

The Western Balkans and the international community

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1. The general characteristic of the region

Recent political tensions in and related to Kosovo, Serbia, Macedonia and Bosnia & Herzegovina have again attracted attention to the Western Balkans in several important international bodies (UN, OSCE, EU, NATO).

The region has during the last two centuries well merited the distinction as the most volatile and troublesome part of the European continent. Throughout the last century local warfare and coalition wars with continental implications, uprisings, revolutions, *coups d'état*, guerrilla warfare, genocide, mass expulsion of population, terrorism and other forms of violence have at almost regular intervals punctured the periods of regional peace. After a period of relative calm which lasted about four decades the latest bouts of bloody violence and wars in the region took place again in 1990 – 1995 and in 1998-1999.

This first upsurge followed and was largely triggered by otherwise positive developments – by the end of the “Cold War”, the breakdown of a score of communist regimes and by the ensuing transition to more democratic political systems and to market economies. The Western Balkans has proved to be an unstable region, very sensitive to the shifts in relations between major powers. In these respects the Balkans differs substantively from the northern half of former Eastern Europe and is similar in its make-up to the geopolitical fault line stretching from Eastern Turkey all the way to China. Not incidentally this fault line was called by Z. Brzezinski the “Asian Balkans”. This characteristic of the Balkans has had deep historical roots.

During more than a millennium numerous incursions and migrations of various ethnicities created in the Balkans a unique and most heterogeneous mixture of peoples and ethnic groups speaking different languages and professing different religions. Having been for many centuries divided between several empires, with their centers of power outside its bounds the Balkans have never become a viable and coherent region in cultural, economic or political sense. Today it obviously lacks its own natural center of gravity. In addition the disintegration of ex – Yugoslavia in 1991-1992 has greatly increased the political fragmentation in the Western Balkans. The proclamation of Kosovo's independence on February 17, 2008 was the latest shift in this direction. However the potential for further political fragmentation in the region has not been fully exhausted in spite of the generally negative attitudes towards ‘Balkanization’ displayed by major powers and by the most important international organizations. It was not by accident that the political fragmentation in the Balkans largely followed ethnic – national lines. Smaller states which resulted from the breakdown of the multinational federation SFRY are today much less heterogeneous from the ethnic, religious and cultural viewpoints than had been the Yugoslav federation and have become also culturally more homogeneous within their own boundaries.

The dramatic change, wars and other developments since the late 1980s have caused huge economic dislocation and damage to the region. The Western Balkans still have not reached the pre-1991 levels of industrial and agricultural production. In some parts of the region wars and dislocations wiped out the positive results of up to three decades of the preceding economic progress. The very uneven damage to their economies has greatly increased the disparities between the most and the least prosperous parts of the region. The differentials in GNP per capita and in the level of unemployment inside the Western Balkans have gone up to tenfold. Thus, e.g., the unemployment rate among Kosovo's young and women stands at present at about 70 percent. Huge disparities inside the same region inevitably feed illegal trafficking, organized crime, social instability and political unrest. The deep economic and social problems have very significantly contributed to the continuity of negative national and religious stereotypes and to the deterioration in interethnic relations. The generations-long indoctrination with historical myths has fanned interethnic hatred which was further magnified by modern mass media, manipulated and exploited by ruthless politicians. The traumatic history of the region has thus served as a powerful tool for mass mobilization with nationalist, religious and xenophobic slogans which led to the most tragic results in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Kosovo.

2. The present security situation in the Balkans

The tectonic geopolitical shifts in the early 1990s and the crisis of neutralism and non-alignment led to a radical political and military realignment in the Balkans and also in the region's relations with external powers. With the greatly reduced Russian influence (and the eclipse of the shortly-lived Chinese political presence in Albania) practically the entire region has become oriented towards the West. The region lacks mineral, energy or other resources on a scale which would make it important to the world economy. The geopolitical importance of the Balkans has also relatively decreased. This is why the Balkans have ceased to be an object of overt contests for political and military control or domination by external imperial powers. The extra-regional sources of conflict in, over or about the Balkans have been therefore greatly reduced. The Balkans are not anymore the world's powderkeg as they were in 1914 and instead gained the notoriety of a troublespot and costly nuisance. On the other hand, these developments and the greatly diminished the big powers' positive motivation to provide assistance to the region.

