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The difficult road to Balkan stability

By Marko Attila Hoare, 9th November 2009

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

1. The complete evolution of the Balkan states into a family of stable post-nationalist liberal democracies is being obstructed by a number of regional conflicts between them.

2. Although these conflicts are not insurmountable, they are being exacerbated unnecessarily by the weak, vacillating and short-sighted policies of the Western alliance, particularly of the EU.

3. Above all, the Western alliance needs to change its policy with regard to Bosnia, whose transformation into a strong, functioning state would render it the foundation-stone of the Balkan democratic order, and put

an end to the regional instability generated by Serbian expansionism.

The Balkans are only a step away from normalisation, but it may be a step too far for Western policy-makers.

Normalisation for the Balkans would mean the region's definite establishment as a set of functioning, democratic nation-states on the model of Western Europe; undivided by serious conflicts or live territorial disputes. The region's national questions would be resolved, to the point that they would be as unlikely to spill over into large-scale bloodshed as the national questions of Belgium, Scotland or Catalonia. The Balkan states would all be integrated into the EU, and ideally NATO as well.

This is not an ambitious ideal, yet it is far from being realised. Regional progress is still being derailed by a series of conflicts of varying severity between the Balkan states. The Slovenian-Croatian border dispute for a while threatened to derail the entire region's EU integration, though this appears to have been averted. Greek-Turkish rivalry over Cyprus, the Aegean Sea and other areas remains latent, something for which the **anti-Turkish rhetoric** on the part of candidates in the recent Greek parliamentary elections has served as a reminder. Both Turkey and Greece are problematic: the first is, under the leadership of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the process of developing a **new regional role** for itself, one that appears to be taking it closer to authoritarian and radical states like Russia, Iran and Syria; the second is pursuing a damaging regional policy, involving hostility to the fragile states of Macedonia and Kosovo. With its campaign against Macedonia, in particular, Greece is threatening the stability of a neighbouring state where relations between the majority Macedonians and minority Albanians are already dangerously unstable.

Meanwhile, the policies of Serbia and Serb nationalism remain the single greatest source of Balkan instability. Serbia is still failing to arrest war criminals indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, thereby obstructing its own EU integration. But more dangerously, it is pursuing a d0g-in-the-manger policy vis-a-vis Kosovo,

preventing the newly independent state from consolidating itself and integrating itself properly into the international community. The Serbia-Kosovo dispute poisons regional relations; Belgrade recently **rebuked** Skopje for the latter's agreement with Pristina to resolve the Macedonia-Kosovo border dispute.

The most intractable regional problem of all, however, remains Bosnia-Hercegovina. The state is saddled with the unworkable constitutional order imposed upon it by the Dayton Accords of 1995, ensuring that the state cannot function and must remain in a state of permanent political crisis. Bosnia's recent exclusion, along with Albania, from the EU's grant of visa liberalisation to the western Balkans, that was applied to Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro, has further entrenched divisions in the country and the wider region. Milorad Dodik, prime minister of Bosnia's Serb entity, the Republika Srpska, is openly pursuing Bosnia's full dismemberment; the aggressive and provocative nature of his policy was recently highlighted by the **warm welcome** he extended to the convicted war-criminal Biljana Plavsic, following her early release from prison in Sweden.

These home-grown Balkan problems are being exacerbated by the policies of outside powers. The revanchist, neo-Soviet regime in Russia is aggressively backing Serbia over Kosovo, preventing the dispute from being resolved. By doing so, Moscow is not merely undermining Kosovo, but is undermining also Serbia's own complete transition into a post-nationalist liberal democratic state. Moscow aims to keep the Balkans divided to prevent their full integration into the Euro-Atlantic framework. Hence, Dodik was looking to Moscow when he **unilaterally withdrew** Bosnian Serb soldiers from participation in NATO exercises in Georgia.

The second major external source of Balkan instability is the weak and vacillating policy of the EU, dominated as the latter is by the Franco-German axis. Germany is pursuing a pro-Russian policy that is making the new East Central European members of NATO and the EU very uncomfortable, while France continues to seek a dissident role in the Western alliance vis-a-vis the Anglo-Saxon powers. Hence, the EU's muted reaction to the Georgian war;

the crushing of Washington's Georgian ally was not allowed to get in the way of growing EU-Russian collaboration. The Georgian war was facilitated by the **Franco-German blocking** of the grant of NATO Membership Action Plans to Georgia, along with Ukraine, in the spring of 2008. French President Nicolas Sarkozy, pursuing his Gaullist policy of Mediterranean union, sees fit also to support Greece against Macedonia.

