The European future of the Western Balkans twenty years after the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords

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Abstract

December 2015 saw the 20th anniversary of the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords for Bosnia and Herzegovina. Twenty years on the six non-EU countries of the Western Balkans (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia, all from former Yugoslavia, plus Albania) aspire to join the Union. The article examines the geographical, linguistic, and historical currents that shaped the region and looks at themes from the last twenty five years that resonate more broadly in international crises today: confronting aggression, the impact of sanctions, “liberal imperialism,” weak institutions, the stress of war, identity confusion, and the future of Europe. The article concludes that to avoid a return to violence in the next 20 years, the region needs to be part of wider European governance. For this to be achieved, we need more than two day summits but more pro-active engagement from all sides perhaps returning to the 19th century model of a Congress.

Introduction

“This Serbo-Croat problem endangers the very existence of Yugoslavia. The day the Croats and Slovenes break away, then Yugoslavia will disappear from the map.”1 So wrote Henri Pozzi, a dual French British citizen, in 1935 in his book Black Hand Over Europe. Pozzi, who claimed to have worked for both French and British Intelligence, saw clearly in the 1930s what came to pass briefly during the Second World War and which culminated in the modern break of Yugoslavia in 1991; in a conflict that bemused many in Europe who had enjoyed their 1980s package holidays to the Adriatic coast.

Former Yugoslavia, to many observers, is inexplicable, in the meaning of the word that it defies logic. At the outbreak of the Bosnian war, a Muslim married to a Serb signed up, not for the Bosniak (Muslim) army, but rather the Hrvatsko Vijece Odbrane, the Bosnian Croat army. He felt they were better equipped to defend the Bihać pocket from the Serbs. After the war was over, he was drinking in a bar in the town of Bihać when he was shot and paralysed by a fellow Muslim because he had fought with the Croats, not the Bosniaks. Last year, according to the Austrian newspaper Kurier, the Muslim bodyguard of indicted Bosnian Serb General Ratko Mladić sought asylum in Austria.2 There are thousands of personal stories such as these, where ethnicity does not confer primary identity, which serve to confuse rather than illuminate.

On YouTube last year, a young Bosnian film maker uploaded YUGOSLAVIA, a short film. It starts with a beautiful young woman in red white and blue and wearing the red star around her neck gathering six red roses and tying them in a red white and blue bow, uniting the six republics of Yugoslavia into a beautiful bouquet. She greets two young children, and then darkness and the sounds of shells. The young woman is bloodied and confused and is seen kneeling in front of a firing squad of six blindfolded gunman. Each blindfold has a word written on it: Falsehood, Money, Corruption, Nationalism, Religion, and Power. They shoot the girl and then Nationalism steps forward to fire the last shot that kills Yugoslavia. The two young children have watched and come forward to remove the blindfolds from the gunmen who now see the beauty they have killed. The children then take the bunch of roses and separate them and replant them. This Yugo-nostalgic video is powerful and raises so many questions. How perfect was Yugoslavia in reality? What was the cause of the destruction of the country? One comment under the video suggests the international community should be one of the gunmen. Looking forward is the implication that the countries should come together again, raising the question: Is “Euroslavia,” as some people call it, the solution for the future?

There are several themes drawn from more than two decades of personal experience of Balkans engagement that resonate more broadly in the unresolved international crises of today:

- the perennial impact of physical geography shaping both cultural and historical understanding,
- myth rewritten as history,
- the failure to confront aggression with a believable commensurate response from the outset,
- the unintended criminal consequences of sanctions,
- the relativity of collective post-traumatic stress,
- the failure of liberal imperialism,
- weak institutions (both international and local),
- identity confusion, and
- most relevant in 2016, the future of Europe.

The recent elections in Serbia have been hailed as a vote for continuing reform towards European Union (EU) accession, but the performance of the Serbian radicals shows that there remains a hard core opposition to this path. Europe and the West should be looking forward to what can save them from losing the life of even “one Pomeranian soldier,” as Bismarck put it in the 19th century, in the future of this volatile region. For small diverse neighbouring states to live in harmony, there is a need for a supra-structure. For the Western Balkans, this is currently the European Union. Indeed today’s nationalists and isolationists would do well to learn one clear lesson from the Balkans: the human and financial cost of conflict borne of nationalism lasts for generations and, in keeping with cliché, repeats itself, not least in the conspiracy-laden world of the Balkans. In Western Europe, after the Second World War, the aim never to repeat the horrors of war was a driving force towards a more peaceful co-existence. The migration and terrorism crises of today, and the Brexit vote, threaten that co-existence as nationalist rhetoric overrides compassion and a sense of collective responsibility and accountability. In times of crisis, countries, like organisations and people, turn in on themselves and seek to protect what is deemed dear to them thus often losing a true sense of perspective. Our leaders, politicians, and media commentators would all benefit from understanding the psychology of responding to a crisis.