Since the end of the last major campaign of armed violence in March – June 1999 **outward tranquility was imposed on the Western Balkans**. After several unsuccessful attempts by UN, CSCE/OSCE and EEC/EU and following considerable hesitation in the West this highly positive change was achieved by political and military interventions from outside the region, primarily through NATO. Since then the tranquility has been preserved by several *de facto* international protectorates over parts of the region. These systems of external surveillance and assistance have included the stationing of peace-keeping and stabilization troops, international police, armed and unarmed watchers, judges, Ombudsmen, administrative overseers etc. in several potential trouble spots. The suppression of armed violence by superior force did not however add up to the long-term regional stability, as was recently manifested in Kosovo and Serbia. **The security situation in the Western Balkans still remains precarious.**

As was noted earlier the termination of the East – West political and military rivalry in the Balkans has had security-wise both negative and positive consequences. In the first decade of the XXI century we thus observe in the region a combination of persisting old sources of tensions and of some positive developments since the early 1990's. Under the veneer of tranquility some serious political and security problems still persist in the Western Balkans:

- the presence of intolerance, pathological nationalism and xenophobia;
- underdeveloped democratic political culture, the lacking art of compromise;
- several varieties of non-military threats to regional security and stability (ill- governance, corruption, organized crime, illegal trafficking in arms, drugs, human beings etc.).
- the still unrevolted problem of well over a million refugees and displaced persons.

Many attempts have been made in the past to create region-wide webs of security in the Balkans. These included two Balkans defense pacts, one in the 1930s and the other in the 1950s. The first failed miserably while the second – the Balkan pact between Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey signed Slovenia in August 1954 - never materialized. So far none of the regionally generated initiatives and undertakings has proven viable, largely because they have never led to sustained political activity on a regional basis. Moreover, all Balkans initiatives have as a rule lacked the support and active involvement of the public, mass media, and of civil society.

A complimentary approach to cure the instability in the region has manifested itself in the efforts to induce and infuse from outside economic, political and security cooperation with and among all Balkans states. These efforts have resulted since the 1980s in a web of ties among these states and between them and international organizations, almost exclusively Western in origin. This web includes such nets as the "Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe", CEFTA, SECI, NATO's "Partnership for Peace", "South Eastern European Multinational Force" et. al. The European Union has promoted and supported regional integration in the Western Balkans by concluding several types of cooperation agreement. These have served as preliminary steps in associating and hopefully eventually admitting the states of the region into the ranks of its future members. This strategy of staged integration has been successfully practiced earlier with two other former East European groups of states - the Visegrad group and the three Baltic republics.

However the nets involving the Balkan states have been overly dependent on outside donors, mostly understaffed, poorly interconnected and coordinated. As a result of these shortcomings a few of them have proven to be effective. In addition some of these nets have partly blocked one another. For

example, the extension of the EU membership has undermined the "Central European Free Trade Area" (CEFTA) and in fact erected new interstate barriers in the region. The EU visa rules and the extension of the Schengen regime have created considerable problems on the practical level which have hampered the movement of persons, economic and cultural cooperation in the region. There has been also a conceptual incongruity between the "Stability Pact for the South-Eastern Europe" and the "Stabilization and Association Process" conducted by the European Union.

3. The Kosovo problem and its international implications

Kosovo's proclamation of independence on February 17, 2008 and the birth of the youngest European state have highlighted the salience of historically generated sources of intraregional tensions and conflicts in the region.

