

ESI newsletter 1/2018
31 January 2018

Balkan crises, imagined and real: Bosnian elections – PISA gap



Dear friends,

Viking helmets have horns. We know this because we have seen them many times, in cartoons and movies, in football memorabilia and on the uniforms of Scandinavian soldiers. What is less well known is that we owe this image to German costume designer Carl Emil Doepler and his nineteenth century staging of Richard Wagner's operas. We recognize the image despite the fact that no archaeologist has ever found a Viking helmet with horns.

A cliché is something everyone assumes is true without checking. Thinking in clichés saves time and effort. We “know” that the Irish like to drink and that the Germans have no sense of humour, that institutions in the Balkans are all deeply corrupt and that Bosnians are irrationally obsessed with ethnic identities.

There are no Vikings in the Balkans, but there is certainly no shortage of clichés, as we also **described in a recent report on “Wine, dog food and Bosnian clichés.”** The problem with clichés is that they make us lazy and complacent. We believe that we know things that we don't. We stop trying to understand complex problems in ways that allow for them to be addressed. We stop critical thinking.



Dragan Covic, member of the Bosnian presidency heading to Brussels this week

Why Bosnian democracy will not end this October

In recent months some Bosnian leaders and international officials in Sarajevo have warned that unless there is an urgent change in the state election law Bosnian democracy might come to an end in October 2018.

Dragan Covic, leader of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and member of Bosnia's tripartite presidency, warned in June 2017: "Formally elections can be held, but the implementation of election results is impossible. There is no point in starting the election process if the results cannot be implemented ... changes to the Election law are needed." Borjana Kristo, speaker of the Bosnian House of Representatives, explained last September that failure to change the election law immediately would lead to full paralysis of all of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

We took a closer look and found that there is no institutional crisis. There is also no reason to adopt changes to the Bosnian election law in a hurry a few months before elections. In a short paper we explain what Bosnia's latest crisis is about - and why there is no need to intervene – in seven answers to seven questions. We conclude:

"Bosnian democracy is safe. This should have been obvious all along. But then again, many obvious things have often been obscured when it comes to the work of Bosnian institutions. On this, as on previous occasions, the rational approach is the same: don't believe the hype."

New ESI Paper:

**Don't believe the Hype
Why Bosnian Democracy will not end this October**



Something is wrong here (the OECD test has nothing to do with the Italian city)

Closing the Balkan PISA Gap

A very real problem across the Balkans, and one of the least focused upon, is the crisis in the quality of basic education. One way to grasp the extent of this crisis it is to look at the regular assessments of education outcomes produced by the **OECD and its PISA test**.

Global PISA results in mathematics (2015) – Top 20 and Bottom 20

Rank	Country	Score	Rank	Country	Score
1.	Singapore	564	53.	Montenegro	418
2.	China (Hong Kong)	548	54.	Trinidad and Tobago	417
3.	China (Macao)	544	55.	Thailand	415
4.	Chinese Taipei	542	56.	Albania	413
5.	Japan	532	57.	Argentina	409
6.	China (four provinces)	531	58.	Mexico	408
7.	Korea	524	59.	Georgia	404
8.	Switzerland	521	60.	Qatar	402
9.	Estonia	520	61.	Costa Rica	400
10.	Canada	516	62.	Lebanon	396
11.	Netherlands	512	63.	Colombia	390
12.	Denmark	511	64.	Peru	387
13.	Finland	511	65.	Indonesia	386
14.	Slovenia	510	66.	Jordan	380
15.	Belgium	507	67.	Brazil	377
16.	Germany	506	68.	Macedonia	371
17.	Poland	504	69.	Tunisia	367
18.	Ireland	504	70.	Kosovo	362
19.	Norway	502	71.	Algeria	360
20.	Austria	497	72.	Dominican Republic	328

OECD, “PISA 2015: Pisa Results in Focus”, December 2016.

OECD, “PISA 2012: Pisa Results in Focus”, 2014 (for Serbia).

What emerges is the Balkan Pisa Gap: in recent assessments (on basic skills in mathematics, but also when it comes to literacy) many of the countries in the region are among the bottom 20 (out of 72 countries) in the world that took the test in 2015. Kosovo and Macedonia have been performing particularly badly. Bosnia has never taken the test until now.



Looking for inspiration: Estonia, Slovenia and education success

Recently – at a briefing for the **EU Council Working Group on the Western Balkans in Brussels** – ESI proposed putting the Balkan education crisis as expressed by the **Pisa Gap** at the centre of regular assessments of the Copenhagen economic criteria in Commission Country Reports.

If the skills of the young are not developed, if citizens of the region are already years behind their age-cohort in other European countries by the time they are 15, how could this region ever catch up in terms of development?

In Brussels we also proposed other concrete ideas:

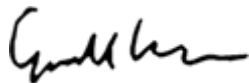
- Closing the PISA gap should be a central issue at EU-Balkan events planned under the Bulgarian and Austrian EU presidencies in 2018; these presidencies might even consider a special EU-Balkan Education Summit, with ministers of education and prime ministers from the Balkans; in preparation of such a summit ...
- ... policy experiences of outstanding performers among EU member states, such as Estonia and Slovenia, should be studied closely and concrete lessons from these presented in local languages to Balkan publics.
- At the same time European Commission regular reports should begin to assess all Balkan countries by the **goals and benchmarks already developed by EU member states** for EU member states (by 2020):
 1. At least 95% of children (from 4 to compulsory school age) should participate in **early childhood education**;
 2. fewer than 15% of 15-year-olds should be **under-skilled in reading, mathematics and science**;
 3. **the rate of early leavers from education and training** aged 18-24 should be below 10%;

4. at least 40% of **people aged 30-34 should have completed some form of higher education;**
5. at least 15% of **adults should participate in lifelong learning;**
6. at least 20% of **higher education graduates** and 6% of **18-34 year-olds with an initial vocational qualification should have spent some time studying or training abroad;**
7. **the share of employed graduates** (aged 20-34 with at least upper secondary education attainment and having left education 1-3 years ago) should be at least 82%.

One way to do this would be to include all Balkan countries in future European Commission “**Education and Training Monitor**” reports.

In 2018, for the first time ever, all Western Balkan countries will take the OECD Pisa test. Let this also be the year in which leaders across the region, and their friends in the EU, commit to close this damaging gap between the Balkan countries and the rest of Europe.

Many best regards,



Gerald Knaus

PS: ESI has published before on the state of education in the region. In 2014 we looked closely at the future of basic education in Kosovo, in a project supported by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs: **Books and Teachers – The Great Debate on Education Kosovo needs in 2015**. ESI’s senior analyst at the time, Besa Shahini, has since become deputy minister of education in Albania.