

EES SPECIAL REPORT

**AN ASSESSMENT OF THE DECADE OF WESTERN
PEACE-KEEPING AND NATION-BUILDING
IN THE BALKANS**

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Since the end of the “wars of Yugoslav succession” in the mid-1990s, the region has made considerable progress toward stability, democratic transition, and future association with the European Union. Slovenia has become a Central European democracy. Croatia is well along on that path. Serbia seemed to mark time between the ouster of Milosevic in October 2000 and the assassination of Djindjic in spring 2003, but has now begun to overcome political paralysis and corruption. Montenegro is ahead of Serbia in this regard. Macedonia has achieved an uneasy internal compromise between its dominant Slav majority and its large Albanian minority populations. Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH, as it is abbreviated in Bosnian) are peaceful under international supervision.

Where do we go from here? My purpose today is to review critically six assumptions commonly made about the Western Balkans. As I review these assumptions, I find myself questioning whether continuation of present trends – more of the same – will result in regional stability, democracy, and inclusion in Europe. Let us examine the assumptions before continuing to accept them as the basis for the “Road Map” of the future.

Shared History?

A first assumption is that consensus is emerging in the region about the causes and consequences of the tragic developments of the past decade. This is simply not the case, notwithstanding a number of notable projects by NGOs and governments that aim to foster such understanding. While no side was without fault, principal blame for the violence that engulfed former Yugoslavia falls on individuals and groups acting in the name of Serbs and Serbdom – Milosevic, Seselj, Cosic, various paramilitary forces, the Yugoslav Army, and many others. Yet much of Serbian society still regards itself as the principal victim of the violent breakup of Yugoslavia. It follows that much more effort

is needed to confront the past and find common truth as a basis for regional reconciliation. These efforts should focus primarily but not exclusively on Serbia and the Serbs in BiH.

Contribution of the Hague Tribunal?

A second assumption is that the search for a shared understanding of recent history is furthered by the work of the International Criminal Tribunal on former Yugoslavia (ICTY). The converse can be argued. Recall that the ICTY was created as an ad hoc institution outside the region early in the Bosnian war to bring war criminals to justice. It has had some success. It has documented war crimes and prosecuted individuals – Serbs, Croat, Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims in the ethnic sense) as war criminals. It has removed from the region some former leaders who, left at home, could thwart democratic transition. (Gary J. Bass, “Milosevic in the Hague,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June, 2003, pp. 82-96)

But the ICTY had negative aspects from the outset and has perhaps already outlived its usefulness in present form. It will soon have cost the UN member-states a billion dollars. It has given some of those indicted – Milosevic above all – a soapbox at home via television that they no longer enjoyed prior to their trials. It has served as an excuse to duck local responsibility for dealing with war crimes and political disaster. Cooperation with the Hague Tribunal became, perhaps counterproductively, the main “condition” required by the United States in particular for economic and other support for democratic transition in the countries of the region, overshadowing other criteria such as legal and military reform.

The UN tribunals established subsequently for Rwanda and East Timor seem to have avoided some of these pitfalls by choosing a local venue, linking international courts to local “truth and reconciliation” commissions, and involving a mixture of international and local judges. The ICTY now seems to be moving, implicitly in this direction. Ten years on, it would seem best to insist on transfer of a small number of the most notorious remaining indicted war criminals to the Hague and then quickly devolve other war crimes trials to the countries of the region, with international participation.

Successful Nation-building?

A third assumption is that states can be “built” from outside and top down. The region has received major Western assistance in the form of money and expertise over the past decade intended to provide security and promote transition to democratic systems. The overall peacekeeping effort in the region has cost some \$58 billion, almost \$20 billion in U.S. military costs. Humanitarian assistance and development aid has cost billions more, \$5 billion from the US alone and much more from the European Union. (Martin Sletzinger, “Iraq Through the Lens of Bosnia and Kosovo,” Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, March 17, 2003, <http://wwics.si.edu>.) Most of these

resources have gone to the two areas that are international protectorates – Kosovo and BiH – and constitute efforts at nation-building, or more accurately, state-building. As a general proposition, “nation-building” has been criticized by a variety of scholars, most recently two at the Carnegie Endowment. (Minxin Pei and Sara Kasper, “Lessons from the Past: The American Record in Nation-Building,” Carnegie Endowment, April 2003, www.ceip.org/iraq.) The proposition is impractical in today’s post-colonial world if only because the effort is unsustainable; sooner rather than later supreme authority exercised by outsiders devolves to authority exercised by locals. Whatever the optimal future might be for Kosovo currently run by the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), the reality is that no one, and least of all those in UNMIK, expect UN administration to continue for very long. Power will devolve soon to the local institutions, overwhelmingly dominated by Kosovar Albanians, that UNMIK is helping to create. There are no counterpart state-wide institutions in BiH, a problem to which I will return.

