

BALKAN PERSPECTIVES 2020

The Fight for a Timely Inclusion

THE STRATEGIC LINKS BETWEEN THE BALKANS, RUSSIA AND THE MEDITERRANEAN

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At an earlier NDCF conference on the Balkans¹ here in Rome, I suggested that the predominance of centrifugal forces detracted from cooperation among states and the region and hence adversely affected the very coherence and stability of the area. A significant share of the centrifugal forces in question are home grown in the sense that they arise from competing identities that have guided, over centuries, the adversarial trajectory of Balkan nationalism. Others result from a competition among external powers to cultivate alliances in that region. To be sure, there has been a great deal of progress in the region since the civil war that broke out at the time of Yugoslavia's collapse. Hostilities have ended. At present four of the Western Balkan countries have reached the negotiation stage for EU membership; and four different ones have acceded NATO. But there is still no evidence of an overall convergence among the Balkan states; to the contrary, the region is largely characterized by the diverging priorities and policy objectives of an array of neighboring states.

To give a recent example, the Deutsche Welle reported only last Wednesday, 23rd September, that Bulgaria was trying to stop the EU from opening membership negotiations with North Macedonia scheduled for December 2020. Bulgaria claims that it has a common history with North Macedonia that was obliterated by the ethnic and linguistic engineering that had taken place in North Macedonia under the authoritarian regimes following the Second World War. "According to the official Bulgarian view of history, people of Slavic descent who live in North Macedonia are Bulgarians who speak the Bulgarian language but were brainwashed during the Josip Broz Tito's communist regime in the former Yugoslavia and were artificially given a new 'Macedonian' identity and language in the process."² As a result Bulgaria has demanded that North Macedonia admit its shared history with Bulgaria, a demand that is viewed as being tantamount to asking North Macedonians to deny their modern language and identity. On 17th December

¹ *BALKAN PERSPECTIVES: Adapting the Partnership and Integration Paths*, Rome: 16th of May 2019.

² <https://www.dw.com/en/bulgaria-asks-eu-to-stop-fake-macedonian-identity/a-55020781>

2020, before these conference proceedings went to press, Bulgaria vetoed North Macedonia's accession negotiations to begin.³

The question of identity, rather than of particular identities standing out in contrast to other ones in the region, come back to haunt any discussion, any consideration of any aspect of the Balkans' history, society, politics, or culture. The topic of the present conference brought to mind the vivid and masterfully depicted explanation by Ivan Krastev of the reason why ethnic homogeneity became so important in central Europe:

Eastern European states and nations emerged late in the nineteenth-century, and they did so almost simultaneously. While in Western Europe, it was the legacy of the colonial empires that shaped encounters with the non-European world, Central European states were born of the disintegration of Europe's continental empires – Germany, Austro-Hungary, Russia – and the process of ethnic cleansing that followed. The nineteenth-century ethnic mosaic of Western Europe was generally harmonious like a Caspar David Friedrich landscape, whereas that of central Europe resembled more an expressionist canvas by Oscar Kokoschka.⁴

What Krastev says about Central Europe in this book is equally valid for the Balkans where the nation-states, like those of central Europe, were born in the wake of the disintegration of the Ottoman and the Habsburg empires and where, like central Europe, common descent -- that is, ethnicity, language, and culture and not citizenship -- has determined the nation.

Strategic links of the region with other regions follows the same pattern of affinity, particularly confessional affinity. The Orthodox Church, for example, has historically reinforced, and continues to reinforce, a special relationship that bonds Russia and Serbia together. The bombing of Belgrade by NATO forces during the Kosovo war (1998-1999), it may be recalled, brought Belgrade and Moscow closer at that time. Although Serbia is now cooperating with NATO, it still does not feel sanguine about committing to full membership of the Atlantic Alliance.

Turkey's AKP government has been keen to cultivate its own strategic links in the Balkans as an important part of its strategy to confirm and project its status as a regional power. Ankara's so-called neo-Ottomanist approach to its broader neighborhood, including certainly the Balkans, has meant that Turkey places priority on building relationships with

³ <https://www.ft.com/content/68191f23-0230-4a71-9c5e-437195b5d25a>

⁴ Ivan Krastev, *After Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), p.48.

the Muslim populations of the region, supporting religious instruction in parts of the Balkans and providing funds for the restoration almost exclusively of Ottoman mosques and religious buildings in Bosnia. It cannot be denied that what was dubbed as Turkey's soft power reaching out to the former Ottoman territories had the effect of raising consciousness of the confessional differences among the peoples of the region.

More dangerous for the region's security and stability was the involvement in the civil war of radical Islamist cadres. In the wake of the Bosnian war, several Muslim countries and Muslim aid organizations came to support programs and projects to propagate conservative and even radical forms of Islam especially in Bosnia but also in other parts of the Balkans. At that time, around 2000 Salafists came to Bosnia to join the fighting. They saw the war as an opportunity for conducting jihad and establishing a foothold for radical Islam in the region.

A far more important strategic link is now being forged between the Balkans and the Mediterranean by China's Belt and Road Initiative. China's purchase and development of the port of Piraeus has resulted in the Western Balkans becoming an arterial link in the economic space between the Eastern Mediterranean and Central Europe. This might be viewed as a unique opportunity by many of the Balkan countries to be on the main artery to a market of half a billion prosperous consumers and, at the same time, having a chance to build their own infrastructure on a par with that of the market in question. Would the Belt and Road Initiative be the catalyst to prepare the Balkans for a credible inclusion in the European club?

There are serious doubts about that eventuality. For one, the Belt and Road Initiative is seen as a project that carries the danger of burdening smaller countries with large debts that they would not be able to repay. The often-quoted example from the region is the highway project in Montenegro. The loan that Montenegro took from China's Export-Import Bank for this project pushed its GDP-to-debt ratio up to 80 percent.

For another, the large financing facilities that China extends in association with the Belt and Road Initiative is also seen as an inducement for increased corruption, particularly among autocratic governments. But there have also been frequent reports of widespread corruption even in those countries where a culture of transparency has not taken root. Needless to say, great many countries fall in the latter category. Examples from several South East Asian countries have received international news coverage of large-scale corruption that took place in connection with funds associated with the Belt and Road Initiative.

China's increasing influence reaching Europe's immediate neighborhood provides another example of an externally driven centrifugal orientation that the Balkans have experienced. Beijing's 17+1 initiative to promote the Belt and Road Initiative in Central and Eastern Europe is considered by a majority of knowledgeable observers and political analysts, as well as by the EU itself, as a divisive move, one that has the effect of driving a wedge right in the middle of the EU.

It is difficult to ignore the continued play of centrifugal forces on the Balkans, both from within and outside the region. Nevertheless, I hasten to add that although there is good reason to be concerned, there is also reason not to be overwhelmed by pessimism. The Balkans are no longer unique in displaying a lack of regional coherence or convergence of interests. At the moment, we are witnessing a global transition away from the certainties of the old order, but we do not know into what kind of a new order, or at least what kind of an international arrangement, the world might be transitioning at the moment. We do not even know if the world will be capable of establishing any kind of a coherent system in the foreseeable future. With respect specifically to the Balkans, however, it would be safe to say that the region will be able to achieve convergence and coherence if and only if the peoples and the governments of the region are able to identify their collective interests in the same way as Western European leaders did in the aftermath of the Second World War.