and civil society. Together with our European partners, we stand ready to continue such work in support of a secure and democratic Europe.

Meanwhile, in the Western Balkans, through the DECOS project, we seek to do our bit with partners in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. Our aim is to make the process of democratic oversight of defence and security more inclusive by bringing oversight actors – civil society leaders, parliamentarians, and civil servants – together around common democratic and security interests. In doing so, we seek to develop capacities through training, enhance cooperation through joint action, and eventually help build and strengthen a culture of democratic oversight of security.

Most of the writing in this Security Matters precludes the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Here, we share our experiences in implementing the DECOS project and offer our views on the developments regarding democratic oversight of security and defence in the Western Balkans. In a commentary, our board member Peter Vanhoutte dives into local politics in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia, while laying out the main stumbling blocks on the road toward Balkan integration into the European Union. Interviews are included with Bauke Snoep as CESS's focal point in hands-on training, and Lumni Rama as 'our man' in DECOS participating countries, preparing the ground for CESS engagement. Finally, CESS programme assistant Beatrijs Visser talks about her experience with CESS training in Albania and Kosovo. Stay safe.

Jos Boonstra, senior researcher, CESS

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Commentary

The democratic deficit and other hurdles on the Balkan road toward stability and EU integration

Peter Vanhoutte, CESS board member and high-level mediator

Arben Taravari, Secretary General of the political party Alliance of Albanians (AA) in North Macedonia and recently re-elected mayor of Gostivar, puts his smartphone in front of me on the table. I see a video, where opponents of his party belonging to the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), the largest ethnic Albanian party in North Macedonia and part of the governing coalition, attack one of his fellow party members, followed by images of the same people standing in front of the mayor's house, the night before the elections, carrying heavy weapons. Even though the mayor filed complaints in both cases, no action was taken by the police or the judiciary, because both are tightly controlled by DUI. During the local elections, the national police – under the Ministry of Interior – was also regularly used to pressure citizens to vote for DUI; a sign that the police functions as part of a clientelist network.

A few hours later, in the office of the newly-elected mayor of Tetovo, Billal Kasami, whose party 'Besa' won in the former stronghold of DUI, I was told that, immediately after the elections, he had to fire some 400 people from the local administration, out of a total of 700, because they received a salary without showing up for work and only served as 'earning' supporters of influential families and politicians. The newly-elected mayor also discovered a budgetary deficit of nearly €24 million, almost as big as the total annual budget of €27 million. It will be a challenge for the municipality to pay back the debt, let alone to invest in urgent necessities such as schools, renovation of the municipal building and the development of a new urban plan. Like in most municipalities in North Macedonia, there is no basic oversight on the functioning of the judiciary and the police, neither does regular independent auditing of budgets take place, leaving local governance corrupted and inefficient.

That said, internal problems at a municipal level are not the reason why the EU accession process is blocked. The real reason is an ongoing dispute between North Macedonia and EU-member state Bulgaria regarding the origin of the Macedonian language and the national identity. As a result, in December 2021 Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev resigned, even though internal sources also refer to increasing pressures as official tenders became more and more influenced by personal business interests. The new government is hopeful that it might be possible to break the existing deadlock with Sofia. If that fails by June, the only way out seems early elections.

Albania, meanwhile, is entangled in fierce internal political battles, originally between the main opposition party Democratic Party (DP) and the ruling majority of Edi Rama.

At one point, the United States interfered by blacklisting Sali Berisha, former President, Prime Minister, and Chair of the DP. This blacklisting did not result in any further investigation due to a vetting of the Albanian judicial system, most of which is currently dysfunctional. The current head of DP, Lulzim Basha, decided to immediately expel Berisha and his supporters from the party. In reaction, Berisha started spending millions on a counter initiative, and in the end tried to storm the DP Headquarters in early January. Even though the plan was known in advance, police stood aside, and only interfered after the American ambassador called the Prime Minister to order the police to intervene.

