

The Balkan Summer of 2011

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“Turning point” has become somewhat of a cliché as a description of where a country or a region stands at a point in time. The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus said “you cannot step twice into the same stream” and, to be sure, life is the story of constant change and turns. Nonetheless, individuals and countries are occasionally confronted with choices so important that the course taken will likely determine subsequent events for years, even decades. Several of the countries of the Western Balkans face these kinds of decision in the summer of 2011, as does the European Union, and to some extent, the United States.

First, the exceptions. Slovenia, in the northwestern corner of the region, is solidly entrenched in NATO and the European Union. Once the most economically developed republic in the old Yugoslavia, it has retained that regional distinction twenty years into independence. Although the global financial and economic crisis has hit Slovenia hard, it is a member of the euro zone, and it continues to participate in Balkan peacekeeping and in the NATO operation in Afghanistan. In its vibrant democracy, which has seen orderly electoral changes of administrations, Slovenia’s populace has no hesitation about expressing discontent. In short, stable Slovenia is one of the success-stories of post-communist Europe. As it struggles to overcome its current economic difficulties, Ljubljana would not seem to be facing fundamental challenges.

Slovenia’s neighbor Croatia is also on a positive path. Unlike Slovenia, however, after the break-up of Yugoslavia, Croatia did not immediately embark upon a democratic course, voting instead for a semi-authoritarian HDZ government under its first President Franjo Tudjman, himself an actor in Yugoslavia’s demise. In fits and starts Zagreb eventually overcame this legacy. Civil society gradually gained strength and contributed to the opposition’s electoral victory in 2000. Out of power, the HDZ began to reform itself. Concurrently, Croatian President Stjepan “Stipe” Mesić, who had left the HDZ in the mid-1990s, proved to be a mature, stabilizing figure for the entire region. The current President Ivo Josipović has made a special effort at reconciliation with wartime enemy Serbia. Croatia joined NATO in 2009, and on June 24, 2011, the EU gave Croatia the green light toward membership, pending unanimous ratification by its twenty-seven members, with accession expected in 2013. Croatia’s domestic political scene is lively - some would characterize it as turbulent – but the country has made a definitive move toward the West.

Little Montenegro, since peacefully gaining its independence from an EU-imposed union with Serbia via a referendum in 2006, has made significant political and economic strides. Milo Djukanović, the “father” of Montenegrin independence, resigned from the prime minister’s post at the end of 2010 but continues to wield great influence. A candidate both for NATO and EU membership, Podgorica has integrated its minorities, in this case Albanians and Slavic Muslims, into national life better than any other country in the Western Balkans. Much of the large segment of the citizenry that self-identifies as Serb, however, remains lukewarm or even opposed to Montenegrin statehood. Winning over more of the Serb population and implementing rule-of-law and anti-corruption reforms constitute the greatest challenges for the pro-Western government of the young, technocratic Prime Minister Igor Lukšić.

Conditions elsewhere in the region are not so clear-cut. Macedonia remains embroiled in a destructive and unnecessary dispute with Greece over the country's name. Greece has been the more unreasonable party, but arrogance, obstinacy, and downright childishness have characterized the behavior of both sides. When Skopje appears prepared for serious negotiations, Athens demurs, and vice-versa. The latest installment of the psycho-drama has the economically embattled Greek Prime Minister George Papandreou seemingly ready to deal, while newly re-elected Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski is more concerned with erecting a giant Alexander-like equestrian statue calculated to enrage Athens than in settling the name issue, which is blocking his country's immediate entry to NATO and eventually to the EU. Meanwhile, Macedonia's economy is stagnant, and its sizeable Albanian minority, not yet on an equal footing with the Slavic majority, is restive. Gruevski must make a decision whether he wants to pursue a populist policy for domestic political ends or act in a statesmanlike manner in order to move Macedonia forward.

The two majority-Albanian countries of the Western Balkans, Kosovo and Albania, face multiple challenges. During the first decade of the century Albania made political and economic progress and upgraded its armed forces, enabling it to join NATO in 2009. Membership in the alliance did not cure the country's persistently toxic political culture, which last winter degenerated into street riots. The country's public life seems nearly paralyzed due to an ongoing, bitter rivalry between veteran politician and Prime Minister Sali Berisha and Socialist Party leader Edi Rama. As in neighboring Macedonia, adult behavior is desperately needed. Albania's leaders must choose between personal feuding and the national interest.

