HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: THE LEGACY OF WAR, COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND THE FUTURE OF THE REGION

Southeast Europe: the perils of the past, the hope for the future

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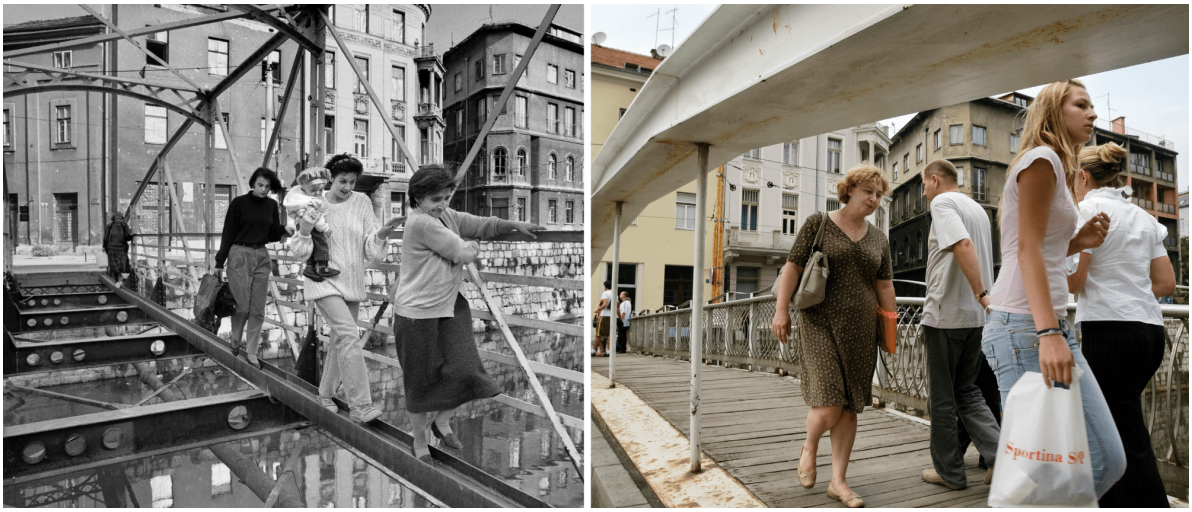

On the left, several people cross a destroyed bridge in the city of Sarajevo, in October 1993, during the siege. On the right, the same bridge, rebuilt, in July 2008. Gervasio Sánchez returned to the city fifteen years later to photograph the same spaces he had portrayed during the siege. A witness to the evolution and transformation of Sarajevo; a bridge between the city at war and at peace. Photo by Gervasio Sánchez

Even a child in Europe bends under the weight of the past.
A literate European is caught in the spider-web of an in memoriam at once luminous and suffocating.
George Steiner (2004)

History has never gone away and never will —anywhere. There are lulls in time and space when it seems otherwise. Such was the time during and after Europe's Annus Mirabilis in 1989, when indeed it seemed that, with the Fall of Communism, things had somehow simmered down and there would be, at least in Europe, some form of convergence toward democracy, the rule of law and a social market economy —an expectation that the peace dividend would bear fruit.

My country, my former country Yugoslavia signalled early on in this period, contrary to all expectations, that things would not unfold smoothly. At the time of the early 1990s as the intra-Yugoslav conflict began to evolve, it seemed that this tumultuous implosion of a

European country was the exception rather than the rule. However, it transpired that it was in fact the harbinger of what we have been witnessing in one form or another for the past 15 years and what we are still witnessing today: the rise of nationalism, populism, identity politics, and political and societal polarisation.

These Yugoslav wars were the return of armed conflict to the European continent after 1989. The Russian full-scale invasion of the sovereign European country Ukraine in February 2022 (preceded by the 2014 invasion and annexation of Crimea) was a reemergence of war in Europe on a wholly greater scale, upending the complete security architecture of the continent defined by the Helsinki Accords of 1975.

One must not forget that the much-heralded long period of peace after 1945 pertained only to the west of Europe. The Soviet invasions of Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968), and the Turkish invasion of Cyprus (1974) form an arc of military violence that a large part of Europe did not witness. Thus, this part of the continent bears more recent historical scars. The collapse of the Soviet Empire and its sequel in the resurgence of Russia's imperial ambitions indelibly mark our current predicament. We are living in geopolitical and geostrategic times, and Europe and the European Union are confronted with hard choices about their position in this world of uncertainty, volatility and complexity.

History's imprint

The region of the Balkans has had more than its share of historical tribulations. History weighs on the present. A failure to properly deal with the past, especially after World War II, during the post-1945 period, all in the name of a brighter (communist/socialist) future within grasp, left the space open to the return of past evils, to the return of conflict.

It was believed that the horrors of World War II should "never again" be allowed to happen. Education in Yugoslavia, for example, as in other countries, was geared to taking children to the sites of the Holocaust, showing them films and having them read books so as to prevent a repetition of that particular evil of history – and yet it came back with a vengeance.

The legacy of empires and the fact that the region was a "playground" caught in the midst of various imperial ambitions (Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, Russian and German), situated on the fault lines of historical dynamics, certainly left an imprint, as did the wars of the 20th century and the division of Europe during the Cold War. The (in)famous napkin from Yalta in October 1944 —on which Churchill and Stalin divided up the spheres of influence of Central and Southeastern Europe with a few strokes of a pen— just epitomises how this broad swath of countries came to be pawns of the great powers.

On the left, Aljosa Basić, Amar Mistrić, Damir Basić and Alen Damir play in front of their house during the siege of the city of Sarajevo, in November 1993. On the right, the same boys are photographed in the same place, fifteen years later, in July 2008. The image is part of Gervasio Sánchez's project "Sarajevo: war and peace". The photojournalist returned to the city to search for and immortalize the same people and places that he had photographed in 1993 during the siege. Photograpy by Gervasio Sánchez

Nevertheless, it is important to note that equal to the general weight of history is the past political and social anthropology of the region. Until 1945, these were preponderantly rural societies with high levels of illiteracy and a thin layer of urban population with a mostly state-employed elite. They were also traditional and patriarchal societies. It is upon this societal fabric that communism was laid, as a system of authoritarian/totalitarian rule (with varying degrees of harshness) in which the monopoly of political power kept an atomised society away from any possibility of democracy or political freedom. What happened in the post-World War II years was economic modernisation at breakneck speed without political and human rights. In the Balkans, Greece was of course an exception.

What this meant for these states and societies was a complete absence of democratic political culture, a lack of democratic "habits of the heart", as per Tocqueville. In his seminal study *The Old Regime and the Revolution* (1856), Tocqueville studies the persistence of the old "customs, conventions and modes of thought" while the new norms and institutions were being formed. What these countries were confronted with was a wholesale transformation. Claus Offe called it the simultaneity challenge: changing every aspect of state and society: political, economic, social, educational and cultural. Ralf

Dahrendorf, in his *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe* (1990), aptly defined this phenomenon in the following way (paraphrasing his words): “you can draft and vote in a democratic constitution in about six month, you can transform your command economy into a market economy in about six years, but to achieve a democratic political culture and vibrant civil society you would need sixty years. One could flippantly remark that 35 years have already gone by.”

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However, another issue has plagued the transformation from a “communist mindset” of (certainly false) certainty of employment and life at a minimal level, to a life of uncertainty in the market. Already towards the end, communist regimes started using nationalism and ethnicity as legitimation tools. The ethnification of politics continued into the early years of the transition from communism and, as uncertainties about the future grew alongside social and economic hardships, a new certainty has been found/constructed in ethnic belonging and nationalism. And given the 20th century’s recent historical past, old grievances are dug up, and historically unaddressed issues and old quarrels are brought back to the surface, often so as to distract from other pressing social and economic issues.