In late XIX c. Kosovo used to be a minor part of the wider Albanian question within the Ottoman Empire. Kosovo as a separate and potentially volatile issue was created by Serbia and Tsarist Russia with the assistance of other great European powers. For many years Serbia, Greece and Montenegro have conspired with Russia to prevent the appearance of an independent Albania on the ruins of the Ottomans possessions in the Western Balkans. According to their coordinated plans the three Orthodox states were to occupy and partition the lands with the majority Albanian population thus forestalling an Albanian declaration of independence. Consequently the Serbian army invaded Kosovo in 1912 on its way to conquer also Northern Albania and its main port Durres/Drač. Serbia's plans to gain by force a permanent sovereign access to the Mediterranean sea were foiled however by Austro-Hungary and Italy. Bowing to an Austro-Hungarian ultimatum the Serbian Army hesitantly withdrew from Northern Albania. However in 1913 the European powers - Great Britain, France, Germany, Austro-Hungary and Italy, at Russia's insistence allowed Serbia and Montenegro to retain the already occupied Eastern parts of the Ottoman possessions inhabited predominately by the Albanians and Muslims. These lands included i.a. the Sandzhak of Novi Pazar, today's Kosovo and Western Macedonia. Under the two Yugoslavias the problem of Kosovo had remained a destabilizing internal issue which contributed to the first Yugoslavia's disintegration in 1941 and continued to create internal troubles in the second, post-1945 Communist Yugoslavia. After the latter's demise in 1991-1992 the Kosovo problem had been for several years totally ignored by the international community and reappeared only in 1997-1999 as an unresolved regional political and security issue.

Serbian rulers and their armies occupied Kosovo four times (1216, 1912, 1918, 1945) and were chased or withdrew from the province also four times (1459, 1914, 1941, 1999). The Kosovo problem has contained at its kernel a political conflict between the Kosovar Albanians' desire for freedom, national emancipation and self-determination and, on the other hand, Serbia's endeavors since 1999 to reimpose, at least nominally, her rule over the province.

For the Serbian cultural and political elites Kosovo has remained a powerful symbolic relic of Serbia's medieval glory and a vestige of Kosovo's colonial and later subordinate status *vis-à-vis* Serbia in the XX century. After 1999 however Serbian rule over Kosovo could be never peacefully reestablished in whatever form. Its reimposition by armed force under present political climate in Europe is also out of the question. A compromise solution for the Kosovo status in the form of a wide autonomy had in fact existed under the last SFRY constitution of 1974. It was however effectively annulled by the Serbian parliament in 1989 thus a grossly violating the Yugoslav constitutional order. Today's Serbia still bears the responsibility for crimes against the Kosovar Albanians committed by the Serbian military and police forces between 1989 and 1999. These included i.a. causing death of at least 10.000 Kosovars. According to the UNHCR statistics about 350.000 persons were forced by the Serbian authorities to leave Kosovo in 1998 and about 770.000, mostly Albanians in 1999.

Many ordinary Serbs have been for many centuries brought up in the belief of the Kosovo myth and in the religiously colored hatred of the Muslims (popularly still called the "Turks"). Due to this mass indoctrination only a handful of Serbian politicians dare to publicly recognize the present reality in Kosovo and to acknowledge Serbia's own responsibility for the loss of the province. Serbia has never apologized for the crimes she committed in Kosovo and no high Serbian official was brought so far to trial in Serbia for them. Most current high Serbian officials had supported Milošević's policy in Kosovo (including the present Prime Minister V. Koštunica). At the last presidential election in Serbia in February 2008 a majority of the Serbs voted for the Radical candidate Tomislav Nikolić, proponent of the same policy. His Serbian Radical Party in coalition with other nationalist formations might form the next Serbian government after the premature parliamentary election on May 12, 2008. The Serbian political class is incapable to admit Serbia's present inability to rule Kosovo and to underwrite financially Kosovo's very costly reconstruction and development. Moreover if Kosovo were to be

returned to Serbia the internal political stability of Serbia itself would become fragile as the Albanians' share in Serbia's population would in only several decades exceed the limit of political tolerance among the Serbs.