In many ways, the Western Balkans, in the challenges it faces, is a microcosm of the world: climate change brings devastating floods; corruption is endemic; nationalism festers; religious tensions continue; the media is partial; migrants pour through; organised crime flourishes; politicians are

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not trusted by the electorate; there are competing spheres of external influence from Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, the US, Russia and, of course, Europe. However, it would be wrong to paint a completely devastating image. The Western Balkan states are no different to many of continental neighbours or other European states. "So why hold us back in Europe," asked one senior Serbian official last year, "when we compare favourably to Bulgaria or Portugal?" The peoples of the Balkans are generous to a fault, and they have a great sense of humour (although when Yugoslavia broke up, it is said that the Croats got the coast and the Serbs got the humour); there is an innate intelligence in the peoples who want to be well educated (and many are); they have fertile agriculture, beautiful mountains, plains, and seas; and there are real natural resources to nurture and exploit. There is much to be said for the Western Balkans. What has led to the current situation of seeming political impasse 20 years after the Dayton Agreement brought a ceasefire, if not lasting peace, to Bosnia and Hercegovina?

The impact of physical geography

In 1910, Harry de Windt, a British travel writer and Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, wrote a book called *Through Savage Europe*. He begins Chapter 1 thus: "Why savage Europe?" asked a friend who recently witnessed my departure from Charing Cross to the Near East. "Because," I replied, "the term accurately describes the wild and lawless countries between the Adriatic and the Black Seas." Today they are definitely less wild, and less lawless, but the Western Balkans remain an unsolved European riddle, and in our lifetimes they have displayed real savagery. In 1992, Lord Owen, erstwhile British Foreign Secretary, was based in Geneva as peace negotiator for the emerging Yugoslav crisis. He was given a book by some Yugoslav academics with maps of the region through history. At the end was a blank map with the instruction: “Now draw your own.” If you turn a map of Europe, without borders, on its head (Figure 1), you will see how the Balkans are a fundamental part of Europe and part of the funnel that leads to the more prosperous West, where fertile geography and mild climate have enabled prosperity and acted as a magnet to those who are less well off.

The land on which we live has always shaped us. It has shaped the wars, the power, the politics and social development of the peoples that inhabit nearly every part of the earth […] The physical realities that underpin national and international politics are too often disregarded both in writing about history and in contemporary reporting of world affairs. Geography is clearly a fundamental part of the why as well as the what.7

In the age of modern travel and instant communication, it is easy to underestimate the impact of geography. In the Western Balkans from the rivers Danube and Sava, the Slavonian plains to the Black Mountains of Montenegro and the Adriatic Sea, physical boundaries have separated clans and tribes for thousands of years. They have prevented armies from extending empires, and they have shaped hardened brigands and wealthy farmers. Above all (until 2015), they limited mass movement of peoples, but those who did migrate settled in villages and valleys barely eking out a subsistence living and with little or no education. The Renaissance and Industrial Revolution largely passed them by. Armies did not. The clash between Ottoman and Habsburg left the Balkans as the front line, the Krajina (a Slavic toponym, meaning “frontier” or “march”). We underestimate the deep cultural and behavioural traits that geographical location leave in the DNA of people. Borders are man-made impositions. Yet local population tends to seek to get round such dictates. Communities form across rivers as trading posts are established. The exits to mountain passes provide both fortresses and settlements. Conquering armies leave behind Counts and Janissaries. Distant capitals make rival claims. In the past Vienna and Istanbul, and today Brussels and Moscow. Look at the black mountains of Montenegro from the Adriatic, or from the Kosovo plains, and imagine what travel was like before planes, tarmac roads, and tunnels.

Geography hampered mobility and created micro-cultures and dialectical differences. On a topographical map of the Balkans, today’s borders do not always follow geographically natural boundaries (Figure 2). Equally if there were an academically agreed map on a linguistic lay down of languages and dialects, it would show that these follow neither topographical features nor current state borders. The borders on a political map are determined by a myriad of identifying factors of which topography and language play their part, but it takes human intervention to create history.

History

Warren Christopher, the US Secretary of State during the Dayton Accords, noted a few years later: “When talking about a current event involving the Balkans, the story can seldom begin with what is happening today. Revisiting history is a prerequisite for getting to the point where something contemporary can be described or discussed. The Dayton peace conference is no exception; the past is essential prologue.”

Twenty years after the Dayton Accords, the conference itself has become part of history. Although Dayton was about bringing the war in Bosnia to an end, it remains the determining factor for the complexity of the current Bosnian constitutional arrangements. Any hope that local politicians would find a way to govern in the interests of all peoples remains lost in historical reverberations. The recent guilty judgement at The Hague tribunal against Radovan Karadzic, Bosnian Serb war time leader, and the acquittal of Serbian radical Vojislav Seselj have re-awakened regional enmities and historical perceptions. It is often hard for external observers to understand the

psyche of Balkan politicians. “So what lies behind the West’s apparent demonization of the Serbs? The Yugoslav President’s (Milosević) ability to whip up Serb nationalism to a battle-ready fervour is part of the reason but he could not have done this without realising that there is something in the Serb psyche which never flinches from a fight, at the same time revelling in the role of victim.”