Such an attitude on the part of the EU also involves toleration of Serbian trouble-making vis-a-vis Kosovo and Bosnia. The Netherlands is essentially isolated in its continued insistence that Serbia's progress on EU accession be linked to its arrest of war criminals. The EU, for its part, would like to see the Office of the High Representative (OHR) for Bosnia closed. Yet the OHR has been the principal integrating force in Bosnia since 1995. Take away the OHR, and Bosnia moves another step toward full partition.

The EU's resolve over the Balkans is further weakened by the activities of dissident members. No unified EU policy exists over Kosovo on account of the refusal of five EU members to recognise the new state – all for nationalistic reasons. Romania and Slovakia perceive a 'separatist' parallel between the Kosovo Albanians and their own maltreated Hungarian minorities. Likewise, Spain is obsessed with 'separatist' parallels of its own vis-a-vis Catalonia and the Basque Country. Greece and Cyprus are traditional allies of Serbia; Cyprus also equates Kosovo with Turkish-occupied Cyprus. None of these states' reasons for opposing Kosovo's independence are very noble, yet the EU has no means of compelling them to keep ranks with the majority; the EU therefore pursues the policy of the lowest common denominator.

Although the EU has been as an instrument for bringing nations together, its recent policies in the Balkans are having the opposite effect. The veto that EU members enjoy in relation to membership bids by aspiring members places a weapon in the hands of trouble-makers lucky enough to already be in the club. The Slovenian-Croatian border dispute was exacerbated by Ljubljana's use of its veto against Croatia. Although Ljubljana threatened to use its veto to keep Croatia out of NATO as well, Washington quickly put a

stop to this mischief. Unfortunately, the EU states are much less ready than the US to put pressure on their partners to cease misbehaviour, and though Ljubljana did eventually lift its veto, this was not before it had **won concession**s over the border dispute at Zagreb's expense.

Still more destructive has been the EU's exacerbation of the Greek-Macedonian dispute. Despite the thoroughly pre-democratic and chauvinistic nature of Greece's campaign against Macedonia, EU members have been wholly unwilling to put pressure on Athens to change it. So, rather than the whole club forcing a badly behaved member to behave better, the policy of the trouble-maker is imposed on the whole. The bad apple poisons the whole basket; the **tail wags the dog**.

The structural factors underlying the EU's damaging policies vis-a-vis the Balkans are likely to become worse in the years to come. The accession of new members will give more states vetoes to use against aspiring members. After joining the EU, Croatia may use its veto against Serbia. If Macedonia does back down to Athens, Albania might be encouraged to use its veto to keep Macedonia out of NATO, to extract concessions regarding the Albanian minority in Macedonia. For while both Croatia and Albania have pursued responsible regional policies over the past ten years, the EU is sending out to them the wrong signals: that bad behaviour brings dividends.

Meanwhile, the EU's growing energy dependency on Russia is likely further to dampen the EU's resolve to resist the mischief of Moscow and Belgrade in the Balkans. **Russian plans** to build the 'North Stream' gas pipeline direct to Germany, bypassing the former-Communist states of East Central Europe, will allow it to exert leverage over its neighbours without simultaneously punishing its German ally.

As the EU moves increasingly to accommodate a dangerous and hostile power, so it is alienating an important power that has long assisted Balkan stability. Paris and Berlin have made it very clear they do not wish to allow Turkey to join the EU. This has had the predictable result that Turkey is losing is faith in the possibility of a European future, and is **turning**

increasingly toward Russia, Iran, Syria and other radical and anti-Western states. Turkey has made huge strides this decade in improving its human rights record, as required by its bid for EU membership. For the same reason, it has facilitated a resolution of the Cyprus dispute through its support for the 2004 Annan Plan. As the prize of EU membership moves further from its grasp, Ankara may backslide over both human rights and Cyprus as well. There are worrying signs that the pace of democratisation in Turkey is indeed slowing -such as the **record fine** recently imposed on Dogan Yayin Holding AS – Turkey's largest media group and critical of the AKP government.

A hardening of Turkey's stance on Cyprus could lead to the collapse of the Greek-Turkish rapprochement, further damaging the prospects for the Balkans' normalisation. For all its human rights abuses, Turkey has been playing a constructive role in the region, as the ally of the weak and vulnerable states of Bosnia, Kosovo and Macedonia. We do not know what the full consequences would be if Turkey fully abandons its European moorings and goes off in a new direction. But at the very least, an authoritarian Turkey headed by an Islamic-populist regime on the border of the Balkans will not have a positive effect on the region.