In Kosovo, Prime Minister Albin Kurti, coming from a grass roots organisation, raised high hopes that the political situation would change. Unfortunately, he immediately took a very harsh stance on anything related to Serbia. As a result, there was no further progress in terms of EU mediation. The primary problem remains the north of Kosovo, where the Serbian community is dominated by hard-line politicians and their business partners, supported by Belgrade. Only few seem to understand the grievances of the inhabitants of the north, who want to make their own choices for their future, including integration into Kosovo. Recently, Kurti also refused to participate in Vucic's Open Balkans initiative aimed at strengthening the internal economy of the region (he was the only leader to have done so). With this decision, he further isolated Kosovo from its neighbours.

Improving stability in Southeast Europe (not only in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, but also in troubled Bosnia-Herzegovina and in Serbia and in Montenegro) will be difficult, but certainly not impossible. Among the key elements are strengthening effective oversight and further democratisation of the security sector. It is crucial that citizens become aware that this oversight is not an exclusive task of central state institutions, but of all citizens. The DECOS project provides a modest, though concrete contribution, to Balkan integration into the EU. It draws the attention to the real problems and engages professionals and independent experts, as well as civil society organisations, in a pragmatic approach aimed at finding practical solutions that are close to citizens.

Interview

DECOS training on/offline

Bauke Snoep, senior associate, CESS, the Netherlands

What is your role in the DECOS project?

I am mostly involved as a trainer, teaching several modules, and as a 'controller' of the one-day simulation exercise that we regularly include in training courses. Unfortunately, this was all put on hold at the beginning of DECOS in 2020.

Covid-19 made in-country training impossible. Instead, online policy lab meetings were organised. In April 2021, we started to do online training, and the original idea of training was more or less reinstated in a virtual environment. I say more or less because we had to spread each training over a two-week period instead of the consecutive 3-4 days that we are used to do in-person. In addition, when working online we faced occasional breakdowns of audio and/or video. Nonetheless, we were happy that at last something of the planned training had come off the ground. Since October 2021, we have been able to do the in-country training as intended, and the joy and relief of doing so amongst both trainees and trainers has been great.

What, in your view, are the biggest challenges that Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia face in the fields of democratic reform and security?

Although they are three different countries, the similarities cannot be denied. Apart from the regional position, the three countries share a common history. Obtaining democracy and independence is not something that the government can order over the weekend. It takes time to understand and to adhere to the corner stones of democracy, i.e. the Trias Politica (separation of powers), transparency, accountability, and the rule of law. It also takes time to root out the heavy bureaucracy, the undeniable corruption, the ingrained clientelism, etc. The biggest challenge for all three countries, in my view, is the absence of sufficient political will from all parties to really change the country and of a powerful leadership that will steer his or her country into the right direction of mature democracy.

What is the added value of training in the field of democratic governance of defence and security?

One example is the largely passive role of the Assembly during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, and its merely formal exercise of control over the executive. Another is the ‘cannabisation’ of the country in 2016-7, during which Albania experienced an unprecedented rise in cannabis cultivation, thanks in part to the involvement of elements from law enforcement and a lack of oversight by the legislature.

Positive examples include the rejection of a draft law by the Assembly in 2020, which, if passed unchanged, would have enabled the government to obtain competencies over security institutions. According to the draft law, the powers of the state police would have been expanded to include investigation and surveillance, which are currently competencies of the prosecution. Another example is the 2016 justice reform that provides for the vetting of officials at all levels, including those working in security. As a result of this reform, a high number of judges, prosecutors and police directors were dismissed under allegations of corruption.

What lessons can be drawn from other countries in the Western Balkans that are relevant or applicable to Albania when it comes to security sector oversight?