A British Foreign Office Minister on being briefed on the nuances of the Serbian sense of victimhood said: “The Serbs should not think like that.” He was right, but he missed the point. In the Balkans, history and myth are intertwined. Britain loves dates: 1066, 1314, 1815, 1966. In Serbia, there is one date: 1389. The battle of Kosovo Polje. It is the graffiti date for nationalists. It is a battle lost, etched on the Serbian soul, that forever portrays them as victims, while winners in Heaven above. “What other country would make a national virtue out of catastrophic defeat? The Serbs under King Lazar, were vanquished by Turks […] yet the clash is hailed as a shining moment in the nation’s history.”

This is portrayed in a Serbian film from 1989 that was full of Christian symbolism: The Battle of Kosovo Polje. It portrays King Lazar as Jesus and Knez Vuk Branković as Judas. At the very beginning of the film, a traveller asks a monk: “Does this path lead to Kosovo?” The monk replies “Yes and that one too, and the one from which you came. What are you wondering? Every path leads there. There is no other path today in Serbia than the one leading to Kosovo or from Kosovo.” It was in 1989, 600 years after this defining battle, that Slobodan Milosević in a commemorative speech (that had consequences he, perhaps, did not intend) spoke of the importance of Serbian unity while recognising

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9 Eve-Ann Prentice, One Woman’s War (London: Duckworth, 2000), 57.
10 Prentice, One Woman’s War, 57.
the constituent peoples of both Serbia and Yugoslavia. The alleged effect was a re-awakening of nationalism rather than a socialist idyll. “He vowed that after this things would change. Serbs would be nobody’s vassals. He did not exclude the possibility of fresh Serbian battles, if it proved necessary.”

Using history to justify contemporary political action is a matter of selecting the bits of history that suit your objectives. In the run up to the 1996 elections in Croatia, the Croats in Knin, the main town in the barren Krajina area of Croatia, once partly occupied by Serbs, but cleansed in Operation Storm in 1995, argued that Croatia had a thousand year right to a kingdom because of the 10th century King Tomislav of Knin. It is, of course, equally possible to argue that Italy had a two thousand year right as the successor state to the Roman Empire. Presidents Milosević of Serbia, Tuđman of Croatia, Izetbegović of Bosnia, and others sought to use history to put their respective causes in the ascendant, together they managed to lead a country, that many thought would be the most ready of the former communist states for a European future in 1989, to the destructive Balkan Wars of the 1990s.

For many Serbs, it was, and remains, their hegemonic right to rule over Kosovo as it was there that Saint Sava established the autocephalous Serbian Orthodox Church in 13th century. The physical evidence of long-established Serbian roots is there in the monasteries of Peć and Dečani among others. “In the south, in Kosovo, the medieval churches of the Serbian kings are like life rafts in the sea of history.”

A few questions, therefore, are: Does national patrimony confer territorial rights? What role does a date in history play in staking a claim? (Today just think of Kyiv as the cradle of Russian civilisation.) What role does religion play in shaping national identity? For the Serbian Orthodox Church, recognising Kosovo’s independence is seemingly impossible.

So when the 1990s’ leadership of Yugoslavia chipped away at the glue of “brotherhood and unity” that Tito had imposed on the county, they used both geography and history to stake their claims. Yugoslavia, formally the Kingdom of Croats, Serbs, and Slovenes, consisted of six republics and two autonomous regions, Vojvodina and Kosovo. It was not a natural construct: from the Napoleonic wars to the Balkans wars and the World Wars, all ensured that borders were never constant (Figure 3).

There were simmering tensions that lay beneath the veneer of an enlightened socialist federal state that ought to have embraced the consequences of the fall of the Berlin Wall with vigour and optimism, but instead pressed the self-destruct button. In 1991, as today, international attention was focused on the Middle East, perhaps distracted, by Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, but also by the political turmoil in Moscow. So when the first shots were fired in Yugoslavia, there was wishful thinking that it was a little local trouble. Western logic still saw the potential for Yugoslavia, while Balkan emotion played on nationalism that had emerged during the 20th century after more than 500 years of Ottoman rule over most of the region.

It is hard, especially for a local, to find a truly objective historical account of Balkan History, or one where the facts where presented cannot be interpreted in a myriad of ways. “The history we learned — which was not in fact history at all — made it easier for us to abandon reason in favour of pure emotions.”