Unfortunately, alongside Russia and the EU, there is a third external factor whose contribution to Balkan stability currently raises concerns: the Obama Administration in the US. The latter's abandonment of the Bush Administration's plans to base a missile-defence system in Poland and the Czech Republic, in order to appease Moscow in the hope of obtaining Russian support vis-a-vis Iran, is a worrying indication of US passivity vis-a-vis Europe and Russia. The capitulation amounts to a betrayal of the security of allies in order to appease a hostile power, with echoes of Cold-War-style sphere-of-influence politics. While it is too soon to press the panic button over Obama's policy toward Eastern and South Eastern Europe, we should be very concerned if Obama goes any further down this path.

For all these internal and external problems facing the Balkans, the success stories and models for future success are close at hand. Romania and Bulgaria are far from model democracies, and have serious problems with

corruption and organised crime. Yet neither has engaged in military aggression or seriously attempted territorial expansionism since joining the free world in 1989; both are members of the EU and NATO. Turkey and Greece, following their heavy military defeats in World War I and the Greco-Turkish War respectively, pursued an enlightened policy of rapprochement vis-a-vis one another, eschewing territorial expansionism. This rapprochement was only derailed by the outbreak of the Cyprus conflict from the 1950s, and later resumed: Greece today is a vocal champion of Turkey's EU membership. Croatia, too, following its unsuccessful expansionist adventure in Bosnia in the first half of the 1990s has, since the death of Franjo Tudjman in 1999, abandoned expansionism to pursue a responsible regional policy and EU membership.

The key to turning aggressive, expansionist Balkan states into responsible members of the European family, therefore, is for the international community to shut off all avenues for their expansionism and keep them firmly confined within their own borders. With all due qualifications, this is the way it has been for Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, Greece and Croatia. Where these states have been less than responsible – as, for example, in the case of Turkey vis-a-vis Cyprus or Greece vis-a-vis Macedonia – this has occurred when there have been insufficient limits placed on their ability to coerce neighbours.

The biggest source of instability in the Balkans remains the fact that, thanks to the weakness and vacillation of Western and above all EU policy, Serbia has not been firmly confined within its borders, despite its defeat in the wars of the 1990s. Instead, Belgrade continues to destabilise the neighbouring states of Kosovo and Bosnia. Its ability to do so means that Serbia – unlike Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Greece and to an extent Turkey – is unable to develop a post-expansionist state identity; one that does not revolve around territorial aspirations towards neighbouring states. This is bad above all for Serbia itself – the reason why it is still a long way from EU membership, despite being before the 1990s more prosperous, developed and liberal than either Romania or Bulgaria.

The problem is not, however, ultimately with Serbia itself. In parliamentary elections following Kosovo's independence last year, the Serbian electorate **handed victory** to the pro-European rather than the hardline nationalist parties, revealing what little stomach it has for renewed confrontation over Kosovo. Belgrade has also played its trump card with its case against Kosovo's independence before the International Court of Justice (ICJ), and there is every reason to believe that the Court will not rule in its favour, even leaving aside the strength of Kosovo's case. The ICJ's judges come from different countries and their verdict will likely represent some form of compromise rather than award outright victory to one side or the other. Anything less than a full victory for Belgrade will effectively be a defeat, ambiguity leaving the door open for more states to recognise Kosovo's independence while plausibly claiming to do so legally. In other words, both in terms of its range of available strategies and in terms of the popular support it enjoys, Serbian expansionism vis-a-vis Kosovo is a broken reed. With the Kosovo Albanians enjoying a comfortable majority in their country, their ultimate ability to consolidate their state is assured.

The principal problem for the region is the Bosnian question, and the policy of the Western alliance toward it. Unlike for all the other Balkan regional problems, for Bosnia, stability will not come through persuading or coercing the states involved to accept reality or to reach a compromise. For Bosnia, it is the very legal status quo and 'compromise', born at Dayton in 1995, that is generating instability for the state and the region. The Dayton order **provides a framework** that is gradually enabling the Bosnian Serb separatists, currently headed by Dodik, to establish the Bosnian Serb entity as a de facto independent state while preparing the ground for formal secession. The Bosniaks will, however, go to war to prevent this happening. It is a moot point what the outcome of such a military confrontation would be, but it is not something to which we should look forward.

Bosnia remains, therefore, the weak foundation-stone of Balkan stability. Only the transformation of Bosnia into a functioning state, through the transfer of most state powers from the entities to the central government, will guarantee against the outbreak of a new Bosnian war, and provide a final and

definite check to Serbia's expansionism, forcing that state wholly onto the post-expansionist path and removing the principal obstacle to the region's progress.

Unfortunately, with Western and particular EU policy being what it is at present, such a decisive step seems unlikely. The problems facing the Balkans are neither huge nor insurmountable, yet Western passivity and vacillation seem set to allow these small problems to turn into larger ones. The Balkans look set for a rocky road ahead.

Marko Attila Hoare is European Neighbourhood Section Director for the Henry Jackson Society

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