“Nation building” in Kosovo and BiH has not been cheap. It has cost the United States and the European Union perhaps \$80 billion overall to date. Economic assistance to the region has gone overwhelmingly to those two areas, often with questionable impact on sustained economic development and arguably to the neglect of support for democratic transition elsewhere, especially Serbia.

Withdrawal of Military Forces?

A fourth assumption is that stationed forces in the Western Balkans can continue to be reduced incrementally and one day will be removed entirely. It is by now generally accepted that the introduction of NATO-based peace-imposing forces with warfighting capability – as contrasted with impotent UN “peacekeeping” forces – was essential to ending the Yugoslav wars and creating stability in Croatia, BiH, Kosovo, and on a much smaller scale in Macedonia. The breakup of Yugoslavia resulted in an internal security deficit that could only be offset by external forces. Macedonia is likely to need a small NATO/EU stationed force for some time to underwrite internal cohesion. KFOR will be needed in Kosovo as long as it is a UN protectorate. An independent Kosovo state – the only realistic outcome of the so-called “final status” issue – accepted as such by Belgrade, Tirana, and Skopje, and with a small internal security force of its own, would permit the gradual withdrawal of KFOR. SFOR will be needed in Bosnia-Herzegovina as long as it is an international protectorate. In other words, major structural and political change is required in all three countries before international military forces can be withdrawn without inducing renewed instability. The mission of these forces will not be completed by inertia.

Multi-Ethnicity Restored?

A fifth assumption is that it is possible to reconstitute multi-ethnic societies and territorial units that have been torn apart by civil war and the madness of ethnic cleansing. Paddy

Ashdown, the current High Representative in BiH, said that “In many places, ethnic cleansing has been reversed. A new human right has been developed in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the right of refugees to return to their homes. This is unique in European history.” (*International Herald Tribune*, October 16, 2002.) However laudable this goal, on any scale it is impractical in concept and counterproductive in implementation. Refugee returns in general must be distinguished from minority returns in particular, and statistics on minority returns should include only refugees who return and stay (as opposed to those who return briefly to sell their property.) In Kosovo, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, in Croatia, there are few areas where significant minority returns have occurred – and where they have taken place, it is likely that they will soon be offset by brain drain and other out-migration.

Nor will rebuilding historical symbols of ethnic comity necessarily reconnect ethnic groups. The famous Turkish bridge in Mostar is being rebuilt by the international community in the old style and with many of the original stones at a cost of \$10 million, but this “new old bridge” it is unlikely to unite the ethnically divided city. (Michael Ignatieff, “When a Bridge is Not a Bridge,” *The New York Times Magazine*, October 27, 2002.)

Focus on minority refugee return has distracted the international community from attention to and economic support for refugee resettlement. In practice this has meant neglect of Serb refugees from Croatia and Kosovo who now reside – sometimes in conditions reminiscent of Palestinian refugee camps – in Serbia. Recall the experience of the millions of Germans – most of them “guilty” of nothing more than being German – who were driven out of Eastern and Southeastern Europe under horrendous conditions in 1944-1945. They were neither returned nor ignored, but resettled in Germany, with support from the Marshall Plan. And nothing would have been more destabilizing to post-war Eastern Europe than an (admittedly hypothetical) effort by the international community to foster their return rather than their resettlement and the resulting recreation of large German minorities in countries that had been destabilized by inter-ethnic conflict.

Permanent Borders?

A sixth assumption is that the current administrative units in Southeastern Europe must be maintained at any cost. The corollary is that larger units are better than smaller ones, whatever the internal problems, and that any change in borders will make matters worse rather than better. In the words of one official, “it would be a deadly game to keep recognizing and supporting individual attempts to create new states, because this is the dissolution process that in the Balkans never ends. It is always bloody, and it always in its heart consists of enormous human tragedy.” (Zarko Korac, then Serb Republic deputy prime minister, in “Stabilizing and Reconciling the Balkans; Conference Report,” Swiss Foundation for World Affairs, Washington, November 21, 2001.)

The counterargument is that no state can survive in the absence of terror without a modicum of internal legitimacy. Titoist Yugoslavia once had that modicum of internal legitimacy but lost it in the 1980s, yet Western policy tried to salvage Yugoslavia instead of helping to manage its devolution without violence. This history repeated itself with rump Yugoslavia – Serbia/Montenegro – and today we have something mediated by the EU called Serbia and Montenegro that is formally one country but is widely viewed as a very temporary transition to two countries.