However, recalling recent history is necessary in order to grasp the enormity of what is needed to maintain a peaceful future. The issue today is one of European values and the “realpolitik” of ethnic minorities. It is easy to forget that the break-up of Yugoslavia did not begin in Sarajevo. Slovenia was 97% Slovene, with a distinct language. A couple of shots and a few surrounded barracks and Milosević let the Slovenes go within 10 days. Croatia on the other hand was only 78% Croat. The Serbian minority held the majority in four distinct areas, Eastern and Western Slavonia and two parts of the Krajina.

13 Bato Tomasevic, Life and Death in the Balkans (London: Hurst, 2008), 455.
16 Drakulic, They would never hurt a fly, 13.
Croatia’s President, Franjo Tudjman, prided himself on being a historian, his theory was that a state could cope with a 5% minority. So what he needed was to push Serbs, Bosniaks, Slov•enes, and Roma across Croatian borders. By contrast, what the Serbs in Croatia wanted was somewhere between either being part of Greater Serbia or a large dose of autonomy. While the UN was coping with the aftermath of the first Gulf War and sending peace keepers to Croatia, so Bosnia and Hercegovina began to implode. It is worth reminding ourselves of the complex ethnic make-up of Bosnia, where neither geography nor lines in the map can form clear boundaries. There is a question that could be posed by any group of peoples, and set out by former British Ambassador to Bosnia and later Serbia, Charles Crawford. “Why should we be your minority when you can be our minority?” The Bihać pocket (top left in Figure 4) in Bosnia exemplifies this as well as any other ethnic area surrounded by boundaries or other ethnicities. It could be Gračanića in Kosovo, Kumanovo in Macedonia, or any number or towns and municipalities where drawing a line of homogeneity, for the purpose of governance, is pointless and only possible through what has become known as ethnic cleansing. Yet it is this minority question that is at the heart of any potential future conflict. Does a Serb in Kosovo, a Croat in Bosnia, an Albanian in Macedonia, a Hungarian in Serbia, a Roma in Montenegro, or a Greek in Albania have the sense of belonging, of representation that gives confidence that there is no discrimination, or that family traditions will be respected? Do they care? What defines their identity or life priorities? Who do they vote for? Does their vote count? If it doesn’t, what do they do? If they rebel and start shooting, or threaten breaking away, how does the majority react? Too often, not able to win the moral argument, the answer is to use force.

Confronting aggression

A question that resonates today is how the international community responds when violence erupts inside a state. It was the destruction of the Eastern Slavonian town of Vukovar in 1991 that brought the full horror of the impending humanitarian disaster to our Western screens. Europe
previricated and procrastinated and the fighting factions entrenched themselves. Worthy declarations by western politicians of the need for peace, agreed by all member states, may make politicians feel that they are doing the right thing, but they are ignored by the fighters on the ground. The warring politicians have to receive the international special representatives such as former British Foreign Secretaries Lord Carrington, David Owen and former US Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, but they merely use these meetings to get their position across rather than seek mediation. A former US official recalls: “I remember well the 1990–91–92 period and can say with 100% certainly as I was part of the inner circle working on these issues — NO ONE in any Western government was willing to even consider the use of military force or any sort of armed element as peacekeepers as the predictions made a few years earlier by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (that is the only paper that I know which has been made public\(^\text{17}\)) came true. It is fascinating to me that in this case our intelligence agency, acting on its own, very accurately predicted what was going to happen and was totally ignored. While in the case of Iraq our agencies were pressured to

develop intelligence which was flawed and unreliable and that was used to justify our intervention. I do think that before fighting began that the Western response had a chance, just a chance to prevent it through a strong show of willingness to use force if any side became violent.”

So what is a believable commensurate response to the use of force? Would any show of force by the West in 1991 have been a deterrent to the paramilitary groups and politicians as his email suggests? The fact is that all too often in the international community we fail to show significant, united, collective resolve. Our politicians dither in international fora, appoint international special representatives, impose sanctions but do not really threaten any credible response. However, it is so easy to write this with hindsight, to use counter “factuals” or hypotheticals to pose an alternative solution. The past thirty years have seen intervention in a number of states. Some successful and some not. British Prime Minister Tony Blair had (in opposition) observed peace brought to Bosnia through an air campaign with no military losses, and then, when Prime Minister, saw the Serbs retreat from Kosovo. In 2000, British troops successfully used force in Sierra Leone. Is it surprising that he subsequently applied the same model to Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya? Brendan Simms in his book Unfinest Hour argues that British well-meaning procrastination and obstruction prevented an earlier resolution to the Bosnian crisis. We will never know what might have been had we intervened earlier, but ultimately intervention in Bosnia and later Kosovo did lead to ceasefires. What we have learned is that one intervention model does not fit all. We know too that any intervention needs better post-intervention planning. In this respect, the Balkans has not really been a total success either.

