

Kosovo: Prime Cause of Instability in the Balkans

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Stable and prosperous Balkans are of paramount interest to the Balkan peoples as well as all Europeans.[1] The situation in the region, however, remains complex with grave political, security and socio-economic tensions and problems which should not be neglected.

During the last twenty-year period, the Balkans have been the testing-ground for new doctrines, becoming a region of dramatic changes and precedents in international relations:

- The second Yugoslavia (SFRY) was destroyed in 1992, the third Yugoslavia in 2006, both in conjunction with internal and external factors;
- NATO aggression against Serbia (Yugoslavia) in 1999 was the first war on European soil after the Second World War, presented as “humanitarian intervention”, contrary to basic principles of International Law and without approval of UNSC,
- The unilateral proclamation of the independence of Kosovo and Metohija in 2008, while the province was under UN mandate, was another precedent, again without UNSC approval and contrary to the Constitution of Serbia;
- Seven new, hardly sustainable states have been created, some even through severe civil wars, the consequences of which will be felt over decades to come[2].

In spite of progress in the normalization of relations, mistrust is still limiting efforts to revive economic, social, cultural and other ties. After over 70 years of common life, these ties were abruptly cut during the secessions and conflicts. There is a great need to remove all politically motivated obstacles and encourage the widest possible cooperation based on recognition of mutual interests. The free flow of goods, people, ideas, culture and capital would certainly push overall development ahead, diminish dependence on foreign assistance and help dealing with the consequences of the global economic and financial crisis.

New international borders, while not a general problem, are still to be defined in a number of cases, including parts of the Serbia-Croatian border on the Danube, and the Serbian-Bosnian border on the Drina River. The best way to resolve these issues is to apply international standards.

New national minorities have appeared in addition to old ones. Throughout history, the Balkans, renowned as a region with a mixture of nations, cultures and religions (and certainly of conflicts, after extensive territorial fragmentation during the last two decades), have “enriched” themselves by producing even more national minorities, languages and even religions. For the greater good? It is doubtful. Standards of human, political and

national rights are not respected in a number of instances.

Serbia is still hosting about 220 000 displaced persons from Kosovo and Metohija, mainly Serbs, and about 300 000 Serb refugees from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is the highest figure of refugees and displaced persons in any one European country. This causes not only serious socio-economic problems but also political issues. Members of neither of the two groups are permitted to return to their places of origin freely and safely. Serbs in Croatia, although promised territorial autonomy, are deprived of even basic individual rights such as the right to private ownership of their houses, apartments and farms.

One of the potential sources of destabilization is Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is occasionally termed a “failed state”. The constitutional set-up of Bosnia and Herzegovina is defined by the Dayton-Paris Peace Agreement (1995), guaranteeing sovereign equality of the three constituent peoples (Moslems, Serbs and Croats) and equality of the two entities – the Bosnia and Herzegovina federation (Muslims and Croats) and Republika Srpska. Contrary to the Dayton-Paris Peace Agreement, attempts by the High Representative to change the federal structure and impose a unitary system by annulling the consensus in decision-making and introduce majorization are counter productive, to say the least. They tend to turn the stabilization process back to the beginning of 90s and are therefore very dangerous for the very existence of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a state. After the recent elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Croat community came to openly ask for a creation of own, third entity. This reveals that both Serbs and Croats have the same fear – of facing discrimination within Muslim-dominated Bosnia.

In my opinion, Serbia does not and cannot recognize the illegal secession of Kosovo and Metohija. Therefore, this remains an open issue yet to be resolved. Solutions should be sought respecting the basic principles of international law, UN decisions and the Constitution of Serbia as a sovereign state. Such a position is supported by a major part of the international community, including some of the permanent members of UNSC (Russia and China) as well as some members of the EU (Spain, Greece, Romania, Slovak Republic and Cyprus). New negotiations on the status seem to be unavoidable. Any expectation on further softening the official Serbian government’s position could turn out to be counterproductive. Perhaps not so much because of the government’s firmness in defending territorial integrity and sovereignty, but primarily because compromise is the only way to to guarantee Serbia’s internal stability which, in turn, is important for lasting peace and stability of the Balkans.

It has been repeatedly noted that the future of the Balkans lies in the hands of the Balkan countries. This is true, but mainly theoretically. In reality, one of the general problems in the region is excessive involvement of out-of-region power centers. Considering that Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Province of Kosovo and Metohija continue to be international protectorates, that the governments in most of the countries in the region owe their loyalty to the West (which helped them in various ways to come to power via the “color revolutions”), it is rather unclear what the regional factors can do themselves, what are the real margins for them to work out needed compromises.

The international community, essentially being limited to NATO and the EU, lacks the capacity and political will for compromised solutions and continue to impose their own solutions which, sooner or later, appear not to be sustainable. This perhaps explains why

NATO and the EU maintain substantial military, police and civil presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, FYR Macedonia and particularly in the Province of Kosovo and Metohija where about 10 000 NATO troops are deployed, including one of the biggest military bases in the world (Bondsteal).