Recent perils

Changing the mindset of elites and populations has proven to be a much more arduous process than was previously thought in the moment of euphoria at the end of communism. The social and political texture after 45 years of authoritarian, non-democratic rule —the absence of a public sphere, of freedom of speech and association— proved to be a humungous task. The cry for a “return to Europe” of countries that had been under the Soviet yoke was one of true liberation and a desire to join alliances (NATO) and unions (the EU) by freedom of choice, for the first time in their history, so as to secure their future against possible new occupations form the East

Yugoslavia, as the only non-Soviet bloc country, and potentially the most qualified to be the first to join the EU, went “astray”, wanting to settle old scores within its confines, ending in disappearance and mostly violent dismemberment. One European country of 20 million people ended up divided into seven countries (Kosovo being one of them, but not recognised by five EU Member States or by Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina).

Serbia, one of the successor states, in fact began its transition only in 2000 after the electoral defeat of Slobodan Milošević, whose 1990s regime proved catastrophic for Serbia. Milošević ended up in jail in the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), but his negative legacy for Serbia was lasting. Subsequent leaders inherited a

criminalised state and society. The first democratic prime minister, Zoran Djindjic, a true European moderniser, set about catching up on the lost decade and setting the goal of both EU and NATO membership. He emphatically insisted on the need for Serbia to fulfil its obligations to the ICTY and the need to resolve the Kosovo issue as rapidly as possible because, he said, an unresolved situation was an impediment to consolidating Serbia's democracy. He was assassinated by the remnants of the old Milošević regime on 12 March 2003. Serbia has since moved toward reform and EU integration but has witnessed sliding into a hybrid regime with authoritarian features, a lack of media independence and important lacunae in the rule of law.

The Yugoslav wars overall took a huge toll in lives and futures. Slovenia and Croatia managed to join NATO and the EU: Slovenia in 2004 and Croatia later (NATO in 2009, EU in 2013). The others are laggards, moving at a snail's pace, though most have been candidate countries for many years: North Macedonia since 2005, Montenegro since 2010, Serbia since 2012, Albania since 2014, and Bosnia and Herzegovina since 2022.

Regional relations were and remain of key importance. The region of the Western Balkans is a system of communicating vessels. This is important because, whatever the specificities of each country, they all positively and negatively impact each other, depending on their individual dynamics of reform and accession.

The Balkan political elites (foremost among them those of the former Yugoslavia) are culpable in so much as, instead of seizing the moment in 1989, as did the countries of central and eastern Europe, they pursued a power retention strategy that tore the country apart and missed the opportunity to join the 2004 "Big Bang" enlargement of the EU. Compromise was very feebly attempted. Each former Yugoslav republic aspired to maximalist goals which were not conducive to at least a peaceful dissolution, as in the Czechoslovak case of the "Velvet Divorce". As a result, apart from Slovenia and Croatia, the others are still in the process of negotiating accession; and they are still far from achieving this goal, apart from Montenegro, which has now, with its new government, decided on a full-speed ahead strategy. Albania is following suit in certain ways as well. Overall, the countries of the region have been all too slow to instil an independent judiciary, the key prerequisite for fulfilling the condition of rule of law compliance for EU membership.

> The European Union inactivity has led to an open space for so-called third actors, such as Russia and China, to enter and fill with their different geopolitical and geoeconomic goals

The EU and the US were caught off guard by the Yugoslav wars and, after trying to keep the country together (too little effort, too late), they engaged in crisis management. What was particularly erroneous in the EU's stance after the fall of Milošević and Serbia's democratic beginnings under Prime Minister Djindjic and President Vojislav Koštunica was not to have moved much more proactively to integrate Serbia (the biggest country and the

“lynchpin of the region”, in American parlance) as soon as possible. Let’s recall that Serbia was taken into full Council of Europe membership only after the assassination of Prime Minister Djindjic (who had delivered former president Milošević to the ICTY). The EU did of course help and show solidarity in a number of ways by helping the post-war reconstruction effort, but with hindsight many problems would have not appeared had there been much more political acumen to understand that time was of the essence.

Missing opportunities

This inactivity has led to an open space for so-called third actors —principally and in different guises and levels of activity, Russia, China, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates— to enter and fill with their different geopolitical and geoeconomic goals. The EU, confronted with multiple challenges (polycrisis), financial crisis (2008), refugee migration (2015), the Russian invasions of Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014), an increasingly assertive China and Trump’s US presidency (2017–2020), focused its attention elsewhere, knowing full well that, even though the region of the Balkans was barely or only very slowly moving forward, it would not cause a major crisis, nor go to war (it did that in the 1990s) thus “stabilocracy” became the modus operandi. In other words, it was important for the EU to regard the region as stable, thus disregarding the various backsliding tendencies and the entry of third actors into the arena.

It is also important to note that EU interventions, whether for Member States’ domestic political purposes or simply for unspoken opposition to EU enlargement, have caused serious detriment to the region’s EU integration dynamic. An eminent example of this is France’s blocking of North Macedonia (and, by association, Albania) on its path to EU accession in October 2019. After a truly historical Prespa (Prespes) Agreement, in full European reconciliation spirit, achieved by Greece and North Macedonia and their respective prime ministers Alexis Tsipras and Zoran Zaev, counter to the majority public opinions in their countries, France and President Macron, for reasons known only to them, blocked forward movement. Across the whole region at the time there was a clear sentiment that something crucially important was happening, moving the region to a further step forward. Serbia felt that it was next in line to resolve its outstanding issue with Kosovo. The French decision not only took the winds out of the sails of the Balkan ship, but it opened the door to Bulgaria to pose conditions for North Macedonia that had nothing to do with the acquis communautaire. There are other examples, but this one stands out for the detriment caused to the region.

The US, for its part, should have worked much more intensely with the EU on a proactive approach. The US, for reasons of consolidating security, also should have helped bring the countries of the region into NATO’s Partnership for Peace programme much earlier. It was US President George W. Bush who, at the Riga NATO summit in November 2006, proposed to bring in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia. The Western Balkans is the inner courtyard of the European Union and NATO, and all the countries of the region want to join the EU and NATO (except Serbia, which maintains a posture of neutrality, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, a country that once wanted to join but is now divided internally on

the issue).

Enlargement woes

Focusing on EU enlargement, there are a number of factors that have kept the region from moving more convincingly toward compliance with EU accession criteria. But prior to enumerating these factors, it is of the utmost importance to mention that three of the countries of the region are full members of NATO (Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia). In spite of Russia's opposition and allegations that these countries have been "forced to join", they joined willingly, to achieve a higher level of security as members of the transatlantic community.

Domestic factors are paramount in keeping the region from faster accession and from deeper democratic reform. Political elites have engaged in dynamics to retain power in every way possible, while opposition parties have been weak and civil society, with its valiant, courageous and important work in calling governments to account, have not been strong enough to change the political dynamic. Corruption, nepotism and clientelism are the bane of these systems. They all vary, of course, and have different dynamics. Some have achieved notable progress, such as Albania in the reform of its judiciary.

There is another crucial challenge faced by the broader region, and that is demography: an aging, diminishing population, a decline in birth rates and a sizeable yearly emigration, especially of younger people. This has multiple consequences. It impacts on the political behaviour of voters (the voter population is older), and it means there is a dire need for workers from third countries to work as bus drivers, construction workers, in public services and in other areas.

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Overall there is, on both the EU side and the candidate side, a wariness regarding the lengthiness of the process of accession. In spite of EU and candidate country officials dedicated to the process and their understanding of its geopolitical and geoeconomic importance, there is an inexcusable fatigue and loss of belief that the process will ever reach its goal. The credibility of the EU enlargement project has been lost in many quarters; people have lost faith and do not believe "that the EU wants us". Whereas the EU is wary of, to define it simply, taking in a new Viktor Orbán, a new Hungary that is seriously regressing and discarding democratic values and norms. For some candidate countries meanwhile, the toleration of Hungary's behaviour inside the EU sends a message that they maybe do not have to necessarily implement all the reforms to become full members. These are some of the issues that plague the current situation of Western Balkan candidate

countries in their domestic context and in their accession process.

How the Russian invasion changes the political landscape

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has turned everything on its head. We are living through an epoch-changing moment on the scale of 1989. It is all about Ukraine and about the future of Europe. Add to that the victory of Donald Trump in November 2024 and the enormity of the challenge becomes even more tangible. EU enlargement is back in full force. Ukraine and Moldova are candidate countries that have begun negotiating accession (with Georgia potentially to follow). Nevertheless, that means that the Western Balkans are also back on centre stage, for obvious geopolitical reasons.

The EU had realised, even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, that it needed to step up its efforts in the Western Balkans. The EU understood that geoeconomics is geopolitics and that, to counter Chinese influence, it needed to start investing in infrastructure projects, transport and energy in particular. To counter Russia's malign influence, it needed to speed up its engagement in support of these countries' EU accession. From that followed, for example, first the issue of candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and then a date to start talks. Russia understands full well where this region belongs but will do anything to delay the accession process, seeking to demonstrate the weakness of the EU, the weakness of its soft and hard power.

Bold decisions and decisiveness are urgently needed. The "limbo" in which the Western Balkans find themselves is not propitious for anyone, except the Russias and the Chinas of this world. It is interesting to note that, as recently revealed by the *Financial Times*, Serbia is providing massive military support to Ukraine through third countries for its defence against the Russian aggression. This is counter to most of the punditry on Serbia's closeness to Russia, even though Serbia is the only European country, except Belarus, not to have imposed sanctions on Russia. Serbia has also signed, together with the EU and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, what amounts to an agreement whereby Serbia will be a key supplier of lithium in the chain for the production of batteries for electric vehicles. With protests by environmental groups and public opinion in Serbia, this will be an all-round test for Serbia as an "indispensable" candidate for EU accession.

The way forward

These are difficult problems to resolve, but such are historical moments. When Romania and Bulgaria were accepted as full Member States of the EU in 2007, many clamoured that they were not ready and not suitable, which was of course in many ways true. However, a bold and necessary geopolitical decision was made to bring them in. It was the absolutely right decision, because let's just imagine these two countries outside of the EU and NATO, bordering Ukraine, and Russia's possible intentions regarding them.

Such is the moment now. Clearly, there is a price to pay. European officials very often now use the argument that the Western Balkans need to be brought in as members for reasons

of European security, which is true, given Russia's malevolent activities and imperial aggression, whose limits are hard to gauge. But security is strong if societies are strong, free and democratic. A tall order, but nonetheless one that requires full engagement, perseverance and commitment, notwithstanding the odds.

Thus, it first of all behoves the people and their elected leaderships to chart and proactively engage in ensuring democracy, stability and the economic development of the region. Fighting the apathy, disengagement and cynicism that are growing in many quarters will require the EU's full commitment to enlargement, a commitment we have heard reiterated often by the newly re-elected President of the EU Commission, Ursula von der Leyen.

What is at stake is the credibility of the whole European Union, as a peace project, one that unites countries with long histories of tumults, but also, often forgotten, long periods of peace. That is why a demonstration that the process is alive and that the European Union is committed to taking in new countries is needed. The closest to achieving compliance are currently Montenegro, possibly Albania, and maybe North Macedonia, maybe Moldova. This may sound naïve, but so did the accessions of Romania and Bulgaria. If only one of these candidate countries could join, not forgetting of course Ukraine and the challenges it faces as it defends its freedom, then credibility would be restored and the other countries would have incentives to move forward.

> The region of the Balkans has been, is and always will be historically, culturally and socially an integral part of Europe. Its long and tumultuous history links it inextricably to Europe's future

It all requires heroism of the spirit, as Vico would put it. It is essential that each of these countries be each other's champions – that they support each other in a spirit of solidarity and regional cooperation. Finally, it needs to be repeated: the region has been, is and always will be historically, culturally and socially an integral part of Europe. Its long and tumultuous history links it inextricably to Europe's future. Barring major unexpected future events (which should always be considered), the region will complete its path to full EU membership. This will happen by fits and starts, herculean challenges and only if, in Machiavelli's words, collective *virtu* (or our capacity to act with force of conviction) overcomes *fortuna* (destiny).

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