Kosovo, in its fourth year of independence, still does not exercise effective control over all of its territory, as Serbia holds sway north of the Ibar River. Nonetheless, seventy-seven countries have given diplomatic recognition to the government in Prishtina, and even Serbia has entered into negotiations on a series of practical issues. Monumental economic and social problems continue to plague the new country, and its Prime Minister Hashim Thaci has been accused of grisly organ trafficking during the 1999 war and of continued involvement in organized crime, charges he angrily rejects. Meanwhile, a radical opposition is capitalizing on the country's anemic economic condition and huge unemployment. Kosovo needs to reach agreement with Serbia in order to stabilize the situation and begin recovery in earnest. The European Union is the key to unfreezing the situation, an issue to which I will return shortly.

The two most dynamic situations in the region are in Serbia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The arrest and extradition to the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague of former Bosnian Serb General Ratko Mladić, who had evaded capture for sixteen years, has reinvigorated Serbia's chances for EU membership. Serbian President Boris Tadić is regarded as a democrat, especially when compared with his predecessor Vojislav Koštunica and his current chief rival Progressive Party leader Tomislav Nikolić. Personality-centered politics aside, perhaps one-third of the Serbian body politic clings to ultra-nationalist views. Government leaders usually have refrained from voicing such sentiments in public, but things changed this spring. Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Ivica Dačić, a former Milošević spokesman who nonetheless had not been regarded as especially radical, called for the partition of Kosovo between Albania and Serbia and for the break-up of Bosnia and Herzegovina. To my knowledge, President Tadić has not reprimanded him for his statement.

Moreover, despite some gestures of reconciliation toward Bosnia and Herzegovina such as last year's parliamentary resolution, on a very close vote, condemning the 1995 Srebrenica massacre,

senior Belgrade officials continue to encourage the separatist policies of Republika Srpska President Milorad Dodik.

Obviously, such statements and actions directly contradict both U.S. and EU policy. The U.S. does not have great leverage in Belgrade, as Serbia presently has no wish to apply for NATO membership. The situation with the European Union, though, is quite different, since the Tadić government is actively pushing its EU candidacy. Until now Brussels' policy vis-à-vis Serbia has been a mixture of appeasement, kicking the can down the road, and periodic dangling of the carrot of EU membership. Brussels seems unable to comprehend that Serbia needs the EU more than the EU needs Serbia. The EU should develop a policy commensurate with this leverage.

However self-abasing the EU policy, one must admit that over time it has played a role in producing some positive results. The ultra-nationalist Koštunica was replaced by the democrat Tadić. Mladić was brought to justice. Serbia agreed to sit down with Kosovo to discuss practical issues, even if its representatives routinely refuse to appear together with Kosovar officials, as graphically illustrated by Tadić's absence at the meeting of Central and East European leaders with President Obama in Warsaw in late May.

On the other hand, one may legitimately question whether a more forceful, principled policy would have brought the same positive results much sooner. Also, how does one quantify the undercutting of civil rights activists and other Serbian democrats by Brussels' continually averting its eyes to abuses? And could Dodik have attained his increasingly threatening position in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the face of real opposition from the EU – or for that matter, from the United States?

Most importantly, whatever one's judgment about the EU's policy to date, it is rapidly running out of space to maneuver. The next stage in Serbia's relations with the European Union is official candidate status, which Belgrade hopes to attain by the end of this year. Can the EU possibly grant this status if Serbia does not agree actively to support EU policy in Kosovo, abandon its longstanding goal of partition of the country, and cease its support of Dodik's separatism in Bosnia and Herzegovina? Recent events do not inspire great confidence.

Last spring Dodik called for a referendum in the Republika Srpska, asking voters whether the state court and prosecution, Bosnia and Herzegovina's only central judicial institutions ought to be abolished. In addition, the parliament of the Republika Srpska passed more than twenty "conclusions" that essentially branded as illegal every new state institution created since Dayton.

Aside from being in direct violation of Annexes 4 and 10 of the Dayton Agreements, the referendum would have been an abomination. In the spring of 1992 there was a Bośniak Muslim plurality on what is now the territory of the Republika Srpska. The only reason that a referendum today would undoubtedly yield a vote favorable to Dodik's separatism is that during the 1992-95 war more than 100,000 individuals were killed and well over a million were driven out of their homes, the vast majority in both categories being Bośniak Muslims. In other words, genocide and "ethnic cleansing" radically altered the ethno-religious composition of the population in what is now the Republika Srpska.

So Brussels huffed and puffed and threatened personal action against Dodik, including the freezing of his assets and a ban on travel to the EU. In mid-May, Valentin Inzko, the international High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina who doubles as the EU's Special Representative, was preparing to use his powers to forbid the referendum.