Sanctions

For when wars break out, an international response is to impose and then strengthen sanctions. There are examples where sanctions have worked and those where they have failed. If you put sanctions on poor states, they have an impact, but they do not convince governments to come to the negotiating table with any degree of urgency. States turn in on themselves, become protective, and the population do not rise up against their leaders. Life is a daily struggle and sanctions busting becomes an organised activity with state compliance. In essence, sanctions create criminal states. States endorse, support, and participate in smuggling of oil, cigarettes, food. Organised crime thrives and the State turns a blind eye. This goes on year after year and then, after the West has been forced to use force, or finally a peaceful solution to the political problem is resolved, there is an expectation that a corrupt free government and civil society will emerge like a miracle, not out of the ashes but from a firm foundation of criminal bedrock. Now criminality and brigandage are not new to the Balkans. The clan structures of Albania and Montenegro have for centuries led to a belief that the law plays no part in clan life. The clan comes first. Politicians have been either in the pay, or have owed a debt to criminal groups. Montenegro became, perhaps, the most prominent in the headlines with speed boats crossing the Adriatic loaded with cigarettes. Yes, they were breaking international law, but how else was an economy that was already at rock bottom going to survive? Now in the West, our politicians and diplomats say to those on whom sanctions have been imposed: “admit you are wrong and come to the negotiating table and we will lift sanctions if you meet our demands.” Sanctions often make Western politicians feel that they are doing something about a problem and that the politicians, businessmen, or oligarchs are being punished. Yet they continue in power and the people suffer. The political propaganda of the state blames the West for the population’s ills, and there are few mechanisms for an opposition to challenge the perceived wisdom. Sanctions are a two-edged sword and leave a legacy of criminality that it is difficult for new democratic institutions to shake off. When sanctions are lifted, Western institutions then put in place strict conditions for investment which in turn leads to the failure of “Liberal Imperialism.”

18 Former US Official, Private email exchange with the author discussing the effectiveness of Western Balkans policy, October 2015.
19 Brendan Simms, Unfinest Hour: Britain and the Destruction of Bosnia (London: Allen Lane, 2001), 349.
Liberal imperialism

The West in recent decades has shown a desire to intervene to change other countries political systems, or halt conflict, but is reluctant fully to impose that change for fear of being accused of colonialism. Thus there is an initial refusal to use force in the first instance (because nobody wants to go to war), and then when force is used and peace imposed assumptions are made. There is a tendency to assume that the peoples of a country want to live like in a western image and will automatically understand what is expected of them, without international administrations having to put in time, resources, and effort to effect lasting change. Look at the centuries of democracy, and decades of peace in Western Europe, and the assumption is made that the rest of the world, let alone the European continent, want what the West has and will learn. Too many assumptions are made about human psychology, about electoral behaviour, and about politicians’ ability and willingness to lead.

Why are Western politicians and commentators surprised when their sensible and fair peace proposals are rejected? Why is there surprise when populations vote in nationalist and/or corrupt politicians? In Germany after the Second World War, the first elections were 4 years after the end of the war and there were clear restrictions on who could stand for election. Yet in the Balkans attempts at both peace plans and post-conflict elections have left the West powerless, and the local politicians struggling to form meaningful executive government. This does not mean that there are not politicians with vision who are prepared to work for the greater good, but they are shackled by the constraints of raw history, corruption, and a lack of sufficient numbers of capable politicians and civil servants able to deliver the deep reforms required. In Bosnia in the Office of the High Representative, the international Contact Group gave itself the powers to intervene but, Paddy Ashdown aside, few have been able to exercise leadership and authority that would be in the interests of the country. The current incumbent, Valentin Inzko, looks like the proverbial “emperor with no clothes.” He is deeply knowledgeable and completely without the authority to exercise strategic leadership. It was only ten months after Dayton that Bosnia held elections that served to entrench nationalist divisions and has led to the “democratic” stalemate of today. How can people, in a few months, absorb the implications of democracy after decades of communism culminating in years of conflict?

Weak institutions

The West rightly heralds the increase of democratic states in the world, providing of course that those who are elected reflect the Western liberal democratic standards that our peoples have learned to enjoy. Western diplomats and experts are at a loss to know how to react when the electorate do not elect the “right” people. Often interlocutors in the Western Balkans talk with huge reverence about how lucky Britain is to have its centuries of democratic tradition. The simple fact is that there are insufficient capable people in the Western Balkans with the right skills and mind-set able to run local administrations, let alone central government. This means that even if a Prime Minister pulls a reform leader he, or she, finds it difficult to engage the gears of change. There is a latent communist gene that seems to plague civil servants not just in the Western Balkans but in wider Eastern Europe. There is little delegation. Even the smallest decisions go right to the top. Yet there is no accountability. Indeed in Serbian there is no word for accountability. There are too many people in the Western Balkans waiting to be told what to do and, as a direct consequence of the acute brain drain in the region,21 not enough competent people telling them what to do and also because it is difficult for talented people to break into politicised administrations. But if local institutions are weak, so are the international ones. Billions of dollars and Euros have been squandered by the international community over the last twenty five years. There is an over emphasis on inputs and not enough focus on outcomes. The short-term cycle of

international appointments means experience is wasted. The locals have also become adept at saying what the international community want to hear, taking the money and doing nothing. So why do they not learn? It comes down to cultural norms and values. The EU, or the US, cannot impose them overnight and certainly not on countries suffering from collective post-traumatic stress.

