



a Balanced View *of the* Balkans

DESPITE SUCCESSES, PILLARS OF
PROGRESS SEEM TO BE ERODING

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Throughout the 1990s, interethnic violence placed Southeast Europe at the center of the Euro-Atlantic security agenda. Today, perceptions of the region gravitate toward one of two extremes. Many current policymakers, pressed with greater immediate challenges elsewhere, dismiss the Balkan conflict as a problem resolved. Meanwhile, prominent former officials and area specialists warn that the region once again stands on the brink of explosion.

More balanced assessments seem lost in between. Despite the end of armed conflict, and steps toward recovery and transformation, remaining problems should not be underestimated. Still, “crying wolf” alarmism risks reinforcing the very complacency it seeks to overcome. What is required is more sober examination of the factors producing qualified success as well as those blocking further advancement. Progressively addressing the Balkans’ unfinished business is vital in the first place for the people of the region themselves. It would also offer hope and lessons for resolving conflicts elsewhere.

One key element that helped end large-scale fighting and open the way for political and economic renewal has been the scope of international effort. The initial NATO peacekeeping forces in Bosnia and Kosovo numbered 60,000 and 45,000 troops, respectively. Relative to local population, these levels were roughly 50 times higher than in post-2001 Afghanistan and four times the surge peak in Iraq.¹ The \$14 billion in foreign aid assistance to Bosnia through 2007 translated into a similar edge of \$300 per person per year versus \$65 in Afghanistan.²

A second factor has been the pull of Euro-Atlantic integration. In a world where geography still matters, the region’s proximity to the established Euro-Atlantic community has accelerated flows of trade, investment and ideas. Unlike for Turkey or most post-Soviet states, it has also meant uncontested eligibility for membership in both NATO and the European Union, as explicitly expressed by the EU’s 2003 Thessaloniki Declaration and confirmed since 2004 by the organizations’ Big Bang and Aftershock enlargements.

Cases such as Switzerland show security and prosperity are achievable outside these institutions. However, for less wealthy countries emerging from authoritarianism and conflict, accession processes offer the advantages of detailed road maps, financial and technical assistance, and (given high public support for joining the EU in particular³) political stimulus for comprehensive reforms of general benefit in their own right. As a common platform for all the countries in the region, they also promote improved relations among neighbors and signal international maturity.

Unfortunately, these foundations of progress seem to be eroding. External peacekeeping forces in the region have decreased to 12,000 troops. International civilian organizations retain an extensive presence, but with sometimes confused competences, as in the case of the U.N. Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo, the EU Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo and/or diminished de facto authority (as with the office of the high representative in Bosnia). U.S. Vice President Joe Biden's high-profile visits in May 2009 at best partially dispelled perceptions of American disengagement.⁴

Moreover, the near-term outlook for new integration breakthroughs has dimmed. Recent advances such as adoption of the Lisbon Treaty, relaxation of EU visa requirements and NATO's Membership Action Plan status for Montenegro have been overshadowed by Greek and Slovene disputes with their respective neighbors Macedonia and Croatia, skepticism of anti-corruption efforts by the most recent EU entries Romania and Bulgaria (newly reinforced by the failed European Commission candidacy of the latter's former Foreign Minister Rumiana Jeleva), significant anti-NATO sentiment in remaining nonmembers, and general "enlargement fatigue." The longer such factors retard further progress, the greater the void opened for the spread of Islamist radicalism, nontransparent Russian business influence and extreme nationalist sentiment reminiscent of the war years.

Some of these developments can be viewed as temporary setbacks or even signs of maturation. What makes them potentially worrisome, though, is their coincidence with other internal issues undercutting consolidation of stability in the region.

STATEHOOD TENSIONS PERSIST

Unresolved political status questions lead the list. Given the role of irredentism in Yugoslavia's breakup, reaching "a 'finalité politique' in terms of borders is the sine qua non of the region's durable stabilization."⁵ The schism between Belgrade and Pristina over Kosovo is the most evident case in point. Despite Kosovo's recognition by 65 other countries, Serbian leaders continue vehemently to reject its separate statehood. They call instead for renewed status negotiations, an option Kosovo's ethnic Albanian leadership refuses out of hand. Moreover, political elites in Belgrade and Pristina have also failed to establish a modus operandi on a practical level, limiting cooperation in dealing with common challenges in areas such as justice, customs and cultural heritage.

An advisory opinion on the legality of Kosovo's

Bosnian war veterans throw bricks at police while storming a government building in Sarajevo, Bosnia, on April 21, 2010. Veterans of Bosnia's 1992 to 1995 war were protesting benefit cuts.



declaration of independence is expected this year from the International Court of Justice, but its likely impact is unclear. Its probably mixed conclusions⁶ may provide one or both sides with some sense of catharsis. However, in conjunction with resistance to new efforts backed by the International Civilian Office to extend Pristina's writ north of the Ibar River, the ethnically Serbian area where Belgrade has maintained de facto control over local institutions, the announcement could plausibly also revive controversial proposals for Kosovo's formal partition.