In the post-Communist world, it is remarkable how uncritically the international community has come to accept administrative lines drawn by tyrants as the “natural” borders of sovereign states. Moldova is one case in point. Kosovo is another such case; its borders as an administrative subunit of Serbia were fixed by Tito’s secret police chief Rankovic after World War II. BiH is a third case; it was established as a subunit of Yugoslavia by Tito to end Serb-Croat squabbling over its territory in borders that did not correspond to any of the historical configurations of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The practical consequence of this assumption in former Yugoslavia is to leave in limbo issues of status that should be addressed sooner rather than later. Kosovo will not be re-incorporated in Serbia, and it would be a plus for all sides – including the causes of democracy and self-government in both Serbia and Kosovo – if this were clarified now. The UN protectorate will be followed by an independent Kosovo, a state of its ninety-percent plus dominant Kosovo Albanian population, with minority rights for those Serbs (down from 25 percent of the population in the 1960s to less than five percent today) who remain. But if the overwhelming local Serb majority in the Mitrovica region wishes to rejoin Serbia, that option should not be rejected out of hand. “Independence minus” (sovereignty with minor partition) may be the best of the possible futures for Kosovo.

The future status of BiH is more problematic. BiH exists thanks to the Dayton Agreement, yet Dayton was an armistice imposed by outsiders, not a constituent assembly of its peoples. The Dayton Agreement was necessary to end warfare, but BiH has no realistic future without fundamental reconstitution. Today, it is neither whole nor free (meaning not sovereign) – it is a pretend country of two and often three parts, each with its own army (albeit confined to barracks by SFOR), its own intelligence service, its own educational system, and with the High Representative – the international pro-counsel – as the only effective country-wide authority. The future viability of BiH as now constituted is suspect even to those in the international community who have the biggest institutional stake in its success. (Jacque Klein, former deputy High Representative and more recently UN head, has frequently said that the country is on life-support from outside. The OHR Mission Implementation Plan of January 2003 poses the question: “Is the BiH state viable?” EC Commissioner Patten, discussing prospects for future BiH association with the EU, said in March 2003 “the key condition is that it should behave like a state. We would like to see a self-sustaining state acting like a country, not like “two and a bit” countries ...” The EU’s Stabilization and Association Process Second Annual Report of March 2003 noted that “Bosnia and Herzegovina needs to become a self-sustaining state ... but self-sustainability is not yet guaranteed.”)

A viable, self-sustaining BiH state will require a revision of Dayton, with more centralization of key state functions – armed forces, intelligence services – and explicit devolution of other functions, e.g. education, media – to the constituent “entities”, which should be renamed. Such revision of the Dayton Agreement will also involve reappraisal of the “Federation” – the Croat/Bosniak unit forged in the mid-1990s at American insistence that is formally one of the two “entities” of BiH but is in some respects a shell for differing Croat and Bosniak interests. (The Federation is subdivided into ten cantons – 5 Bosniak, 3 Croat, and 2 mixed Bosniak-Croat.) Such restructuring will have to be initiated by the international community and involve the long-overdue abolition of the three separate ethnically -based armies and intelligence services. But it will have to become a consensual restructuring if it is to succeed.

If there can be no consensual restructuring of BiH, the alternative of (peaceful) dissolution must be faced. That would presumably involve the accession of the Serb and Croat regions to Serbia and Croatia, respectively, and the formation of a small Bosniak state in the remainder of the territory. (William Pfaff, “Time to concede defeat in Bosnia-Herzegovina,” *International Herald Tribune*, October 10, 2002. He was immediately challenged by High Representative Ashdown in the October 16 issue.) Breakup of BiH earlier would have poisoned Serbia and Croatia by adding the worst of the extremist nationalists to their respective polities. Today that danger may be less, for Croatia has become a stable democratic state in transition, and Serbia is at last moving in that direction.

The remaining alternative is the status quo, projected into the future – an indefinite international protectorate. That may be the lesser evil. But it is not very realistic, for it assumes continued economic and military support for “Dayton” BiH at levels that are unlikely to be available for very much longer.

Conclusion

As I said at the outset, the former Yugoslav region has made considerable progress toward overcoming its Communist past, developing democratic systems, and moving toward Europe. The region needs urgently a clearer prospect of association and eventual inclusion in the European Union – the most important stimulus for continued progress.. It needs economic and other assistance, which must not neglect Serbia. And it needs the international community to clarify, not further obfuscate, its vision of the future for Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina.