

The Western Balkans Security Agenda: Short and Midterm Prospects

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After the fall of the Berlin wall and the deep economic and political transformations the Balkans seemed to be taking a different turn.

While the Central and East European countries were working hard to integrate with the West, the Balkans were gradually falling into an ever deeper crisis which no one seemed to be able to prevent.

It is difficult to explain why this had to happen here or was it the fault of the people living here and why all these people had to go through so much suffering, killing each other, losing one's family and finally, having an international tribunal for some of them.

Key words: The Balkans, security

1. Introduction

The Balkans have neither oil, nor gold reserves. The people living here are poor and had been even more ruthlessly suppressed by the authoritarian communist regimes than the nations of Central and Eastern Europe. Were not the weak Balkans victim to the new geopolitical realities after the end of the Cold War which their political elite failed to decipher thus preserving the conservative *status quo* for a longer time?

Compared with the past fifteen years or so today the Western Balkans are calm, without war conflicts and ethnic cleansing. A group of states which came into existence have covered part of the requirements for NATO memberships and, as we all know, are waiting to be invited to the NATO membership in 2006. Still, a number of research centres

focusing on the Western Balkans, assess the situation here as critical, that is to say half-way between success and failure. Thus, in its latest report of April 2005 dedicated to the Western Balkans, the International Commission on the Balkans writes: "The region's profile is bleak - a mixture of weak states and international protectorates, where Europe has stationed almost half of its deployable forces. Economic growth in these territories is low or non-existent: unemployment is high; corruption is pervasive; and the public is pessimistic and distrustful towards its nascent democratic institutions. The future of Kosovo is unpredicted, the future of Macedonia is uncertain, and the future of Serbia is unclear. We run the real risk of an explosion of Kosovo, an implosion of Serbia and new fractures in the foundations of Bosnia and Herzegovina" (The Balkans in Europe's Future, International Commission on the Balkans, pp. 7-8).

In my opinion the facts underlying these conclusions and the tendencies in the development of the Western Balkans are more positive than bleak. I

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might be wrong because I live in the Balkans also, but in my understanding the critical point in the crisis in the Western Balkans has been outlived, the negative tendency has been overcome and there is no radical potential for new military conflict or ethnic wars. I also believe that all other pending problems may be solved in the coming years through the efforts of the international community, above all the EU and the USA.

Even a cursory glance at the Western Balkans shows that their political and state development towards democracy did not take place "in a package" the way it did in Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, or in the Baltic republics, on their way to join NATO and the EU. After the Dayton Agreement which put an end to the war in Bosnia, and after the Ohrid Accords, which regulate the relationships between the ethnic minorities within the Republic of Macedonia, the question of the status of Kosovo is coming to the fore. Its solution will provide the final and ultimate settlement of such issues as state borders and ethnic minorities populating the respective territories, as well as the overall political development of Kosovo. If the Kosovo case is not solved properly and equitably for all neighbours, it will continue to have a negative destabilising effect on the whole Western Balkans. Similar judgements were passed by the UN, the EU and the USA, all being unanimous that the current situation in Kosovo has a destabilising potential, therefore it has a negative influence on the processes taking place in the neighbouring countries too. Therefore, the sooner the question of the Kosovo status is resolved, the sooner the further integration of the Western Balkans into NATO and the EU will become a reality, as all countries in the region have pointed to that as their strategic priority. Unfortunately, it seems that as of today, neither the Kosovo politicians, nor those in Belgrade have a clear-cut will and capacity for constructive talks, for mutual compromise, and for reaching a consensus on the issue of the Kosovo status.

Three problems, three doubts and three points of optimism

Before concluding, I would like to dwell on:
 - three serious problems,
 - three doubts and
 - three points of optimism

related to the current situation in the Western Balkans.

2. The Three Problems

The first problem in the development of the Western Balkans is Kosovo. We all know that the more the issue of the status of the province is postponed, the more difficult it becomes to solve it. Regrettably, despite the huge efforts of the international community, the positions of Priština and Belgrade "are far apart from one another". Both the government and the opposition in Priština allow for no other solution of the status of the province than "full independence and sovereignty for Kosovo". On the other hand, all democratic parties in Serbia uphold the formula "more than autonomy, but less than independence". The difference in the positions of the politicians in Priština and Belgrade is so big that most of the analysts believe that "any attempt on the part of Serbia to rule Kosovo will trigger violence among the Kosovo Albanians". At the same time Belgrade would accept a compromise only if Kosovo remains - no matter under what form - a part of Serbia. It is difficult to predict whether and how a breakthrough in that stalemate could be achieved. I do not believe, however, that a sooner opening of a procedure for Serbia's EU membership could turn out to be the incentive that would make Belgrade change its position. It seems, that for the current generation of politicians in Belgrade it is more important that Kosovo remains a part of Serbia than the country's membership in NATO and the EU. The influential radical-nationalist party of Vojislav Šešelj in Serbia's parliament, where it holds one third of the seats, is one of the staunchest supporters of that position.