There is no blueprint for democracy, but one can think in terms of a general framework. Each country must stay within that framework, but be free to determine itself how it wishes to exercise democracy. The same applies to democratic governance, participatory democracy,

and inclusive oversight. In our training, we show trainees how things could be done, but never enforce anything upon them as they must pick and choose themselves. During simulation exercises, we see that the outcome is always different. This is quite logical, as each of our trainees has his or her own experience, expectations, political maturity, etc. Our trainees always confirm that they have increased their knowledge, learned to cooperate and compromise, improved their skills, and also have made friends with trainees from different institutions during the training. All this not only serves to improve democratic governance in general, but, in particular, it helps to increase inclusive oversight of the security sector, the main aim of the DECOS project.

Interview

DECOS: staying informed on local developments

Lumni Rama, CESS consulting partner, Kosovo

What is your role in the DECOS project?

In DECOS, I work with local stakeholders by identifying local experts and trainees and staying in touch with them. The idea is to extend the work of DECOS beyond the training sessions and research by constantly liaising with local actors: what are their needs and interests? Do they have ideas for DECOS engagement, etc.? This way, we seek to establish an inclusive approach to improving security sector oversight.

For me, these tasks are ideal as I can lean on my experiences with security and democracy projects in Kosovo and my broader network in the region. Over the last two decades, I have gained experience in capacity building of various state institutions, political parties, independent agencies/bodies and, of course, civil society organisations. In this sense, my activities with CESS are also in line with assignments that I have fulfilled for the OSCE mission in Kosovo, the Geneva Centre for Democratic Control of Armed Forces, and the Westminster Foundation for Democracy.

What, in your view, are the biggest challenges that Kosovo faces in the fields of democratic reform and security?

Being a country with a newly-established statehood, Kosovo faces many challenges in terms of governance and development in general. When it comes to security sector institutions, we lack lots of things; most importantly, experience (as new institutions), resources (having tight budgets), staff capacities, a habit of governance oversight, political stability, and so on. The assistance of the international community is appreciated, but sometimes confusing as Americans and Europeans suggest different ways of working or offer conflicting templates. Meanwhile, a lack of Kosovar access to international institutions also remains a problem.

What is the added value of a training project like DECOS to democratic governance of defence and security?

In the DECOS project, people from different institutions and backgrounds are brought together around common interests of oversight. It is stimulating to see how people learn from each other and understand each other's issues and concerns better. This also applies to the regional elements of DECOS, where oversight actors from different countries share best (and worst) practices. This project is of special importance when you have in mind the sensitivity of democratic security oversight in transitional societies.

Commentary

From books and online classes to travel and hands-on training

Beatrijs Visser, programme assistant, CESS, The Netherlands

After all the theoretical knowledge and skills that one acquires at university, finishing with an internship enables you to put what you have learned into practice. It is the moment you can finally get a taste of life after studying. As a project assistant at CESS, I have experienced the shift from theory to practice, and I enjoy being able to combine research with my interest in international security and fascination for the Balkan region. But which intern gets the opportunity to travel to the region not just once, but twice, to see the work at the office unfold in practice?

In January, I accompanied my colleagues to Tirana for an in-country training course on post-legislative scrutiny. Apart from arranging logistics before and during the training, I enjoyed participating in the course itself. The content of the training taught me a lot about the process of legislative oversight and how Western Balkan countries deal with this. After two years of online classes due to covid-19 restrictions, it was nice to learn, communicate, and collaborate in person. It was particularly interesting to work with people from different cultural backgrounds and understand how their politics function daily. For me, this put Albania's position in the Balkans and, in fact, in Europe, in a different light.

In February, we travelled to Pristina for a similar training course. Being familiar with the method and understanding what was expected of me, gave me more confidence in participating in the different elements of the training. I learned that every training course is different. Whereas the modules were similar to those in Tirana, the input by the participants and experts made it a very different experience. Due to being more comfortable with the material, I was able to connect more with the trainees. Moreover, the conversations we had were very valuable for my deeper understanding of Kosovo's history and politics.

