Theme 4: Troubled Waters: Reclaiming a Common Space?

Presentation: The Balkan Dimension
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I want to take this opportunity to add two dimensions to the debate – the political and economic. For the future of the Adriatic will without question depend on the political and economic future of South-eastern Europe; and by that I do not mean merely the littoral states but other states and territories as well, including Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, and Macedonia.

But before I go into the boring bit, I want to tell you a story. It is a truth widely acknowledged that if you wish to enjoy a lifetime of exciting and exotic travel, one of the best ways of achieving this nowadays is to be born into this world as a cigarette.

Let us follow the breathtaking life cycle of a pack of cigarettes manufactured in the United Kingdom by one of the big corporations at a cost of some 25 pence. Bound for export, our little pack makes the long journey from Southampton to Lanarca in Cyprus. Here our friend changes ships and sails south for the port of Alexandria. While being transferred to another ship (who knows, perhaps the little dear stops off at the library for some R&R), its papers are lost and the little pack becomes effectively a stateless commodity. "Where to next?" it wonders excitedly. Why, back northeastwards to Thessalonica, where it is able to slip through customs without being noticed (I wonder how that happens) before being sent in a lorry to Skopje. His new foster parents are Macedonians who quickly pass him onto Albanians in Tetovo in the west of the country. They slip it across the border, under the very nose of KFOR, into Kosovo, further to Montenegro from where it is taken across the Adriatic by boat to Italy. Some of his close friends decide to stay in Umbria or Tuscany; but our chap hasn't finished. He is now bound for Oostende in Belgium, where he is greeted by a familiar site – a white van with a British registration which takes him through Folkestone, and on to London where, several weeks after his birth some 100 miles away, he is sold on the Holloway Road in North London for between £2 and £2.50 a pack.

Everyone's a winner – all of the people who have taken care of him on his adventure have been happily remunerated for their troubles. All, that is, except one man – Gordon Brown, the Chancellor of Her Majesty's Exchequer, who has lost in the region of £4.15 as a consequence of this jolly journey.

Today, security in the Balkans is a broad subject. Its complexity has deepened over the years by dint of three processes:
The active intervention of international military force in the region;
A shift in the nature of local conflict from one in which nationalism was the primary motivating force into one where the interests of corrupt and criminal economic interests assumed that illustrious position (anyone who doubts this should have a close look at the role of cigarettes in the Macedonian conflict);
And September 11th, an event which has impacted both on international concern about the region as a potential incubator for various nefarious operations, and also on NATO attitudes to its expansion strategy.

In South-eastern Europe these have been painted onto a backdrop of states whose level of dysfunctionality rangse from the moderately high, in countries like Romania and Bulgaria, to the very high, especially in Albania and the group of states and territories which one friend of mine refers to as The Provisorium: Serbia and Montenegro, Bosnia-Hercegovina, Kosovo, and Macedonia. These are areas of the former Yugoslavia where the final constitutional status and essential nature of the territories remain open to question. Kosovo is obvious; but I wonder how many people here who know the region believe that Serbia and Montenegro has the air of a major and enduring state entity?

Organised crime and corruption are the most severe and damaging symptoms of the overall security issue. But the core components of Balkan security or insecurity are the following: unemployment; chronically weak public administration; developmental economics and relations between the IFIs and regional governments; and the nature of the political and fiscal decentralization programmes in South-eastern Europe. This is why we have to reassess our approach to questions of security. The frontline cannot be the preserve of a valiant vanguard of the military. Now they must stand shoulder to shoulder with battalions of developmental economists, civil servants, religious leaders, political scientists and NGOs.

In theory, these problems can be solved. Security can be established. But the real question runs: "Does sufficient political will and capacity exist within the region and among the International Community to translate the theoretical answers into practical ones?"

In 2004, the European Union is going to open its doors, probably to another ten countries. I believe this is likely to administer a minor infarct to the European administration and its developing philosophy. This is simply not comparable with earlier experiences of expansion.

While coping with this shock, European Union interest in South-eastern Europe will diminish, probably quite dramatically. Other new problems will coincide – the aid and assistance programme to large parts of the region was designed to be front-loaded and in a couple of years, monies transferred to the region will be significantly reduced. Both domestic and foreign companies have been involved in a hideous programme of asset stripping in the sectors of telecommunications, oil, electricity, food and beer production, the media and cement factories (investment in the latter by EU companies, incidentally, has been motivated by the desire to avoid strict environmental regulations which do not apply in South-eastern Europe). The capital accruing from these sales have gone into back pockets (including many belonging to EU citizens) and purchases such as inappropriate military hardware, but some has also found its way into the health, education and social welfare sectors. These funds, too, will dry up.