The second problem. Despite the efforts made by the international community to stabilise Kosovo in the past six years, the most recent events in the province (such as the murder of the brother of the ex-Prime Minister of the provisional government Haradinai, the sharp conflict between the leader of DPK Hasim Taci and the president and leader of the leading DLC Ibrahim Rugova, etc.) show that Kosovo is not entirely prepared to start negotiations for clarifying the final status of the province. Moreover, even if the international community succeeds within a very short time, say end of 2006, to grant Kosovo the status of independent and autonomous state, it seems to me that the province does not yet possess the necessary political potential, and administrative and human resources to function on its own outside the control of the international community.

In recent months we have been witnessing, a highly energetic, very constructive and well-wishing impulse that Washington is trying to give to the

processes in Kosovo. That impulse is the result of a sincere, friendly and disinterested policy in Kosovo and the Western Balkans, pursued with the personal participation of an erudite diplomat, thoroughly versed in European and Balkan matters, Mr. R. Nicholas Burns, Under Secretary of the Department of State. This policy is supported by highly influential think-tanks, the International Commission on the Balkans and the International Crisis Group, which worked out earlier this year a detailed and very precise version of the development of the situation both in Kosovo and the Western Balkans at large. However, I am of the opinion that these impulses coming from Washington miss the target. I am afraid the political leaders of Kosovo do not know how to utilise the efforts of the US. The politicians in Priština do not yet have the personal and collective capacity to make use of the energetic and disinterested support of the US for the benefit of the Kosovo statehood.

The State is a powerful institution that rules the nations and societies. Each state, even the weakest one, has an enormous power resource which, if given to incompetent people, might produce disastrous results.

The third problem is related to the international community which, too, has not finalised its own process of reaching a consensus on the question of the Kosovo status. Whereas the EU is prone to wait and allow more time for Belgrade and Priština and support the formula "more than autonomy, less than independence", the USA is convinced that the only working formula is complete independence and sovereignty for Kosovo, as an independent state whose legitimacy will be recognised by the UN Security Council. Consensus is difficult to achieve in the Security Council itself, because two of the permanent members, Russia and China, will most probably not support the creation of a new state out of the former Serbian province. For both Russia and China support for Kosovo as an independent state would have grave international as well as domestic consequences. In a report of January 2005 the experts of the International Crisis Group propose a possible solution in case Russia blocks the work of the Contact Groups in the UN Security Council, namely that Russia and Serbia should be excluded from participation in finding a solution to the problem. The representatives of the ICG propose that an international conference under the aegis of the UN and with the participation of the countries of the Contact Group, the EU, Belgrade and Priština is convened. The Conference will have to discuss and approve the Treaty and the Constitution of Kosovo as

a new independent state. Kosovo is to put the Constitution to vote in a referendum, while the Treaty for the Independence of Kosovo should be endorsed by the UN Security Council. If Serbia refuses to participate in such a conference, the Treaty for the Independence and the Constitution of Kosovo should be endorsed without the participation of Belgrade. If Russia declares in the Security Council that it is not going to support the creation of a new state, the Treaty and the Constitution could be ratified, according to the ICG experts, without the approval of the Security Council. This would be the worse case scenario in case the Kosovo talks end in a dead alley. It will be the last resort because it has a number of serious drawbacks:

- To begin with, the non-recognition of the Kosovo status by the Security Council would mean Kosovo could not become the UN member, and would only have an observer status.

- Kosovo not being a UN member would mean that the EU would not start pre-accession talks for the EU membership.

- It is not certain that all EU members would support that scenario which would trigger a crisis inside the EU, similar to the crisis related to the Iraq war two years ago.

- From the very beginning of the functioning of that state an atmosphere of mistrust concerning its legitimacy would be created amidst the international community which would reflect negatively on the work of the government in Priština, of whatever description it might be.

