

Overcoming Conflict in the Balkans

1. The convening of this workshop of the PFP Consortium Working Group on "Crisis management in Southeast Europe" to consider important aspects of inter-ethnic relations in countries of this region is a most laudable and timely initiative. Since inter-ethnic relations are one of the main causes of the conflicts which have been ravaging this part of Europe for the past ten years, their analysis at this meeting of recognised specialists in the field provides us with the opportunity of looking also at the wider prospects of peace in this region. The initiative to organise this Workshop comes at the right moment because, with the latest democratic changes in Yugoslavia and Croatia, conditions have been created for the undertaking of a determined diplomatic effort to move beyond the mere management of the existing crises, towards reconciliation and the establishment of lasting peace in the Balkans. As the special Envoy of the UN Secretary General to the Balkans, former Prime Minister of Sweden, *Carl Bildt*, put it in a recent article in *Foreign Affairs*, a second chance - after the one missed in 1995, following the conclusion of the Dayton Peace Accords - is now given to the nations of the Balkans, of Europe and of the world at large to put an end to these endless cycles of violence and counter-violence. The UN special Envoy draws the attention to the grave risks with which this region and Europe as a whole will be confronted in the future if this new chance for peace were to be missed again.
2. Indeed, for ten years now, the largest part of the former Yugoslav space has been the theatre of unspeakable violence and war, which resulted in huge material destructions and great losses of human lives. Hundreds of thousands of refugees and displaced persons are still wandering far away from their homes, placing an additional heavy burden on the fragile economies of the countries sheltering them. The extremely harmful effects of the conflicts have been felt not only by the parties directly involved, but also by other neighbouring nations of the region, seriously affecting their progress towards integration into the European Union. And despite the presence in the region of large international peace-keeping forces, the situation has not become less risky. In fact, the outstanding issues to be settled in order to establish durable peace in the region are more numerous and more complex today than they were two years ago or five years ago.
3. At this time, the countries of South-eastern Europe and the international community as a whole are confronted with the dilemma of either continuing, as in the past ten years, simply focusing on efforts to prevent new violent conflicts, to control the emerging crises and to undertake modest steps of post-conflict rehabilitation; or of moving decisively, in a coherent and coordinated manner, towards seeking acceptable solutions to the real causes of the existing conflicts. If the present no-war-no-peace situation is allowed to continue, we may end up with repeating the sad history of the Cyprus problem, which would be disastrous for the ideal of achieving the unity of Europe. Moreover, we may be confronted along the road with new military outbursts, with unpredictable consequences for the region, for Europe and the wider Euro-Atlantic space. Such a course would have no winner, but all would be losers. What is going on today in Southern Serbia and Northern Macedonia should serve as a serious warning in this regard. The continuation of the present state of instability in the Balkans would only widen and deepen the extremely harmful phenomena of drug and weapon trafficking, organised crime, terrorism and illegal migration in this region, which are posing growing risks for the stability and welfare of the whole of Europe.
4. Obviously, the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe, initiated by the European Union two years ago, plays a crucial role in the efforts of the international community to turn the course of events in the direction of establishing real peace in the Balkans. Nevertheless, the

experience of the past two years has clearly shown that, important as it is, the Stability Pact is not sufficient. More is required in order to take the Balkan situation out of the present stalemate, in the absence of a reconciliation between the main parties to the conflict, especially between Serbs and Albanians and between Serbs and Croats, no genuine progress can be made in the implementation of meaningful national and regional projects of development, of democratic reforms or of consolidating the sense of security in the region. It is obvious that as long as nations of this area remain locked into conflicts, there will be insignificant resources that could be spared for sustaining substantive programmes of economic and democratic changes, which would allow them to move towards integration into wider European and Euro-Atlantic structures.

5. All this suggests the pressing need for defining a more comprehensive strategic vision about the kind of measures that are necessary at the national, regional and international levels in order to advance as fast as possible towards the establishment of genuine peace in the Balkans.

In fact, there are several factors of common position and common interest on which such a vision can be based.

First, as members of the OSCE, all the nations of this region are firmly committed to respecting the existing national borders which cannot be changed but by mutual consent of the states concerned.

Second, all these countries have accepted the standards of the OSCE and the Council of Europe regarding the full respect for the rights of national minorities. Certainly, such standards do not offer any support for tendencies towards fragmentation of countries on ethnic criteria. This is fully understandable since the central course of developments, which include various forms of local and regional autonomy in Europe and in the world, is heading into an opposite direction, that of integration of nations in wider entities as a component part of the process of globalisation.

Third, there is the major national interest of every country in South-eastern Europe to become members of the European Union one day. Obviously, in order to be able to meet the difficult economic and political criteria for admission into this great organisation, our nations must concentrate all their material and human resources, as well as any other international assistance they may receive, on significant programmes of economic development and of consolidation of their democratic institutions. This would require seeking urgent mutually acceptable solutions to the problems which constitute the causes of the existing conflicts in the area, since development and war are incompatible. When all countries of South-eastern Europe become parts of an integrated Europe, many of the issues which separate them at present will become irrelevant.

At an international conference in Bucharest last month on coping with crises and conflicts, organised by the Romanian Foreign Ministry and UNDP, *Yasushi Akashi*, former assistant Secretary General of the UN and a recognised expert on Balkan problems, stated that peacekeeping alone cannot bring solutions to the issues separating the parties to a conflict. Peacekeeping is essentially a measure aimed at a cooling — down of the political temperature. “In order to be effective”, he said, “peace-keeping has to be accompanied by a determined effort for peacemaking or the resolution of conflict. When these diplomatic efforts are out of joint, (UN) peacekeeping is reduced to prolonging a unsteady and fragile status quo like in Cyprus”.

It was also the widely shared view of the participants in that conference that the main initiatives for building a solid structure of peace in South-eastern Europe should come from within the region, since it is the very future of the nations of this part of the continent which is at stake. Countries from other parts of Europe and of the world, as well as international

organisations and especially the United Nations, OSCE, the Council of Europe, the European Union and NATO, can bring a decisive contribution by landing their political and material support to such initiatives.

The most appropriate framework in which Southeast European can develop ideas and proposals for the establishment of peace in their region is probably the South-east European Cooperation Process, in which all countries of the area take part. Nations of this group which are not involved in the existing disputes and conflicts, such as Bulgaria, Greece, Romania and Turkey, can jointly play an important role in the efforts to achieve reconciliation among the other countries of the region. Before ending my brief remarks, it is proper to quote the conclusions of *Carl Bildt's* article referred to at the beginning of this presentation.

“On a day-to-day basis”, says the UN official, “simply accepting a drift toward disintegration and abstaining from more ambitious efforts might seem the most comfortable approach. But the risks of this option are grave. The world might end up with a revanchist Serbia, a broken Bosnia, and a fractured Macedonia, with NATO having to manage endless low-level confrontations along the region’s different fault lines, and the rest of Europe consumed by a cancer of criminality fed by the uncertainties of the region.

The international community must not fool itself into believing that only more smart bombs can handle the problems of the Balkans. It is the smart policies that have been most lacking over the past decade. Now, history has given the region, Europe, and the world a new chance. We miss it at our own peril”.

Nicolae Micu
Editor in Chief
Romanian Journal of International Affairs
Romania