After assisting and participating in two national training courses, I have also been able to reflect on this way of training people. By bringing people from several areas of the security sector together, they learn from each other's perspectives. By teaching them the theory of a certain topic, and subsequently letting them put their new knowledge into practice during simulation exercises, you create a constructive environment. I do believe that this bottom-up approach eventually creates institutional knowledge and a skill set that will improve democratic oversight in the Western Balkans. However, to assess this long-term effect, it is necessary to keep track of the learning process. By participating in the courses in Tirana and Pristina, I have discovered a newly-found interest in the long-term effects of a training on institutional change.

The trips to Tirana and Pristina changed my perspective on NGO work. Both trainings helped me understand the work that CESS does in the region, how the work in Groningen contributes to that, and what is involved in organising a training. Due to the pandemic, the previous interns did not have the opportunity to see both sides of CESS' activities. Therefore, I truly feel lucky to have been able to join my colleagues in the region.

CESS News

DECOS online national training courses

Between April and September 2021, we engaged three groups of practitioners from our DECOS countries Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia in a sequence of online national training courses. We worked with the same group of trainees per country, and covered a series of topics directly related to the main objectives of the project: respectively, inclusive oversight of the security sector; post-legislative scrutiny; and strengthening oversight of law enforcement. Each online training course was divided over two weeks and consisted of various interactive Zoom sessions and one-day simulation exercises in the GatherTown environment. Trainees who completed the online training courses received a certificate in the last months of 2021 when CESS resumed in-person trainings.

DECOS in-country training courses Autumn 2021

In October 2021, we were finally able to organise in-country training courses again. Our first training course was implemented in Albania for a group of enthusiastic practitioners representing parliament, the ombudsman institute, the audit office and several civil society organisations. In November, we organised the next two training courses in Pristina and Skopje. At the three training courses, the challenges pertaining to democratic oversight of the security sector were discussed with the trainees. During the one-day simulation exercise, policy lab discussions and various working group sessions, trainees provided us with substantial input on country-specific issues that hamper oversight, but also identified options for reform. Challenges in all three countries are different, but there is overlap and similarities in various fields. That is the reason why regional training courses have

been scheduled later in the project, allowing us to stimulate experience-sharing sessions between practitioners from all three countries.

DECOS in-country coaching Kosovo

In November 2021, CESS organised a sequence of meetings parallel to our training course, which are part of DECOS coaching. The idea is to address a timely request or need in the DECOS countries. In Kosovo, a draft law was being considered by the Security Committee in the Assembly to establish the institute of a military Ombudsman. The Committee Chairman indicated to us that his committee was interested in hearing examples from various EU countries on how human rights matters of military personnel were perceived in member states. That is why we sought the involvement of a former Inspector General of the Armed Forces from the Netherlands, who was present with us in Pristina while we organised our training course. During his visit, he presented the Dutch practice to the committee and engaged in meetings with the Ombudsman of Kosovo and several think tanks.

New CESS project in Armenia

The 'Developing Inclusive Oversight of Security' (DIOS) project in Armenia runs from December 2021 to December 2023 and is funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The project seeks to contribute to a more inclusive process of governance, whereby the Armenian Parliament is at the centre of democratic oversight of security. The project, which will be implemented together with the Armenian Parliament and local civil society actors, consists of a research and a capacity-building component. Over the course of the project, policy-oriented research will be developed through assessment and policy labs with local stakeholders. Capacity-building is foreseen through a series of targeted training courses for parliamentary staff, as well as other oversight actors, including representatives of civil society.

CESS Interns

In autumn 2021, Megha Nair did an internship at CESS. She was already involved earlier with us through her participation in a student advisory team, briefing CESS about options in moving training and research online. At CESS, she worked on an EUCAM online training course and was instrumental in the organisation of a DECOS training course in Tirana, where she joined in with participants. Our current intern, Beatrijs Visser, offers her views on DECOS training in the commentary above.