Such inclement economic circumstances have occurred in a territory that lives cheek-by-jowl with the largest and most affluent market in history – the European Union. The emergence of a factory of crime in South-eastern Europe that can never supply enough untaxed cigarettes, drugs, trafficked women and illegal immigrants to satisfy the EU market, is not the consequence of a congenital deviousness on the part of the

Balkan peoples. It has happened in the absence of proper jobs and in the face of fairly merciless programmes imposed by the IFIs that do not take local conditions into consideration. It is the only way that people can survive economically, even if such a system inflicts enormous hardship of the overwhelming bulk of ordinary folk while making a few individuals fabulously wealthy. This, incidentally, is the chief economic function of today's Adriatic – facilitating the transfer of illegal products from South-eastern Europe to the EU.

EU governments have finally woken up to the problems of South-eastern Europe because of two issues. One is cigarette smuggling because it hits the exchequers; the other is illegal immigration (it says something about our societies that we channel far fewer resources into preventing the trafficking of women). Illegal immigration (the majority transit through the Balkans) is suddenly threatening the electoral prospects of EU elites, and as a consequence we now sit back and watch the unseemly spectacle of Blair, Schroeder, Berlusconi, Aznar et al vying with each other to see who can introduce the most illiberal immigration and asylum laws in Europe.

Policing alone will not do; it is but one element. The EU must develop a coherent immigration policy, especially as it is a union whose future prosperity depends on attracting people from outside to join in its society. But finally, the EU must contribute substantially to the stabilisation and development of the South-east European economies. By that I do not mean by channelling endless funds down a black hole – it requires relatively little money. What it does require is policy – policy that meets the needs of the region.

The situation in the Balkans looks very bleak and for those blighted people who live in this region, it is. But it is not hopeless. And that is because the people of the region – who boast exceptional intellectual resources – are beginning to do it for themselves and it is thanks largely to people like Edi Rama, the Mayor of Tirana.

Please indulge me a little longer as I tell you the story of three neighbouring districts I have just visited, Gnjilane in Eastern Kosovo, Preshevo in Southern Serbia and Kumanovo in northern Macedonia, an area that lies on the watershed between the Adriatic and the Aegean. Until 1992, these areas, peopled primarily by Albanians, Serbs, Macedonians, Roma and Vlachs, formed a coherent economic unit, trading primarily with one another but with all parts of the former Yugoslavia. In 1992, a border appeared between Macedonia and Serbia. In 1999, a border appeared between Serbia and Kosovo – all three districts became backwaters overnight, cut off from all their markets. All three districts were perforce involved in one major ethnic conflict that pitched Albanians against Slavs. But despite the blandishments of criminals, the indifference or hostility of central governments and the sheer ignorance of the international community, the three mayors (two Albanian and one Macedonian) appealed to citizens of all communities in their districts to overcome these immense pressures. Gnjilane is now the one district in Kosovo where the safety of the Serbian minority is secure; the mayor of Preshevo persuaded the Albanian insurgents of the region to lay down their guns and withdraw; and the mayor of Kumanovo, a Macedonian, worked with all local Albanians to ensure that when war broke out in the West of Macedonia in 2001, it did not break out in Kumanovo where most people assumed the bloodiest fighting would be.

The achievements of these three communities under the circumstances are nothing short of miraculous. But because they are not slitting one another's throats, it is yet another positive episode of Balkan history that is in danger of evaporating.

Politicians committed to real reform are emerging in several countries of the region, both on the municipal level and on the level of central government. They are slowly beginning to exchange ideas and assist one another in creating a coherent voice for the entire region. I am cautiously optimistic that as this develops, the European Union and the IFIs will respond positively to the policy priorities that are emerging for the region. This is not something that simply affects the former Yugoslavia and Albania – Romania and Bulgaria clearly recognise their regional responsibilities, while the most amazing transformation in foreign policy over the past five years has taken place in Greece. Not only has George Papandreou struck up the most constructive relationship with Ismail Cem, his Turkish counterpart, he has reversed Greece's destructively negative policy towards South-eastern Europe, emphasising the need to assist and integrate this region into European structures.

You may find it odd that I have barely mentioned the Adriatic or the environment at all. Please do not think that I am indifferent to either. It is simply my conviction that if the issues of social and economic development and democratisation are not addressed, then the future of the environment and the Adriatic can only be grim. And not only these two – let me make my message plain so that Western Europe may take the needs of the Balkans seriously – either the European Union must expand into South-eastern Europe, or South-eastern Europe will expand into the European Union.