Since summer 1999 Kosovo had been a *de facto* mostly self-governing country under a UN mandate and a NATO protectorate. It had been fully separate and independent from Serbia, having a different political and economic system and a different currency. During these almost nine years the economic, social and political situation in Kosovo has significantly improved due to international assistance (around 21% GNP), its own population's efforts and remittances of the Kosovars from abroad (roughly 15% of GNP). Gross national product per capita in Kosovo has quadrupled to today's around € 1000 p.c. It remains however twice lower than in the neighbouring states, while poverty (about 45% of the population) and very high unemployment still prevail (well over 40%, over 70% among the females and the young). The international community spends on its regular activities in Kosovo about € 2 billion annually, although mostly on security and its own representatives and only a small fraction of these funds (5-8%) flows directly into Kosovo's economy.

The problem of Kosovo's status was formally resolved by a unilateral declaration but with a tacit approval of USA and the major EU members. This action was carried out without a prior UN Security Council resolution approving Martti Ahtisaari's recommendation but also without a condemnation of, let alone annulling Kosovo's independence, as Serbia demanded. The essentials of M. Ahtisaari's recommendation (commissioned by the UN Secretary General) are nevertheless to be implemented by Kosovo's democratically elected authorities with the assistance provided by a large EU mission called EULEX. The presence of UNMIK, OSCE and NATO has continued while the legality of EULEX was claimed by the Western powers under the existing UNSC Resolution 1244 and challenged by the Russian Federation. **However even with the question of status finally resolved the much more difficult Kosovo problem will remain on Europe's agenda for quite some time also due to its wider geopolitical reverberations.**

Kosovo represents today only one of the numerous political conflicts in the world closely related to ethnic, national, linguistic, cultural and religious divides within states. In the Euro-Atlantic area alone these problems span from Quebec, Greenland, Scotland, Ulster, Catalunya and Basque country in Spain, Belgium, Corsica in France, to Slovakia, Estonia, Western Ukraine, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Western Macedonia, Eastern Moldova, Southern Russia and Northern Cyprus. Further to the East the ethnically related trouble spots include Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia in Georgia, Nagorni Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Eastern Turkey, Northwestern Iran and Northern Iraq, stretching all the way to Tibet, Taiwan and Indonesia. The total number of similar problems threatening the stability of multiethnic and multireligious states in Africa is also high. Each of these conflicts has been dealt with separately. Thus the solution of Kosovo's status need not create a spill-over effect and/or be replicated elsewhere.

Since the end of the 'Cold War' there have been almost two dozen changes of internationally recognized borders in the Euro-Atlantic area, mostly without a UN Security Council approval. Each of these changes in Germany, former Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union took its own course. The political effects of the new interstate borders has mostly positively affected European security. The same could be eventually expected from adjusting Kosovo's legal status *vis-a-vis* Serbia to the *de facto* situation and from the new interstate border between Serbia and Kosovo once the relations between the two states are normalized.

4. International community facing the Western Balkans

The Balkan elites when involved in conflict with their neighbours show typically the propensity to appeal to and to attempt to embroil in them outside powers instead of managing these conflicts bilaterally or within a regional framework. Mainly for this reason Balkan conflicts during the last two decades occupied and led to the direct political and military involvement of four permanent members of the UN Security Council. These conflicts have been also almost continuously the agendas of the UN, CSCE/OSCE, EEC/EU, NATO, Council of Europe. Due to diverging interests of the great powers these conflicts often contributed to already existing divisions and antagonisms in the international community. The Kosovo problem had represented a serious challenge to NATO's political cohesion in 1998 - 1999. The Alliance was able then to overcome the differences among its members concerning the pending forceful military action against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in March 1999. Nine years later the question of Kosovo's status has also divided the EU and NATO members. A majority of them has supported M. Ahtisaari's recommendation as the least bad of all available alternatives and consequently recognized Kosovo's independence. A minority of EU and NATO members, notably

Greece, Cyprus, Spain, Slovakia and Romania have remained so far closer to Serbia's strongly rejectionist position. The disagreements among EU members are more visible in 2008 than were the discords among the EEC members in 1991 concerning the recognition of Slovenia's and Croatia's independence. This fact does not speak well for the coherence of the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy. In addition the Kosovo problem has served as a source or a pretext for interstate tensions, notably between USA, major EU members, the Russian Federation and Serbia.