**Collective post-traumatic stress disorder**

Post-traumatic stress disorder has become overused in everyday life to refer to some societal issues that would not reach a truly scientific definition. In societies trying to rebuild after war, the relativity of experience is important. “It is not often publicly acknowledged that life after war can be as difficult and as haunting as it was during war time.”

Many Serbs today see only Serbia as the victim of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) aggression in 1999, able to blame their failure on what are euphemistically described as “external factors.” If you are a Serb from Belgrade, and were not part of the Yugoslav Army or a paramilitary group, your most traumatic experience of war is NATO's cruise missiles destroying infrastructure and selected targets. Despite comparably little collateral damage, there were civilian casualties from children to journalists. When such attacks happen, as with sanctions, the population turn inwards to protect themselves. One locally employed Bosnian Serb working for the international community in Banja Luka said on the morning of the first NATO bombings in 1999: “I have turned from multi-nationalist to nationalist overnight”; and this was someone who a month or so before had been called an “international whore” by a waiter in a restaurant. The ordinary person, in times of fear does not rationalise, and say: “NATO are bombing us because we are killing, or have killed, each other.” The propaganda being fed them is their reality. “During and after the 1999 bombing campaign, rumours grew fat on the state’s manipulation and control of the media […] Many were convinced for example that President Bill Clinton’s daughter had converted to Islam, hence the US President’s support from Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo.”

How did Western experts expect people to vote after they have recently experienced the hell of being bombed? What was in their memory? It was neither the beauty of Yugoslavia nor Western notions of civil society.

**Identity confusion**

At times of stress, there is a tendency for human beings to become introverted to be closer to where they feel safe, resorting to a single identity. “The incitement to ignore all affiliations and loyalties other than those emanating from one restrictive identity can be deeply delusive and contribute to social tension.”

For violence in former Yugoslavia to erupt people needed to protect one identity or other; identities shaped from their parents’ and grandparents’ bloody past. Identities that were not Yugoslav, and not European, but Croat, Serbian, Bosniak, Kosovar, Macedonian, and Montenegrin. Identities with complex origins that were simplified in a need to survive, but awakened by leaders who exploited the media and the levers of state allowing emotion to overcome logic. It was “also about the painful processes of acquiring new, and for many […] in former Yugoslavia, unwelcome and unwanted identities”.

They were confused identities shaped by history, language, and geography but ruined by power, falsehood, corruption, money, religion, and nationalism.

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23 Prentice, *One Woman’s War*, 57.
A European future

As the Western Balkans are coming to terms with recently formed identities, old Europe is facing its own identity crisis. Nevertheless, a common European identity of shared values is seen by the European Commission and some member states as the best hope for the future. “A European Union without the Western Balkans is incomplete.”

The “Berlin Process” of annual summits holds regional politicians to account for working individually and regionally towards European accession. However, there are neither the external human nor financial resources to effect the sort of reform required. This limits the options. The current “let’s muddle on” approach can be summarised as follows: there is no current fighting; the politicians say they want to join Europe; the European accession process is tough and buys time. Stable instability is fine, violent instability is possible but is a long shot. This approach lacks real vision. It is an approach based on limited resources and hope. It does not learn from history but rather assumes that the Balkans will sort themselves out. One could argue that as each year goes by without serious conflict, the approach is working. However, if the Balkans are on a geographical earthquake fault line, we know that they remain on a geopolitical fault line too. As with earthquakes, predicting the location and strength of any future political upheaval is no easy task. The point is that we have the ability to prevent geopolitical earthquakes, but only with preparation.

The current European vision has its good points. All six non-EU countries of the Western Balkans (Bosnia and Hercegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia from former Yugoslavia plus Albania) aspire to join. In many ways, Yugoslavia as a loose federal construct offered not much different a solution to that which Europe offers, and it failed. Yet there is a need for an overarching governance structure to avoid future conflict. There is an irony (before the possibility of closing off borders and restricting movement), in that all the Western Balkans’ nations talk of joining Europe but the tensions and divisions of the break-up of Yugoslavia linger below the surface. Full membership of the EU means freedom of movement, thus breaking down the man-made borders that the break-up of Yugoslavia created. Thus whether Kosovo is part of Serbia or independent should, in theory, be largely irrelevant. Both countries recognise independently the economic necessity of membership but not the true political benefits. There should be a greater focus on the peace building aspects of the EU. The danger is that the current boundaries of the EU around the Balkans are recreating the Habsburg Krajina, reinforcing historical fault lines. There is, of course, a counter argument. There are those who believe that hard fought for independence should be maintained with pride and that Europe is not the solution. There is a Slavic and religious affiliation for the Serbs with Moscow. Putin’s popularity ratings in Serbia are higher than Merkel’s. Religiously minded Bosniaks are drawn eastwards to Turkey or Saudi Arabia, while the more secular might still identify with Europe. Thus even with the ethnic groupings that make up the region, there are differing approaches making the formulation of a coherent policy difficult for politicians, be they regional or international. Europe offers, with the rigours of a properly administered accession process, a mechanism to establish common standards of reform and good governance. Washington would welcome Europe, for once, solving its own problems. For Europe itself, the refugee crisis (and the responsible response of, for example, the Serbian government to it) has highlighted the importance of the Western Balkans for our security. It is in Europe’s interests to build capacity, opportunity, and the rule of law such that eventual membership would not be a risk but rather a coherent convergence of ideal values. However, even the locals can lose faith and patience (Figure 5).

