THE OPENING OF
ALBANIA

SHARED BORDER MANAGEMENT IN THE WESTERN BALKANS HAS IMPROVED INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Police officers guard a new highway linking Kosovo and Albania during the road's opening ceremony near Pristina in November 2013. The highway is expected to boost trade between the two countries.

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Through the years, not only have state borders separated countries geographically, politically and administratively, but they have also separated and isolated peoples, cultures and civilizations from one another. Albania is unique in Europe and the world for its 50 years of isolation — its population separated from ethnic Albanians living in neighboring countries by barbed wire and bunkers.

The London Peace Conference in 1913, followed by World War I, ensured that 30 to 40 percent of ethnic Albanians lived outside the country's borders. After World War II, the totalitarian regime that took power in Albania imposed isolation on its population, a condition that wasn't remedied until the democratic revolution in 1991. In a relatively short period since that changeover, Albania has transformed itself by completely opening its borders and integrating border control with its European partners.

SEPARATION AND ISOLATION

The 1945-1991 period marks one of the most notorious eras of the country's history. Thousands of Albanian citizens were killed while attempting to cross the border illegally to escape political persecution and dictatorship. Thousands more were arrested and imprisoned. Archives reveal the extent of the oppression: From 1948 to 1990, security forces killed 5,157 people trying to cross the border and another 17,900 were imprisoned for political offenses, with 9,052 of them dying behind bars.

During these years, 500 kilometers of the country's 627-kilometer land border were militarized and hemmed by barbed wire. Border crossing was forbidden, even at the few official crossing points that existed. In extreme cases, Albanian citizens could be punished just for expressing a desire to visit neighboring countries. Border services of adjacent countries were viewed as enemies.

Illegally crossing the border was classified in the criminal code as a serious offense punishable by death.

A NEW ERA

The years of democratic transition changed everything. Among other things, opposition to the regime resulted in the exile of half a million Albanian citizens to foreign embassies and neighboring countries. In 1991, the border police were placed under the Ministry of Defence, but in 1993 they were transferred to the Ministry of Public Order.

Even though the criminal code was amended in the 1990s to decriminalize border crossing, uncontrolled movement of the population, mainly in the direction of the former Yugoslavia, resulted in deaths at the hands of border guards.

Between 1993 and 2000, the first attempts were made to establish contact and cooperation with neighboring countries, but this was done mostly to handle incidents at the border. Given the serious situation and incidents, the United Nations began monitoring Albania's border with the former Yugoslavia. From 1999 to 2000, Western Balkan countries undertook several border police "twinning" programs to ease tensions between border guards of different nationalities.

The years 2000 to 2005 marked a major turning point in border control for Albania and the rest of the region. That's when the region entered the European Union integration process. In 2003, initiated by partners that included the EU, NATO, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and the Stability Pact, Balkan nations adopted the first common platform for border management and security, the so-called Ohrid initiative. It established a regional and international exchange of information through regular meetings at the operational and headquarters levels.

Long-term goals of the initiative were

demilitarization of border controls, promotion of broad cooperation and coordination between international border services and engagement of militaries in specific surveillance tasks under the control of civil authorities. In the interim, nations were asked to define national policies and strategies for integrated border management (IBM) and set up procedures to make it happen.

THE EU'S ROLE

In 2004, the EU issued its first recommendations on IBM for the Western Balkan countries, which served as a basis for drafting IBM strategies and related action plans. The year 2005 was important for Albania with the start of negotiations for its EU Stabilisation and Association Agreement. A key factor in capacity building was financial support initiated by the EU through the Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilisation (CARDS) program.

The years 2005-2008 were considered the most dynamic with efforts to entirely change border management based on IBM. The commitment of Albania to integrate into Euro-Atlantic structures and fulfill the criteria for membership has motivated the country to enhance the standards of the Border and Migration Police (BMP).

Since then, the BMP have focused on establishing Schengen standards for integrated border management. Such standards had already been imposed as Albania sought NATO membership and a liberalized visa regimen. Moreover, in the framework of fulfilment of standards for EU candidate status, European experts positively evaluated the country's progress toward IBM.

FOCUS OF REFORMS

Reform of the BMP, especially between 2005 and 2013, was focused on legislation, organization and functioning, improvement of information technology, modernization of equipment and logistics, and education and training.

Albania has strived to harmonize its legislation with that of the EU, and starting in 2008, the BMP became an independent structure within the State Police with separate budget, logistics and human resources.

