

January 2013

The United States and the Balkans: Waning Interest or a Key Player?

Michael Haltzel

I would like to begin with a couple of general comments about the region and why it is important. First, at the continental level, I would mention the stakes for Europe. The project of creating a Europe whole, free, democratic, and at peace will not be completed without all the countries of the Western Balkans becoming members of the Euro-Atlantic institutions, should they so desire.

Second, I am somewhat pessimistic about a few of the countries where things are not going well. Here too, at the national and regional level, the stakes are high: the continued, independent, sovereign, democratic character of Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), and Macedonia – all of them essential building blocks of the common European project. The jury is very much still out.

Third, and on a brighter note, Americans would do well to remember that the Western Balkans is one area where in the last twenty years we have done the right thing and where, as a result, we retain great street credibility and popularity. I just got back last night from Kosovo. The feelings there about the United States are extraordinarily positive. It is gratifying, even moving, to hear emotional sentiments about the United States from the president of the country to the bookseller on the street. One finds this elsewhere in the Balkans – in Albania, in parts of Bosnia. I would submit that this bond gives us a special responsibility on top of the region's strategic importance.

Michael Haltzel is a senior fellow at the Center for Transatlantic Relations of Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies. Dr. Haltzel capped a distinguished career in public service as senior foreign policy advisor to US Vice President (then-Senator) Joseph R. Biden, Jr., ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and as democratic staff director of the Subcommittee on European Affairs.

The ideas in this paper were presented at the Atlantic Council's workshop, "Moving the Balkans and Bosnia Forward: A Post-Dayton Roadmap" on November 13-14, 2012. Done in conjunction with the US Army War College, the workshop brought together forty top US and European experts and policymakers to identify regional and national initiatives that could encourage the Balkans region to continue on the path toward Euro-Atlantic integration.

The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Atlantic Council, its staff, or its supporters. This draft is not for citation or quotation without consent of the author.

I am not going to rehash in detail where we are, as we have already covered that ground earlier in the conference. I am a bit less sanguine about the happy talk on US-EU cooperation in the Balkans than are some other participants. US goals for the continent, which I mentioned earlier, are, indeed, shared by the European Union (EU), including membership in Euro-Atlantic institutions for the countries of the region.

Nonetheless, some cynics – and their numbers are increasing in the Western Balkans – think that the European Union is now intentionally drawing out its accession process, moving the goal posts in the hope that the current enlargement fatigue in Western Europe will in time dissipate. I do not think that is fair. But I do think that there is an added factor in the thinking of large segments of at least some of the Western European members of the EU, which neither the United States nor some of the newer EU members share.

That factor is a genuine fear about renewed refugee flows from any future conflict in the Western Balkans. This fear has its roots in the warfare in 1992-95 and the creation in Croatia and later in Bosnia and Herzegovina of the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR), whose restrictive rules of engagement and bizarre chain of command proved able to tamp down the violence but not nearly enough to end the warfare. This anxiety is still shown in the European Union's stress on "stability," and not just in the Balkans. Not only was there a Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe (now called the Regional Cooperation Council) aimed at strengthening peace, democracy, human rights, and the economy in the region. There is also a Stability and Growth Pact of the Economic and Monetary Union of the European Union. Stability is a big word in the EU lexicon, often accepted without context as a virtue in itself. "Stability" in the Balkans in the early 1990s, unfortunately, more often than not meant the stability of the graveyard.

I think that there also is a remaining feeling of guilt in some quarters of the European Left about NATO's bombing of Serbia in 1999. One can argue whether the air campaign was right or wrong – I think it was justified – but guilt feelings play a role in the thinking about Kosovo, for example, in segments of the German Social Democratic Party.

I firmly believe that we should support democracy in Serbia in every way we possibly can. Ivana Howard brought over a group of civil society leaders from Serbia to the National Endowment for Democracy a few months ago, and a more inspiring, better group of human beings I have rarely met. Moreover, there are people in the political world in Serbia that certainly merit our support.

I do part company with the positions of some EU figures who concentrate on the Balkans like Carl Bildt and Miroslav Lajčak, two highly intelligent men with whom I agree on many other issues. The thrust of their policy – whether prompted by a desire for stability or because they like the current Serbian government or the current Republika Srpska (RS) government – has been highly supportive of Serbia and the RS where I believe it should have been more objective and, hence, more critical.

We talked about conditionality this morning, and I regretfully agree that there has been a sliding scale. In watering down its requirement to a "credible effort" by Bosnia and Herzegovina to

implement the verdict of the European Court of Human Rights in the Sejdić-Finci case, the European Union has come perilously close to abandoning its core principles. This step backward from demanding full implementation is both morally wrong and politically inept. The EU holds all the cards with regard to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Similarly, although Serbia is the most important country in the Western Balkans, it needs the EU far more than the EU needs Serbia. Sad to say, however, few members of the EU are comfortable with, much less adept at, the practice of *Machtspolitik*. I will return to this theme in a few minutes.

Realistically the Balkans will remain a secondary priority for the United States. Our development assistance is modest. At the operational level, some of our ambassadors in the region are activist, which is admirable. But in policy terms what can the United States do?