- Finally, it should not be precluded that given such a scenario Belgrade might harden its position of non-recognition of the Kosovo status, passing Serbia off as a victim to the international community. Such a position of the government would most probably win the support of the overwhelming majority of the population of Serbia which is very sensitive to the subject of "independence and sovereignty of Kosovo". At the same time such a situation would strengthen the prestige and position of the radical party of Vojislav Šešelj winning it a parliamentary majority in the next elections in the conditions of pressure on Belgrade on the part of the international community to accept the Kosovo status as an independent and sovereign state. In that event the overall context of the debate concerning the final status of Kosovo would be changed drastically.

3. The Three Doubts

As to the three doubts, they are related to the strategy of the EU enlargement after the voting on the European Constitution in France and the Netherlands, and, on the other hand - to the assessment of the capacity for reforms in the zone of the Western Balkans.

In a thorough analysis by the International Commission on the Balkans entitled "The Balkans in Europe's Future", published in April 2005, an attempt was made to analyse the development of the region till the year 2015 studying the phases, deadlines and the work which each country in the Western Balkans should carry out in order to be accepted in NATO and the EU. In my understanding even if the reforms continue at high pace, some of the countries in the Western Balkans will hardly be able to meet the criteria for the EU membership before 2015-2017. Let us recall that it took Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, which were the first to have joined NATO and later on the EU, 10 to 12 years to cover the criteria for membership of the two organisations. The three countries are located in the centre of Europe and have never lost touch with the western world even in the bleakest years of the Cold War, thanks to which it took them a comparatively short time to conduct the reforms. For Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia it proved to be a more challenging task whereas it has taken much longer for Romania and Bulgaria to join NATO and in all likelihood, the EU in 2007-2008. In other words it has taken the less developed Bulgaria and Romania 12 years to achieve NATO membership and, if all goes well, 16 to 17 years to prepare for the EU membership (for example Bulgaria signed its first official document in 1991 but has not yet met all requirements for full membership of the organisation). Understandably, 1991 differs from the context nowadays, still I personally doubt that Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia and Montenegro will succeed in carrying out the necessary reforms in less time than it took Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Romania and Bulgaria to do so. Therefore, the EU membership could not be a short or medium-term perspective for part of the countries of the Western Balkans.

My second doubt refers to historic memory. An ethnic conflict of more than a decade duration cannot be forgotten easily, no matter where it sprang up - in Central Europe, Asia, America or the Western Balkans. The great number of human casualties, the enormous number of refugees, the ethnic cleans-

ing and the wars in that region cannot be wiped out from memory within ten years. These are wounds that need healing so that at least part of what happened between the individual ethnic groups and peoples should be forgotten.

Finally, I think, it is possible that the coming years will probably witness a reassessment of the EU enlargement concept. When Europeans planned enlargement they had no inkling of the sharp and prolonged conflict that would drag on in the Balkans after the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia and the appearance of new states and the entailing economic and political destabilisation of the whole region.

The ongoing debate about the European Constitution after the voting in France and the Netherlands will probably lead to correction of the very concept of enlargement. Recently influential European politicians, academics and intellectuals have ever more often come forward with the notion of "*privileged partnership*". It is possible that at a given stage of the European integration of the Western Balkans this notion could play the role of an element that would prolong their preparation for the EU membership thus opening up a more realistic perspective for them.

Still, despite the above problems and doubts I see

4. Three Serious Points of Optimism

The first boils down to the fact that the USA has already proposed a concrete timeline for solving the issue of the Kosovo status, which should not be postponed endlessly. The sooner an international conference on the Kosovo status is convened the quicker the relevant solution will be reached. The resolve of the US to step up the process is very encouraging. At this stage it is clear that there is no equally acceptable solution for both Priština and Belgrade. It is equally plain, however, that there is no constructive alternative to the concept of full independence and sovereignty of Kosovo which the international community should recognise as an independent state, and a UN member. In order to achieve that goal, however, it is necessary that the USA and the EU take up a common position and that this position could not be attacked by Moscow. A decision on Kosovo should not be opposed by either the USA or Europe, nor should it turn Russia into an opponent of any of the two. In that sense

despite the optimism, it is unrealistic to expect that the recognition of the Kosovo status will be finalised in the coming couple of years. A breakthrough should, at best, be expected in a medium-term perspective. Such a breakthrough will depend on the energetic efforts of the USA and the EU, but also on the constructive cooperation with Russia.