No doubt that the key source of destabilization of the Balkans today remains Kosovo and Metohija. The apparent massive violation of human rights of Albanians in Kosovo and Metohija was just an excuse for NATO aggression against Serbia. The NATO aggression in 1999 was a historic mistake of the West, especially of Western Europe and Germany. It set a precedent, the first ring in a chain of aggressions and occupations which ensued after. Ever since, Europe has been obliged to take part in other military interventions outside of its zone of defense. With the recent Lisbon documents, such practice has been codified and formalized. The aggression was a blunder towards the United Nations and particularly towards the Security Council and its role in maintaining peace in the world. It gave a push to separatist tendencies in the region, Europe and the World. New military bases mushroomed from Kosovo to Bulgaria, Romania and the Baltic states. Economic destruction, including some of the strategic European corridors, has been valued at over 100 billion US dollars.

The unilateral secession of Kosovo and Metohija in February this year was also a dangerous precedent. Whether it encouraged the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia may be debated, but the general effect of Kosovo's "unique case" should not be disputable.

Last month, Albanians representatives from Kosovo and Metohija, FYROM, Greece, Montenegro and three southern districts of Serbia (Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja) gathered in Tirana to announce their devotion to the "natural Albania". This gathering was preceded by repeated declarations of highest Albanian officials that Albanians have the right to live together, and was followed by the declaration of the former chief of the OSDE Kosovo Verification Mission, American ambassador William Walker, that Albanians have the right to unite.

"Side" effects of Prishtina's unilateral secession may be summed up in one word: divisions. Divisions within the EU, UN, OSCE, between EU/NATO-Russia, divisions in the Balkans and divisions within Serbia itself.

Apart from the fact that the province is faced with dramatic socio-economic problems and unemployment, it is a safe heaven and a jumping board for extremists and clans of organized crimes whose real aim is to operate in the EU area. It is assessed that over 60 percent of the total marketing of heroin in Europe is controlled by Albanian mafia. Trafficking of human beings, their vital organs and smuggling of armaments is also under their control.

Putting an end to the protectorate status of Bosnia and Herzegovina would be important step in the right direction. After 15 years of peace and international governance, local institutions and politicians must be given a chance to work together, compromise and run the country without the almighty so-called High Representative. Reopening negotiations on the status of Kosovo and Metohija after the opinion of the International Court of Justice is announced later this year is quite a reasonable expectation. Compromise must be based on the respect of International Law, particularly. The UN SC resolution 1244 (1999) must be considered a lasting legal document, starting point and corner stone of any future solution for the Kosovo and Metohija problem. This is the most important precondition to peace and stability in the Balkans. Foreigners come and go, their interests vary, but the Balkan nations

will stay here forever. For this reason they should rely on compromises of their long-term interests.

The EU appears to be a key partner of the Balkan states. How long will the current financial, economic and institutional crisis in the EU last? What conclusions did Brussels draw from the recent enlargements of EU membership? Answering these questions would certainly help to realistically assess the prospects for EU membership of a number of Balkan countries. To continue submitting to endless demands of Brussels bureaucracy, in exchange for repeated promises of “European perspectives”, may turn out to be a loss of time and vital interests.

Democratization and transition has left, among others effects, profound social divisions and tensions, extremely high rates of unemployment, corruption, and organized crime. These tendencies are not assets for peace and stability. To alleviate the roots of these tendencies requires political will, strategies, recourses (including financial) and – time.

Western benevolence towards the obvious rise of separatism and territorial fragmentation (especially where it affects Serbia and the Serbian nation) and clear support for centralization, unitarization of certain other countries (notably Bosnia and Herzegovina) are examples of a double-standards policy. Putting aside the motives and interests of the West, it must be noted that such a policy would surely hinder prospects of peace and stability today, up to 2020 and beyond.

The effects would include: the proliferation of puppet states with unsustainable economies; national minorities with uneven levels of rights; political parties based on ethnic and religious criteria; refugees and displaced persons with the lack of political will to secure conditions for free and safe return to their homes; and expansion of Islam not as a religion or culture, but as an overall social and governmental system. Indeed some Muslim leaders do consider the Balkans a springboard for further expansion (Wahhabist groups, Islamic extremist organizations, have been uncovered recently in a number of Balkan countries).

Serbia, with its geostrategic position and resources, is capable and willing to play its role in achieving sustainable stability, peace and development in the Balkans. But Serbia is faced with serious problems: stagnation of socio-economic development, about one million unemployed persons, 700 000 living below the poverty line, and disregard of legitimate national interest.

Serbia’s territorial integrity and sovereignty is not jeopardized by the illegal unilateral secession of Kosovo and Metohija only, but such tendencies are present in some other parts (namely, Vojvodina, Raska, Southern districts).

Recently “The Group of Friends of Sandzak” (Raska) was established in Belgrade, composed of the ambassadors of USA, Germany, Britain and Italy! What would be the real political objective of such a move? These ambassadors have long-since been welcomed to Belgrade as friends of Serbia and they are expected to behave as such. Forming a “Group of Friends” of these states is a well-known practice at the UN Headquarters in New York, usually to show strong support to a country with certain problems that are pending consideration within the UN. But, forming a “Group of Friends” of any particular part (region) of a sovereign country by diplomats accredited to such a country is neither diplomatic nor respecting the partnership or hospitality of that particular country and nation.

Serbian public and civil society should like to see everybody investing in mutual

understanding and respect so that the the Balkans become a region of integration, peace and stability, leaving behind divisions, distrust and confrontation.

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Notes

1 Speech at the German Peace Congress held in Kassel 4th and 5th of December 2010.

2 Kosovo and Metohija's self-proclaimed secession from Serbia has not been recognized in the region by Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece, Cyprus

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