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Progress is possible in the Balkans - why can't the EU push for it ?

By Marko Attila Hoare, 30th June 2010

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

1. The recent discovery in Serbia of a mass grave containing the bodies of ethnic Albanians; the definite discrediting of the Kosovo Liberation Army 'organ trafficking' claims; the recognition by Belgrade that the war in Bosnia was an 'international armed conflict'; and above all the resolution of the Slovenian-Croatian border dispute - all are evidence of the capacity of the Balkans for progress.

2. Nevertheless, the EU's failure to overcome Greece's resistance to Macedonia's membership, and failure to take definite steps toward

bringing Turkey into the Union, may have catastrophic consequences for both the Balkans and the Middle East.

3. The UK must lobby within the EU for a change of policy on both issues, or we will be left facing the disastrous consequences of our allies' misguided policies.

There are at least two reasons why the last two months have been good for the Balkans.

The first is that what is left of the propaganda edifice constructed by the Serb nationalists during the wars of the 1990s has received three heavy blows. Serb nationalists and their Western lobbyists spent the best part of these wars trying to convince the world that Serb war-crimes were mostly the fabrication of a hostile international media. For example, apologists such as [John Pilger](#) have long claimed that mass graves of Kosovo Albanians were as non-existent as Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction, and that not enough Albanian bodies have been discovered to support the figure of approximately 10,000 Albanians killed by Serbian forces in 1998-1999. Yet on 10 May of this year, Serbia's War Crimes Prosecution Office announced that a [mass grave](#), thought to contain the bodies of about 250 ethnic Albanians, was discovered at Raska in southwestern Serbia, near the border with Kosova. The slow but steady location and identification of the remains of the victims of the wars are important not only for the relatives of the dead, but for making the publics of the region – and particularly the Serbian public – aware of the incontrovertible reality of the war-crimes.

Another favourite tactic of the Serb-nationalists propagandists was to muddy the water, by arguing that Croatian, Bosnian, Kosova Albanian and NATO forces were as guilty of atrocities as the Serb forces, or even more so. Perhaps the most graphically gruesome assertion used to support this argument was that the Kosova Liberation Army was guilty of systematically removing and trafficking the internal organs of their Serb captives – a rumour that was started by Carla del Ponte, the maverick former chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia,

then eagerly seized upon by the water-muddiers. Yet shortly after the discovery of the Raska mass grave, the BBC [reported](#) that ‘Three parallel international investigations, by war crimes investigators from Serbia, the European Union, and the Council of Europe, have failed to uncover any evidence that the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) trafficked the organs of captives, according to sources close to each investigation.’ Although the KLA did commit atrocities – as all national-liberation movements that resort to armed struggle do – the myth that its atrocities represented a degree of evil equivalent to the Milosevic regime’s systematic ethnic-cleansing of hundreds of thousands of its own citizens has now been laid to rest.

The third blow against Serb-nationalist propaganda was a spectacular own goal. Ever since 1992, Serb nationalists claimed that the war in Bosnia was not a war of aggression waged by Serbia against its neighbour, but a ‘civil war’ between the Bosnian Serbs, Croats and Muslims, in which Serbia merely assisted the Bosnian Serbs. However, Serbia is currently attempting to secure the extradition of former Bosnian vice-president Ejup Ganic from the UK to Serbia to face spurious ‘war-crimes’ charges, and in order to have the legal right to do this, it has had to accept that at the time of Ganic’s alleged crimes, in early May 1992, an [‘international armed conflict’](#) was taking place between Serbia and Bosnia. Thus, it has casually torpedoed the eighteen-year-old myth of a Bosnian ‘civil war’.

The steady collapse of Serb-nationalist wartime mythology in the light of new research and developments is part and parcel of the post-war normalisation of the Balkan region. It means a steadily greater awareness – in Serbia, in the Balkan region and in the world as a whole – of the true nature of the wars of the former Yugoslavia. These were wars for which a single regime – that of Slobodan Milosevic in Belgrade – was overwhelmingly to blame, and responsible for most of the killing. The more Serbia’s citizens become aware of this, the less inclined will they be to support aggressive policies reminiscent of Milosevic, while the more the international public becomes aware of it, the less inclined will the international community be to appease any further such policies. Belgrade’s ongoing attempt to have Ganic extradited is, of course, evidence that Serbia

has not completely turned its back on Milosevic's legacy, but the cup of reform is at least half full, and every myth demolished adds another drop.