Number one, we should be out in front where we really do have the power – in NATO. That means at the next NATO summit pushing hard for the accession of Montenegro and Macedonia. Montenegro is making excellent progress on fulfilling its Membership Action Plan and, barring unforeseen stumbles or changes of policy in Podgorica, should be qualified to join the Alliance in 2014.

Macedonia was judged by NATO to be ready for membership at the Bucharest Summit back in April 2008 but was vetoed by Greece because of the name issue. The time has come to get serious with Athens, preferably in coordination with our European NATO allies. Mention was made today of backstage dealings with Germany in the lead, which may show up at the ministerial next month. I can only hope that that this report is correct. If it proves to be the case, I could not be happier. There are NATO and US assets in Greece, which obviously constrain us somewhat. But I do think we have to be more insistent with Athens, and we also have to be frank with Nikola Gruevski, the prime minister of Macedonia, who, aside from the name issue, seems to be going the wrong way with regard to his difficult domestic ethnic situation. Put simply, the behavior of the Greeks and to some extent the Macedonians is absolutely preposterous, and it has to change.

In Kosovo, we certainly should not further draw down the US contingent in KFOR. We are the Kosovars' best friend, and more importantly *they* know that we are their best friend, perhaps their only major true friend. This gives us considerable leverage. Incidentally, the other night when I was in Prishtina, I had an interesting, wide ranging discussion over dinner with Albin Kurti and Shpend Ahmeti, the two youthful leaders of "Vetëvendosje!" – the populist opposition party in Kosovo. In many ways I disagree with their bottom line, but these are highly intelligent, well informed people who will continue to play an important role in Kosovo's political life. If it is true that the United States is blacklisting Kurti, or at least taking our good natured time in giving him a visa, I think this is counter-productive. I understand the arguments: there has been some minor violence, tomatoes thrown and silliness like that, and we do not want to be seen as supporting "Vetëvendosje!" I think, however, that we are actually enhancing Kurti's maverick image in Kosovo if we are, in fact, blacklisting him. Moreover, a trip to the United States just might persuade him of the futility of some of his party's policies.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina we should vigorously support constitutional reform in the Federation. I am told that the United States Embassy is holding a conference on this topic in Sarajevo early next year,

which I hope will yield tangible results. The role of the international community continues to be essential. In the Q&A session after the speech this morning by Assistant Secretary of State Phil Gordon, I asked him about the possible closure of the Office of the High Representative (OHR) in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I was pleased to hear that the United States sees a continued need for the position and its staff. I hope we will not go along with the EU, which would like to close the OHR down. In the Peace Implementation Council (PIC) we should continue to cooperate with like-minded EU countries and with Turkey in preserving, ideally strengthening, the OHR.

The United States continues to make clear the permanence of the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. I would submit that we could make it even clearer, absolutely unambiguous. The census figures show that on what is today the territory of the Republika Srpska, in April 1992 there was a Bosniak Muslim plurality. The only reason that any kind of referendum in the RS would now yield a strong majority for complete autonomy or even secession is because of the genocide and ethnic cleansing of the 1990s. The United States cannot be in the business of approving that.

With regard to Serbia itself, I am very cautiously optimistic. I see a flicker of flexibility in the Progressives, the largest party in the new governing coalition. Despite ongoing belligerent rhetoric, I am hoping for something like a “Nixon to China” phenomenon, in which the Progressives find room in domestic Serbian politics to move beyond technical issues in the Serbia-Kosovo Dialog and conclude a more comprehensive agreement. Concerning Bosnia and Herzegovina, we ought to be clear to President Tomislav Nikolić and Prime Minister Ivica Dačić that they must pursue the same policy toward the Republika Srpska that Croatia has toward Herzegovina. I may not be happy with some of the utterances out of Zagreb about Željko Komšić, the Croat Member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but basically Croatia is not interfering in another country’s internal affairs.

In tandem with US policy, I would hope that the EU pursues an effective policy of conditionality. At some point as the Dialog between Belgrade and Prishtina progresses, the European Union should confront Serbia with a clear choice: either cooperate with the EU in Kosovo north of the Ibar River and agree to allow Kosovo to join all international bodies, thereby clearing the way for Serbia’s accession to the EU; or persist in stonewalling, and abandon plans for proceeding further along the accession path. This is essentially the point that German Chancellor Angela Merkel made to former Serbian President Boris Tadić in the summer of 2011. As for a supposed “Russia option” – if Belgrade truly believes it has one, I can only say, “be my guest.”

Finally, the US should re-create the position of special envoy for the Balkans, which my colleague Jim O’Brien used to have. Aside from spending a healthy percentage of his or her time in the region, the occupant should also be a monthly visitor to Western Europe, especially Berlin and Brussels, because Germany and the EU are absolutely key to overcoming the challenges we have been discussing. The new special envoy should also be someone who is well connected politically here in Washington. In advocating this, I am not in any way implying that Phil Reeker is not doing a great job. I think he is. Phil is hugely talented and works overtime, but he does not have the special envoy title, and he does have other duties to fulfill. Re-creating the special envoy position would show the people of the Balkans a continued, perhaps even an increased US commitment to the region, and would reinforce cooperation with the EU.