Latest Publications

CESS (www.cess.org)

Countering disinformation in North Macedonia: how can parliament rise to the occasion?

CESS Policy Brief, No. 6, February 2022

Marko Pankovski and Vlora Rechica

Disinformation poses a serious challenge to politics and society in North Macedonia. It is time for parliament to step up its activity in countering disinformation through its key tasks of law-making, democratic oversight, and representation. Establishing an inter-party working group on disinformation would be a good start.

Improving the information position of the Albanian, Kosovar and North Macedonian parliaments

CESS Policy Brief, No. 5, May 2021

Jos Boonstra (ed.)

Parliamentarians are overwhelmed with information and often have difficulty in finding specific information to perform their duties. The Albanian, Kosovar, and North Macedonian parliaments are developing their own in-house information capacities, and they work with civil society. What steps can the three Balkan countries take to further boost the information position of their legislatures?

EUCAM programme (www.eucentralasia.eu)

Between praise and persecution: Civil society in Kyrgyzstan

EUCAM Working Paper No. 21, September 2021

Jos Boonstra (ed.), Begimai Bekbolotova, Aizhan Erisheva, and Irina Kulikova

Kyrgyzstan's civil society has been renowned in Central Asia and beyond for its influence and activism. But with the sudden rise of a new populist president, civil society's freedom and room for manoeuvre is becoming more and more limited. How does liberal-democratic civil society regard the turbulent political and social events that the country is going through? How does civil society see its own role in the development of Kyrgyzstan? And finally, what is civil society's view on cooperation with the international donor community?

Seven pointers for the new EUSR for Central Asia

EUCAM Commentary No. 46, June 2021

Jos Boonstra and Fabienne Bossuyt

The European Union Special Representative (EUSR) for Central Asia plays a central role as the primary point of contact between the Central Asian countries and EU institutions. The new EUSR will have the opportunity to set her own priorities within the parameters of the mandate and the EU's strategy. To help the new EUSR, Ambassador Terhi Hakala, get up to speed, we have taken the liberty to outline seven matters that she might want to consider in the fulfilment of her mandate.

Delivering aid 'uphill'

EUCAM Commentary No. 45

Farida Alibakhshova, Jos Boonstra, and Gulbara Omorova

The mountainous regions of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan present a set of specific development challenges and opportunities to inhabitants, local governments, and international donors alike. This commentary argues that there is a need for more inclusiveness and transparency in the relationship between the main development actors in the Naryn Region in Kyrgyzstan and Gorno-Badakhshan in Tajikistan. It does so by briefly assessing two development matters: environmental risks and the position of people with disabilities.

About the DECOS project

The 'Developing Capacity, Cooperation and Culture in Overseeing the Security Sectors of Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia' project (2019-22) seeks to empower democratic institutions and actors in their function of democratic oversight of security. It does so by increasing capacities, enhancing cooperation, and fostering a culture of oversight of the security sectors of Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. DECOS consists of a capacity building and a research component that are directed at democratic oversight actors – parliaments, independent institutions, and advisory bodies; and civil society organisations – in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia.

The Centre for European Security Studies (CESS) collaborates in DECOS with the Albanian Institute for Political Studies (IPS), the Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM) from Albania, the Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development (KIPRED), and the Institute for Democracy 'Societas Civilis' Skopje (IDSCS) from North Macedonia. DECOS is funded by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs.



CESS

The Centre for European Security Studies (CESS) is an independent institute for research and training, based in Groningen, the Netherlands. CESS seeks to advance security, development, democracy and human rights by helping governments and civil society face their respective challenges. CESS is an international, multidisciplinary and inclusive institute. Its work is part of the European quest for stability and prosperity, both within and outside Europe. CESS encourages informed debate, empowers individuals, fosters mutual understanding on matters of governance, and promotes democratic structures and processes.