Such a result could encourage similar moves in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which is experiencing its worst political crisis since 1995. Intended as a short-term compromise, the country's Dayton Accords-based constitutional system has proven dysfunctional over the longer run. International High Representative Valentin Inzko recently complained "not a single new reform has been adopted" the last four years.⁷ Inaction has left Bosnia at the back of the line for successive stages of



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Euro-Atlantic advancement in areas from NATO's Membership Action Plan to the EU's Stability and Association Process, or SAP, and visa liberalization.

Perhaps more important, consensus is lacking on even the most fundamental elements of constitutional reform. Despite briefly raising hopes, neither the Prud Process launched by key local leaders in late 2008 nor the EU-U.S.-sponsored Butmir talks of fall 2009 managed to forge agreement on a way ahead. Compromise will be even more difficult prior to statewide elections in fall 2010, as Bosnia's political elites harden their positions in appeal to their respective constituents.⁸

In the interim, Republika Srpska Prime Minister Milorad Dodik has threatened to meet any internationally imposed constitutional change with a referendum on secession. Although many dismiss such a move as an unlikely violation of Dayton, its very discussion has not only provoked harsh responses from the office of the high representative and

Bosniak political leaders but also sparked a sharp exchange of words over possible military reaction between the presidents of Croatia and Serbia.

A negative regional domino effect could also hit Macedonia. While fairly considered a success story,⁹ the country has faced numerous challenges to its cohesion and national identity since its emergence as a state. External contestation of the latter has come in the forms of jurisdictional claims by the Serbian Orthodox Church, denial of ethno-linguistic distinctness by many Bulgarians and the long-standing name dispute with Greece. The last has proven most serious, blocking Macedonia from opening formal accession talks with the EU as well as from receiving an invitation to join NATO along with Croatia and Albania at the alliance's 2008 Bucharest summit.

These stalled membership prospects may revive internal mistrust between the country's majority Slavs and sizable Albanian minority. Interethnic relations have slowly improved



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Supporters of the opposition Socialist Party of Albania shout slogans during an anti-government protest in Tirana on April 30, 2010. Tens of thousands of people rallied to back their party's request for a government recount of 2009 election ballots.

since adoption of the Ohrid Agreement, which ended several months of armed conflict between Albanian insurgents and the government's security forces in 2001. Now, however, ethnic Albanian politicians are slowly losing patience with the government's unsuccessful efforts to find a compromise with Greece as well as its accompanying "antiquization" campaign embracing the heritage of ancient Macedonia. Localized violence in the 2008 elections demonstrated some of these parties' supporters' susceptibility to radicalization.

ETHNIC STRIFE AND CORRUPTION

Beyond status questions, broader legacy issues stemming from Yugoslavia's violent breakup as well as the Cold War socialist past also present formidable challenges. Overcoming them has been rendered even more daunting by the global financial crisis, which has reversed several years of strong growth in the region.

To begin with, national and interethnic reconciliation remains a distant goal. Neither the Hague Tribunal process nor political expressions of regret have displaced entrenched rationalization or denial over war crimes. Serbia's new countersuit before the International Court of Justice charging Croatia with genocide demonstrates the durability of such issues. On a practical level, the underreported phenomena of refugees and internally displaced persons, including 340,000 in Serbia and 194,000 in Bosnia,¹⁰ exert persistent pressure on countries' politics and social programs. In addition, as many as 1.75 million citizens of Bosnia, nearly half the population, may suffer from symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.¹¹

Meanwhile, pervasive corruption and organized crime activity, which thrived under conflict conditions, continue to undermine the rule of law, development and confidence in public institutions. Opinion surveys consistently indicate that most people throughout the region view business transactions, judiciary proceedings and their governments as corrupt.¹² The October 2008 murder of prominent Croatian journalist Ivo Pukanic by a syndicate of ethnic Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks and Montenegrins illustrated how cross-national cooperation has flourished more easily among criminals than state law enforcement agencies.

Finally, as the European Commission highlighted in its October 2009 enlargement progress report, the Balkan countries still need substantial effort to solidify legitimate democratic institutions and political culture.¹³ Recurring parliamentary boycotts and complaints of electoral fraud in several countries, presently including Albania, exemplify such concerns.

Anyone versed in the complex history of Southeast Europe should have anticipated its transition would not be easy. U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's recent description of Kosovo as "relatively calm, but potentially fragile"¹⁴ could equally apply to the whole region.

However, highlighting the latter side of that equation should not trigger conflict voyeurism, hopelessness or self-fulfilling prophecies. While serious, conditions in the region are not dire. Indeed, the countries of the region now routinely contribute to peace operations outside their territory. Accordingly, purposeful reinforcement of countervailing forces for stability can forestall the various nightmare scenarios.