What could be done about the Western Balkans? First of all, the countries of the region should be actively encouraged to further develop and strengthen the existing ties among themselves by forming pragmatic regional networks of cooperation in practical matters. On the other hand, one could not realistically expect the Balkan countries to overcome the persisting sources of internal instability in the region entirely by their own efforts. The Balkans elites are simply incapable of transforming the region into a viable and peaceful community of nations even distantly comparable e.g. to Scandinavia. Glaring examples of the Balkan political elites' unwillingness and/or inability to reach agreements have been the longstanding and ridiculous Greek-Macedonian dispute over the constitutional name of Macedonia and the past Serbian-Kosovar Albanian negotiations on the status of Kosovo.

The international record of dealing with the sources of instability and insecurity in the Western Balkans has highlighted the importance of:

- clear understanding and realistic appreciation of the complexity of problems in the Western Balkans which defy quick unidimensional solutions;
- the previously underestimated interconnection between the security in the region and security in other parts of the continent;
- the great contribution to conflict management and stabilization in the Western Balkans made by NATO and EU members (France, UK, Germany, Italy, Turkey, Greece) and also by some non-members, including the Russian Federation and Ukraine;
- a robust and well-coordinated international action to improve the economic and social situation in the region and to repair and develop its infrastructure;
- the need for a rational division of labor and effective coordination of activities between numerous international actors operating in and/or dealing with the region (UN, OSCE, NATO, EU, Contact group etc.); and also between various programs conducted under their sponsorship;
- the fundamental need for consensus among and coordinated actions by Western powers, particularly by USA and EU members states;
- avoiding the danger of a vicious circle of dependency on the presence of foreign peace-keepers (as it has happened on Cyprus) and the adoption of a realistic exit strategy for them.

The international community's ability to manage numerous problems in the Western Balkans could be best improved by the further extension of the European Union's and of NATO's ties and influence in the area. It should be done in cooperation with the UN, OSCE, Council of Europe, the World Bank, EBRD etc. Moreover, continuous international military and police presence in several neuralgic spots in the Balkans (particularly in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina) will be needed for many years. The qualitative transformation of the region should be firmly imbedded in the broader European integration process. The membership in EU and NATO as well as associate and partnership arrangements in the region ought to be extended to all worthy and aspiring candidates, preventing the appearance of new lines of division within the area.

These observations are relevant also in the case of the youngest Balkan state. Having become an independent country Kosovo will should join the activities of several international organizations and regional interstate networks in the Western Balkans. Kosovo's joining these bodies will have beneficial effects on the overall security situation in the Balkans. The more overlapping Balkans institutions there exist and function, the better it is for the region and for the whole Euro-Atlantic community. The EU - supported South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) has fostered multifaceted cooperation among the states of the Western Balkan. Its successor – the "Regional Cooperation Council" with the seat of its Secretariat in Sarajevo will hopefully continue with success this laudable effort.

A note of caution ought to be added concerning the general proposition that the management of Balkan problems would be best assured within the framework of European integration. The fate of the

'Treaty on a constitution for new Europe' manifested the rather wide-spread fatigue and resistance in the older member states to further EU enlargement to Eastern Europe and the Balkans, including Turkey. Thus the question of the so-called EU "absorption capacity" ought to be realistically reviewed in a new light. It became questionable whether in the near future EU will be willing and able to implement in full the Thesaloniki commitments to the Western Balkan states. A substantial revision by scaling down and delaying the implementation of these undertakings by EU has become a distinct possibility.

However all states aspiring to become members of the European Union and/or of NATO should know in advance that their admission into these organizations would be conditional on their commitment to fulfill constructively their responsibilities in the region. The implementation of this injunction would certainly help to promote regional cooperation and to eventually turn the Western Balkans into a region of democracy, economic and cultural dynamism, prosperity and security. This has been one of Slovenia's main objectives during her Presidency in the Council of the European Union in the first half of 2008.

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