Reducing enmity

For true lasting peace to be sustained, there is a need for societal reconciliation. It is insufficient for leaders to sit round an EU negotiating table. There is currently a surge of Yugo-nostalgia, but this

26 Sebastian Kurz, Austrian Foreign Minister 26 April 2016 speaking to the Vienna public panel debate, under the Berlin Process for the Western Balkans.
tends to look backwards through a rosy tint and not forwards to focus on what brings us together in 21st century Europe. Attempts to draft common histories in Bosnia and Herzegovina have been tried since 2003. Many young are being brought up across the region, both at home and school, to have no respect for their neighbouring countries. Myths are being created about the recent war let alone battles from 600 years ago. An intelligent Serb last year stated that the massacre at Srebrenica was an international fabrication. The international community cannot impose “Truth and Reconciliation,” but it does not help when resolutions are crafted in the UN that obsess on language and not on practical approaches. There will not be lasting reconciliation while National Security Strategies focus on narrow regional enmity. There is an issue in Europe in that National Security is a national competence and there is no effective peer review mechanism to reform Security Services, whose oversight is often weak and focused not on a clear national need but on raking over the coals of the past, or in some cases supporting corruption and organised crime.

National Security Strategy and Security Sector reform should be a strong focus of UK bilateral engagement, within an EU anti-corruption and good governance framework.

Institution building and tackling corruption

As “colonial” administration is impossible and there is insufficient capacity locally, we need a more structured approach to training and public servant development. It is not surprising that Serbian Prime Minister has sought help from Tony Blair Associates to focus on delivery or that the EU is funding multi-million Euro anti-corruption initiatives. It is an attempt to make the gears of government work. If we had had the imagination in 1995 to have created a University of Public Administration for Bosnia, we would now have 19 years’ worth of graduates. The Regional Public Administration Faculty in Danilovgrad, Montenegro, needs much more support (www.respaweb.eu).


There are many laudable projects run bilaterally but, as with the Western Balkans Investment Fund (www.wbif.eu), there is a need for a more focused co-ordinated approach across Europe to giving people the skills to run local administration in the interests of the citizen and not their pockets. The accession process on its own is insufficient. EU funds for external development should give far more to the priority of the Western Balkans and less to other parts of the world or neighbourhood countries. Focusing on the near abroad will strengthen European collective security.

There is a requirement for a much more concerted attempt at tackling corruption. In some cases, it is endemic from getting medical treatment to a child getting top marks at school, from registering a property to speeding fines. Patronage and nepotism is the Balkan rule not the European exception. There are lots of EU and UN initiatives; some good, some growing, but the cultural change required needs leadership and effective judicial systems. Some form of amnesty is required for low-level petty corruption up to 500 euros, and then to allow for a clean start when all those instances of small corruption are clearly outlawed and stigmatised with concomitant fines. Larger corruption requires stiffer sentences. The recent corruption scandals in world sport have only shown that this is not a Balkan issue, but one does not have to bribe to get a blood test in the UK or to be seen by a specialist. School teachers will not write glowing reports in the UK because they have received a bribe. There is a need for cross border anti-corruption judicial systems such that a European or international judge can sit objectively over disputes.

Degrees taught in English

One of the biggest barriers to successful reconciliation and European integration is language; not just the dialectical differences of Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, and Montenegrin but Macedonian, Albanian, Greek, and Hungarian. The issues of minorities will never fully be solved without a neutral language. Over time, the universities of the Balkans should adopt the Dutch model of teaching degrees in English, recognising that a language of limited reach disables global engagement. The benefits of a common language at degree level would allow administration and business to work far more efficiently cross borders. There may be a risk of exacerbating a brain drain, but the outcome of offering a common administrative language would create regional employment and lessen tensions.