The second point of optimism relates to the growing role of NATO in the Western Balkans. The experience of the Central and East European countries has shown that NATO membership is a precondition and a test of the political will and capacity of each of these states to be reformed and integrated into the Western world. Several countries of the Western Balkans - Croatia, Macedonia and Albania are on the threshold of Nato membership and will probably get invitations to join the pact at its June 2006 summit. Their becoming NATO members will give a strong impact to the integration processes in other Western Balkan states. An additional incentive to the Western Balkan countries would be the opening of membership talks with Croatia as soon as possible as well as a positive opinion from the European Commission, granting Macedonia a candidate status (as Franz-L. Altmann, a German analyzer said in his work "Kosovo 2005-2006: Phased Independence" p. 7).

Finally, the most important reason for optimism is related to the fact that the peoples of the Balkans are in no way inferior to all other. Their political destinies have evolved in a way that they went through a very grave crisis in the past ten years, still they are aware of being part of Europe and it is their natural civilisational path of development to become integrated economically, politically as well as military and strategically into the EU. From a philosophic point of view there is no alternative to that integration.

5. Conclusions

1. I believe that the process of NATO enlargement into the Western Balkans that is gaining momentum will be one of the most decisive factors for the success of the democratic reforms in the region in the coming years, and above all, in a medium-term perspective. The very preparation for NATO membership of the countries of the first and second wave of enlargement of the Alliance proved a powerful catalyst for the democratic reforms. That preparation provided a strong motivation both to the peoples and the politicians of the Central and East Eu-

ropean countries. That is why an invitation for membership extended to the countries of the so called Adriatic Charter at the NATO summit in the summer of 2006 will be the adequate acknowledgement not only of the reforms in the security sector of those states, but also of the preparedness of their peoples for an overall integration in the western structures. At the same time it will enhance the security and stability in the Western Balkans.

2. Despite serious advancement in recent years, Bosnia and Herzegovina is moving comparatively slowly on the road of democratic development. The assessment made in the Resolution on the Western Balkans of the European Parliament very truly reflects the situation in this country, by saying that "nine (10 - R. K.) years after the signing of the Dayton Agreement, crucial political problems remain unresolved, the country is deeply divided and political stability is vulnerable" (European Parliament Motion for a resolution on the state of regional integration in the Western Balkans, 6 April, 2005, Brussels). The EU is ready to open negotiations on the Stabilisation and Accession Agreement (SAA) but before that Bosnia and Herzegovina must implement two very important conditions:

- the country must reinforce its cooperation with the ICTY and
- a police reform is absolutely necessary.

That is why it is, in my opinion, counterproductive to nourish expectations for a rapid integration of the Western Balkans into the EU. The first successes should be expected in a short-term perspective while the reforms in Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina for instance might be completed not earlier than 2015-2020. An exception could be made by Macedonia and Croatia which, provided they maintain the current pace of reforms might join the EU before 2015.

3. The next two years will be critical for the State union of Serbia and Montenegro. The finding of a satisfactory solution concerning the future development of the relations between the two parts of that Union will have key significance for the stability of the Western Balkans as a whole. At the same time Serbia is bound to increase the efficiency of its cooperation with the International Tribunal in the Hague. The reforms in the ministry of defence and the secret services will be pivotal. The fulfilment of the requirements of the international community will open up vistas for negotiations for a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU. *Finally*, a dialogue with Priština will be crucial for

Belgrade. The politicians in Belgrade are no doubt facing serious political tasks. They must figure out with great precision the complex balance between the national interests of Serbia and the drastically changed strategic context in the region after 1999 which will allow them to make a progress on the road to integration into the EU and NATO. An important step forward along that line was the Declaration of the Parliament of Serbia proclaiming NATO and EU membership as strategic goals.

4. The problem of the Kosovo status will be central for the Western Balkans in the coming years. The development of the political process in Kosovo and the attitude of the international community toward Kosovo give ground to conclude that full inde-

pendence and sovereignty of Kosovo and its gradual transformation into a new independent state is the only alternative. It is time for the Contact group member states to stop talking of final status as a process open to a wide range of results. At the same time it must be clear that that process will take a lot of effort and considerable historical time to complete.

The process of creating a multiethnic state, however, demands that the Priština politicians come to the awareness that this lofty mission can be performed not only with political will and disinterested international support, but moreover with professionalism and a skill for state governance. At the same time it should be clear that it will take a long historical span and a lot of effort. ■