

The Balkans: A Region in Transition

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Essentially the Balkans remain under Western military control as the Europeans and Americans exercise a decisive political influence on the overall region. States like Kosovo, FYROM and Bosnia-Herzegovina have been spared the pain of war thanks to the presence of American and European troops while Yugoslavia, what remains of it, has almost imploded again. Moreover, if Montenegro is forced by the European Union to maintain a link to Serbia, the Yugoslav Federation will no longer exist for this link will really be a confederate one. Of course Serbia remains a tattered state after the war NATO led against it because of Kosovo. To make matters worse, Milosevic's arrest and his trial at The Hague have not helped Serbia get the economic aid expected. While retaining political influence on the region, the Americans are trying to disengage militarily but especially financially from the Balkans so that the Europeans can take over this responsibility.

In the current climate of poverty and social crisis, two movements have flourished: nationalism and organized crime. Not surprisingly, the societal structures continue disintegrating, especially in the breakaway republics of the former Yugoslavia but also in Albania. The situation is far more stable in Bulgaria, Romania and Slovenia; however, as long as instability persists in neighbouring regions, these countries suffer indirectly. Even Greece, a member of the European Union, has not been completely spared from this unstable situation.

In this issue of *Etudes helléniques-Hellenic Studies*, we present a special Balkans Feature comprised of four articles highlighting different problems in the region.

In the first article, George Stubos outlines the turbulent economic transition which the Balkans experienced after the Soviet Bloc

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disintegrated (1989-2002). The shift from a planned, centralized economy to a liberal or free market one was interrupted by the military conflicts arising when Yugoslavia broke up. The success of this transition remains uncertain and the litmus test will be the integration of several Balkan countries into the European Union.

Haralambos Kondonis describes the efforts of what is known as the Civil Society in the stabilization of the region and creation of various NGOs with the help of the Stability Pact. Greece has already participated in these efforts and is trying to help in the multilateral project referred to as the Stability Pact.

Jean Catsiapis analyses French policy on the Balkans throughout the twentieth century. Whereas Paris backed a large and powerful Serbia at the beginning of the century to counterbalance the German and Austro-Hungarian influence, within the last decade of this century, France had to resign itself to a disintegrating Yugoslavia and would exercise in Greece, once the second pillar of its policy in the Balkans, only limited influence.

Spyridon Sfetas details the political development of the FYROM after the recent bloody conflicts which shook the foundations of this country. His article describes essentially a mini-civil war between Albanians and Slavo-Macedonians.

Now, one could ask the question: Where is Greece in all that? Greece stands out as an oasis in a region jolted by a brutal process of economic change and democratization. As the only EU- and NATO-member, Greece could contribute to the stabilization, as well as the political and socio-economic development of the Balkans. However, when the socialist countries of the region crumbled, Athens was ill prepared to confront the situation and adapted to the new reality of the region with some difficulty. Obviously tense relations with Turkey and a redistribution in the balance of power among the major Western countries left Greece with a limited margin of manoeuvre when drafting a Balkan policy adapted to current circumstances. What made matters worse were the Macedonian issue regarding the name of

the country and the Albanian issue related to human rights violations among the Greek minority in Albania. Even today, despite normalized relations with all its Balkan neighbours, the prickly Macedonian name issue remains unresolved.

Although Greece could take this opportunity to provide an active presence in the Balkan countries and help in the reconstruction of the region, its presence remains rather modest. On top of some missteps in its regional policy, Athens is also lacking the economic means to take action. However, the main problem in Greek policy has been a lack of any overview of the region. Consequently, no coherent, balanced policy statement has ever been developed. Only lately has Greek foreign policy begun to overcome its structural weaknesses and attempted to adopt a broader view of the Balkans that might lead to more tangible results than in the past.

Right now, the Balkans region is in a stage of full-blown development. Their future depends on the dynamic spirit of the people, the wisdom with which they behave politically in order to overcome divisiveness and sterile conflicts, as well as the European Union's behaviour towards this region. As long as the Europeans can not define a truly united European policy for the Balkan region and continue to play the national interest card, as in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they will play second fiddle in an American imperial orchestra. The Balkans, whether one likes it or not, are part of Europe. The only way to avoid problems or conflicts from spilling over the borders of this region is European integration.