The second, and more substantial reason why this has been a good period for the Balkans, is the belated [resolution](#) of the Slovenian-Croatian border dispute. In a referendum on 6 June, Slovenia's citizens voted 51.5%, in a turnout of just over 42%, to permit the border dispute to be resolved through international arbitration. The referendum result removes the last major obstacle to Croatia's membership of the EU, and marks a major step forward for the Euro-Atlantic integration of the former-Yugoslav region. Despite the low turnout, the referendum result indicates a degree of political maturity on the part of Slovenia's citizens. The Slovenian attempt to hold up the entire process of EU expansion in the Western Balkans to make a cheap territorial grab has proven extremely damaging to Slovenia's international standing, and damaging to the wellbeing of the entire region. In rejecting the siren call of nationalism made by the Slovenian opposition under Janez Jansa, in favour of harmony within the EU and the region, Slovenia's people demonstrated an admirable appreciation of where their national interest lies.

Readers might argue that Slovenia is not part of the Balkans, yet the country has recently [joined](#) a Balkan regional body, the Southeast European Cooperation Process (SEECP), that includes all the Balkan states except Kosovo, including Moldova and Turkey. Somewhat belatedly, given that the body was established in 1996 and its other members all joined by 2007. Despite their proudly felt Central European identity, the Slovenians realise their national interest lies in participating in and facilitating South East European regional cooperation. Their readiness settle their border dispute with Croatia on a fair basis may be linked to this perception.

The Slovenian case demonstrates that the states of the region are not immune to soft pressure from the international community, even if they do happen to be EU members. It provides a model for a possible resolution of another dispute arising from the break-up of Yugoslavia involving an EU member and a candidate country: the Greek-Macedonian 'name dispute'. EU and NATO members should put pressure on the parties to this dispute to permit it

to be settled by binding international arbitration, in the manner of the Slovenian-Croatian border dispute. With Greece in the throes of acute economic and social crisis, with its social capital expended and its international standing at an all-time low, an ideal opportunity exists to pressurise Greece to accept this. However, bizarre as it may seem to any rational person unaccustomed to the perverse ethics of the EU, the latter has rewarded Greece for its spectacular economic selfishness and irresponsibility with a still more **craven appeasement** of its anti-Macedonian nationalist policy.

The EU's failure to resolve the Greek-Macedonian conflict, despite ample opportunity, is contributing to the **deterioration** in relations between the political parties in Macedonia representing the country's two principle nationalities: the ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians. Ethnic-Albanian parties, who do not feel particularly committed to the country's constitutional name, are increasingly frustrated with the Macedonian government's failure to progress toward EU membership in light of Greece's veto. In a worse case scenario, this could lead to the collapse of the Macedonian state and a new regional conflagration, drawing in Macedonia's neighbours and potentially spreading to other Albanian-inhabited Balkan states. If this were to occur, the EU would have only itself to blame.

Thankfully, such a catastrophe does not appear imminent. The same cannot, unfortunately, be said for another consequence of EU vacillation: the alienation of Turkey from the Western alliance. Turkey's increasingly aggressive policy of Israel-baiting, manifested most spectacularly in its permitting of the Gaza aid flotilla to sail from its shores last month, with predictable bloody consequences, is the bastard child of the Franco-German-led policy of keeping Turkey out of the EU. Turkey's turn toward Iran and Syria and away from Israel cannot be excused, but it can be understood, as the rising Turkish regional superpower seeks to carve out a new, more Islamic and Middle Eastern role for itself in place of its denied EU role. Instead of being drawn into the club, where it would have to play by the rules, Turkey has been left outside, where it is increasingly going rogue.

It would not require superhuman efforts on the part of the UK and its allies to keep the Balkans on the straight and narrow. The region is slowly and unsteadily reforming, but faces a number of surmountable obstacles, which we are in a position to help it overcome. Weakened, discredited Greece could be pressurised to lift its veto on Macedonia's EU and NATO accession, and the EU member states could make a joint and unambiguous commitment to Turkish membership when certain conditions are met. The tragedy is that even these easy steps are blocked by the selfish and short-sighted interests of certain EU members, above all France and Germany. The UK needs to break ranks more openly with them with regard to both issues, and to campaign loudly and publicly for a change in EU policy. We must point out the potentially catastrophic consequences for Europe and the Middle East of abandoning Macedonia and Turkey, and say openly whose fault it will be if things go further wrong. We might offend our allies now, but that is preferable to having to clean up their mess tomorrow.

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