Then, only one day before Inzko was to act, his EU boss, European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, and Miroslav Lajčák, the Managing Director for Russia, Eastern Neighborhood and the Western Balkans of the EU's new External Action Service, traveled to Banja Luka, capital of the Republika Srpska, to meet with Dodik. There, in return for Dodik's calling off the referendum, they agreed to hold a "structured dialogue" with the Bosnian Serbs on the future of judicial institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Ashton allowed herself to be photographed sitting in front of a map that showed the Republika Srpska running through the Brčko District. The District was placed outside the control of either entity by binding arbitration; an independent Republika Srpska could only exist by linking its two halves through this area. At the press conference after the meeting, Ashton told Dodik, "We welcome your leadership, Mr. President." For his part, Dodik told reporters that the agreement made the referendum unnecessary "for now."

Some voices in the European Union like Swedish Foreign Minister and former International High Representative Carl Bildt praised Ashton for allegedly having averted bloodshed through diplomacy. It is difficult, however, to see how her acceding to Dodik's salami tactics, including undercutting the EU's own Special Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, will do anything other than increase his prestige and popularity, thereby strengthening his hand in his near-certain next move toward autonomy and secession, as well as further diminishing the EU's political credibility.

The State Department was extremely displeased with Ashton's surprise visit to, and naïve diplomacy in Banja Luka. A few weeks later in a speech to an international conference on the Western Balkans in Sarajevo, Assistant Secretary of State Philip Gordon made clear that the United States will not allow the dismantling of the Office of the High Representative until previously agreed upon reforms have been enacted.

If Dodik has been aggressive, he at least got the government of the Republika Srpska up and running quickly after the October 3, 2010 elections. Not so in the Federation or at the state level. The Social Democrats (SDP) led by former Chairman of the Council of Ministers Zlatko Lagumdžija won the largest number of votes in the election, but it took forceful, unorthodox action five months later to put together a Federation government, and then only over the outraged objections of the Bosnian Croat parties. The judicial authorities declined to call the SDP's actions illegal.

At the national level, however, gridlock set in with no government having been formed at the time of writing of this essay, nearly nine months after the elections. Lagumdžija, accused by his critics of a domineering and inflexible manner, nonetheless has said that he would honor the "gentleman's agreement" brokered by former High Representative Paddy Ashdown whereby the Chairman of the Council of Ministers would go to a Bosnian Croat as part of an unofficial rotation. He would likely accept the position of foreign minister, but Dodik has refused to agree to this. Whatever Lagumdžija's personality flaws – and surely he is not the only politician to be accused of high-handedness – the fact remains that his party did receive the largest number of votes. It is unreasonable to expect him or the SDP to accept being shut out of all the plum positions in post-election haggling.

There is a larger, more fundamental issue concerning the SDP. The Social Democrats are the only major multi-national party in Bosnia and Herzegovina. One of their members, Željko Komšić, was elected to the Croat seat on the tripartite collective presidency with the help of

thousands of votes from Bošniaks. The various Bosnian Croat parties, especially the HDZ, have cried foul, making the fallacious claim that the Bosnian Croats have been disenfranchised. Aside from the fact that the Bošniaks' votes were entirely legal, their actions can be viewed as the kind of behavior that eventually might break down the ethnic divisions that have so crippled the country. Furthermore, why should the HDZ, or the Croatian Government in Zagreb, which has unwisely inserted itself into the dispute, have the right to define who is a "real" Croat? By that logic, the Bošniak-dominated Party of Democratic Action (SDA), or perhaps Turkey or Saudi Arabia, should get to decide who is a "real" Muslim and presumably would veto the secular Lagumdžija.

This tribal and undemocratic reasoning has no place in the twenty-first century and stands out as especially archaic at a time when Bosnia and Herzegovina has been ordered by the European Court of Justice in the *Sejdić-Finci* ruling of December 2009 to revise its Constitution to in order to give equal rights to citizens who do not belong to one of the three "constituent peoples" – Bošniak, Serb, or Croat.

Rather than an unlikely democratic awakening, economic realities may soon force the various parties to compromise and form a national government. Without a national government in Sarajevo, the international financial institutions will not lend Bosnia and Herzegovina or its two entities (Federation, Republika Srpska) the funds necessary to stay afloat. In the long run, however, a change of mind will be necessary if the country is to survive. Symptomatic of the current dysfunction, elementary and secondary schools are effectively segregated in wide sections of the country, and individual ethnic groups have their own television and radio outlets.

Perhaps the promise of EU membership will serve to break down these barriers. The EU appears to think that EU accession is a one-size-fits-all inducement. I doubt the premise, and, moreover, the inducement will only be effective if two conditions obtain: first, membership in the European Union must be perceived to be the ticket to prosperity, and second, it must be seen to be attainable in the relatively near future. In this period of euro bailouts and enlargement fatigue, neither condition seems assured.

A Europe whole, free, democratic, and at peace seemed dawning with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism. Two decades later the Western Balkans has only partially realized that vision. The leaders and people of Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Albania, and Macedonia – and the decision-makers in Brussels and Washington – must make important choices in the coming months in order to put the reform process in this volatile region back on track.