Plan properly for a larger Europe

European values will only survive if we work together. Much of the good work of Europe goes unheralded from infrastructure funding to small business support. The EU is bad at public relations, and the debate around the upcoming British referendum has been narrow in focus, touching on the negative aspects of expansion and not the potential for long term security of Europe’s south eastern flank. The migrant crisis has shown that the Balkans are both geographically and politically part of Europe. They need to be part of European governance, as part of our collective security, both to avoid internal strife and to bolster our own defences. However, a European Union of 34 countries, without further reform, is not going to function effectively. The 2014 EU commission was right to say that there would be no expansion of the EU during the course of the current Commission up to 2019. With migrants, Ukraine, the continuing debt crisis, and the threat of Brexit, there is enough on Europe’s plate for the immediate future. Europe has learned that the accession process should not be rushed and that there should not be expedient political fixes. Yet Europe offers genuine hope of lasting change to embedded Balkan cultures, by introducing clear reform processes with the aim that politicians do not act out of narrow personal interest, or limited ethnic interest, but in the wider interests of their populations and of Europe. If we are to avoid another Balkan geopolitical earthquake, the European mantle needs to be in place. Scepticism of the EU let alone an enlarged EU is rife but in twenty years’ time, at Dayton 40, what will be the factors that ensure that there has not been another conflict in the Western Balkans that has had an impact on our own security and resources. As one Croatian official put it last year: the tinder is still
dry, but the fuse is longer than it was. We need either to continue to lengthen the fuse, or take it away altogether. This can only be achieved through shared values.

In conclusion, twenty years after Dayton we are a long way from establishing the sort of lasting peace that Western Europe enjoys. The approach of letting the Western Balkans politicians and peoples work out the future for themselves is not leading to the degree of change required. Conflict is likely in the next twenty years if a Western European model of reconciliation is not ensured such as happened between Germany and France after Second World War, neither of whose national characteristics have been damaged by the European project. National interests can thrive within Europe, but for the Western Balkans to be truly part of the European project there needs to be a more activist approach to training the leaders of the future, to bringing about reconciliation by focusing on what is common and not what divides. Wouldn’t it be good if a Prime Minister of Serbia was able to say: “Serbia and Kosovo share a common European destiny that recognises the need to build a peaceful future of co-existence. Serbian patrimony in Kosovo is best protected not by the use of force but by mutual respect and the freedom of movement for peoples and goods. On the day that both Kosovo and Serbia are granted membership of the EU then Serbia will recognise Kosovo’s independence.”? Wouldn’t it be good if the leaders of the Bosnian parties acted in the interests of their peoples and said: “More than twenty years after Dayton we need to put the horrors of war and mutual recrimination behind us. We will now strive to improve the lives of the ordinary citizens of Bosnia by actively pursuing the European ideal that will allow all people, of whatever background, to live in a secure framework and rule of law. We will begin by adopting the common history curriculum [...]”? Wouldn’t it be good if Europe took an even greater concerted and focused approach to assisting the Western Balkans in realising a common vision, and did not assume that the politicians could do this on their own? This is a huge challenge for Europe, but to steal a phrase we are in danger of sleepwalking29 into a future Balkan conflict.

Another congress?

On 23 June, Britain will vote on whether to stay in the EU. The deal on the table was negotiated through bursts of shuttle diplomacy and a couple of long nights at a three day European summit. Even with modern communications, we need more than quick fire summits to resolve the complex issues of the day. The Congress of Vienna in 1815 that set out European peace in the post-Napoleonic era took nine months. The Congress of Berlin in 1878 that rebalanced Europe after the Russo–Turkish war took a month. Both Congresses sought to use diplomatic negotiation to balance competing interests in Europe in 19th century. The two World Wars and break-up of Yugoslavia in the 20th century showed that efforts to bring about lasting peace rarely last a generation. Yet Europe (Yugoslavia and Ukraine aside) has survived in peace for 70 years. For this to be achieved, national interests have been sublimated to international ones (while not losing national stereotypes or identities). There are plenty of unresolved issues in Europe from the future of Eurozone governance, to non-Eurozone engagement to the future of Ukraine (with or without Crimea), to the future of the Western Balkans and the threat of the escalation of the Syrian conflict to Turkey (ethnic and sectarian). History shows that nothing is set in stone. If Europe is now at a time of diplomatic rebalancing, then the substantial and sustained 19th century model of a Congress could create the dialogue that leads to a 100 years of peace in Western Europe, and 50 years of peace for the countries of the Western Balkans. Rather than looking at trouble spots in isolation, today’s power states and groupings as well as individual states, civil society, and business can convene to find sensible, non-violent approaches to a myriad of differences. A Europe of distinct identities but shared values and approaches to good governance offers a better hope of sustained peace than any of the nationalist options. Whether you vote for or against Britain to stay in the EU on 23 June 2016, Britain cannot ignore continental European instability. The Congress of Belgrade 2017 anyone?

Supporting material


Funding sources

None.

Conflict of Interests

Anthony Monckton is a former British diplomat and founder of ViennEast, a risk advisory consultancy based in London and Vienna.