Information technology is the new weapon that the BMP uses to fight cross-border crime. This advanced technology includes the Total Information Management System (TIMS), the National Electronic Register for Aliens (integrated with TIMS), the Results and Impact Management System (integrated with TIMS), the MEMEX system and the Smardec surveillance system.

The Albanian State Police use TIMS for automatic processes and operational procedures, and it is installed in all border crossing points and BMP structures from basic to central levels. TIMS is integrated with several national and international systems to access national passport databases, vehicle databases, national driving license databases, the latest Automated System for Customs Data, the Interpol system, face recognition readers, license plate readers and others.

The BMP attach great importance to surveillance and control. The seas are monitored with a maritime control space system that transmits images to a multi-institutional operations center consisting of the Ministry of the Interior, the Coast Guard,

EU GUIDELINES FOR REGIONAL BORDER SECURITY

- Set up national contact points within the border police directorates.

- Organize and hold meetings between heads of border and migration police at local, regional and central levels.

- Set up joint border crossing points and common offices for immediate exchange of information.

- Organize joint border patrols and exchange risk-analysis data and other information.

- Set up a liaison officer network between countries.

- Conduct joint intelligence gathering and investigations at borders.

customs and fisheries. The police maintain a fleet of speedboats to control the coasts. With financing from the EU, the police have also stressed mobility on Albania's land borders and have invested in such things as night-vision optics, upgraded radios, mobile phones, cameras and guard dogs.

Education and training get special attention. Without proper police training, even the most modern laws and technology achieve nothing. Therefore, Albania offers courses for border and migration officers that match those provided by Frontex, the EU's border agency. In any year, 10 to 20 percent of BMP staff is involved in training. Priority is given to on-the-job training and joint training with other agencies and neighboring countries.

BORDER COOPERATION

IBM is based on three pillars: intra-service, intra-agency and international cooperation. This has proven to be the most secure way to control and monitor borders. Intra-service cooperation is based on 24-hour-a-day exchange of information within all the levels of the BMP using the latest IT systems. Intra-agency cooperation has been one of the most influential elements in improving the quality of service toward citizens and strengthening the fight against cross-border crime. Albania is the only country in the Western Balkans to apply the one-stop control principle at all border crossing points. In addition to running quick border checks, such cooperation has increased efficiency and reduced corruption. Intra-agency cooperation consists of joint use of work premises, support staff, equipment, investigations and training, as well as an IT system that integrates agencies such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the State Police, the State Intelligence Service and the General Prosecutor Office.

If intra-service and intra-agency cooperation mark an evolution in Albania and the Western Balkans, international cooperation represents a revolution. A little more than 20 years ago, Albania viewed borders as a dividing line with hostile neighbors; nowadays, the very same borders unite us in a shared sense of responsibility for border security. We no longer manage two sides of the border. Instead, in what has become an effective partnership, we manage common areas that extend up to 10 kilometers on both sides of the border.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND FINDINGS

Based on common interests and mutual trust, Albania has cooperated on border control with its neighbors Greece, Italy, Kosovo, Macedonia and Montenegro. Borders that were once isolated are now more open and integrated. Albanian officers, for example, jointly patrol borders and train together with their counterparts. Albania shares statistical data about illegal migration with most of those countries and holds regular meetings among border guards at the command level.

Albania's cooperation with Italy and Greece includes joint maritime patrols involving the Italian Guardia di Finanza and the Greek Marines. The border of Greece and Albania benefits from joint patrols, and Italy and Albania maintain a network of liaison officers at airports and seaports.

IBM has proven to be the best form of border control and surveillance for Albania. It continues to require a commitment from the entire state, as well as political and financial support from respective governments and international partners. Signing cooperative agreements is critical, but successful implementation also requires training, command of multiple languages and shared use of equipment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Improving border security requires support and an orientation toward best practices and special recommendations on IBM. Border management agencies need to reorganize structures and re-dimension missions in the interest of IBM. Planning has to occur over a long enough horizon to make it a success.

Agencies, both domestic and multinational, must harmonize policies related to IBM and provide room in budgets to make it effective. On the other hand, sound border management demands a system of monitoring and accountability. Joint training — and the integrated use of communications and computer technology — should be a focus, as should the sharing of expertise and curricula.

The process of integration has room for improvement, but thanks to this initial cooperation, Western Balkan countries have evolved from merely providing national security to building international partnerships that help provide security for all. □