ENSURING PROGRESS

Many government and think-tank reports have presented detailed proposals for policy action in the region. At the level of general principle, though, three mutually supportive points stand out.

First is the need for continued international engagement. While simple status quo preservation cannot be an indefinite aim, some challenges will require patient management rather than forced quick solutions. Progressive reduction of direct external roles in governance and security in places like Bosnia and Kosovo should remain tied to conditions on the ground. For the next few years at least, visible presence and targeted assistance will offer invaluable reassurance against sudden escalation of tensions.

Second, viable Euro-Atlantic perspectives must be maintained. This entails more than ritualistic invocation of open-door policies. In line with the preceding point, NATO and EU members and officials should offer tangible support for Balkan states' integration aspirations. This includes post-accession assistance to new members as they assume full roles and responsibilities within these organizations. It should also entail stronger discouragement of existing members' blockage of progress toward accession over narrow bilateral issues, a practice now threatening to spread to Bulgaria regarding Turkey. Finally, it will also require defining relations with

Kosovo, which five NATO or EU states have not recognized.¹⁵ While this situation has entailed some silver linings such as displaying policy independence and preserving links to Serbia, some commonly accepted understanding will soon be needed not only for Kosovo to participate in programs such as Partnership for Peace and SAP, but also for Serbia to receive serious consideration of its EU candidacy.

Third, and arguably most important, the Euro-Atlantic community must uphold not only accessibility but also its credibility and attractiveness as a destination. Alongside its effects on the region, the global financial crisis has crystallized a broader drop in confidence in Western-style liberal democracy. In the face of an alternative “Beijing consensus,” the community must show it can effectively meet the challenges of the new century. Along with individual domestic efforts, this will require solidarity in such contexts as carrying out the International Security Assistance Force mission in Afghanistan, preserving the European monetary union, adopting a new NATO Strategic Concept and implementing the Lisbon Treaty.

Together, these approaches will best provide space for moderate, effective leadership from within the region itself. This equals neither picking favorites nor waiting for idealized Jeffersons, Havels or Mandelas. Nonetheless, notwithstanding the European Commission’s governance concerns, possible signs of leaders approaching this type present final grounds for cautious optimism that the Balkans can move forward.¹⁶ □

1. See Dobbins, James et al. *America’s Role in Nation-Building: From Germany to Iraq*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2003, pp. xvii-xix and 197-198.
2. McMahon, Patrice and Jon Western. “The Death of Dayton.” *Foreign Affairs* 88:5, Sept./Oct. 2009, pp.71-72.
3. “Insights and Perceptions: Voices of the Balkans, 2009 Summary of Findings,” Gallup Balkan Monitor, Gallup, 2009, p. 7.
4. “America, Europe, and the Western Balkans.” *Economist*, May 21, 2009.
5. Judy Batt. “Regional Stability in the Western Balkans,” Background Speech in Ernst M. Felberbauer, et al (Editors), *Cutting or Tightening the Gordian Knot? The Future of Kosovo and the Peace Process in the Western Balkans after the Decision on Independence*, 16th Workshop of the Study Group “Regional Stability in Southeast Europe” Vienna, October 2008, p. 15.
6. See the comments of court President Hisashi Owada in “ICJ Decision on Kosovo to be Vague.” *Balkan Insight*. November 20, 2009.
7. “Inzko Calls on EU to Maintain Focus on Bosnia.” *Balkan Insight*, January 27, 2010
8. Dennis C. Blair. “Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, February 2, 2010, p. 38.
9. *The Balkans in Europe’s Future*, Report of the International Commission on the Balkans, 2005, p.27
10. UNHCR, “2008 Global Trends: Refugees, Asylum-seekers, Returnees, Internally Displaced and Stateless Persons,” June 16, 2009.
11. “Study: PTSD Haunts Bosnian War Survivors,” *Balkan Insight*, February 3, 2010. Equally concerning is recent research showing that PTSD is sometimes socially transmitted to younger generations not directly exposed to the original events.
12. “Insights and Perceptions: Voices of the Balkans, 2009 Summary of Findings,” Gallup Balkan Monitor, Gallup, 2009, p. 21-27.
13. Commission of the European Union. “Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council. Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2009-2010.” Brussels, October 14, 2009.
14. “Ban calls on Serbia, Kosovo to focus on regional cooperation, not status issues.” *UN News Service*, January 15, 2010.
15. These are Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain.
16. Vejvoda, Ivan. “A Social Democrat Wins in Croatia – and the Balkans Moves Forward.” *Tirana Times*, January 22, 2010.

People in Skopje, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, rejoice after the European Union announced in December 2009 that Macedonians can travel visa-free to the EU. The nation seeks EU integration.



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Children walk through a heavily damaged section of Shusha, Nagorno-Karabakh. A large part of the town hard-hit by the Nagorno-Karabakh War remains in ruins. AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE