Regional Security in South Eastern Europe

Professor Dr. Anton Bebler

For the last two decades, parts of Southern Europe have prominently figured as the most insecure part of our continent. The recent intercontinental financial crisis, with its initial epicentre in USA, has provoked particularly deep economic and social troubles in several Mediterranean EU members and threatened the Euro, a highly visible and weighty symbol of European integration. The political crises, social unrest, armed violence and wars in Northern Africa and the Near East added to the decades-long tensions and conflicts in southern Europe’s Mediterranean vicinity. These recent events in the neighbourhood resulted in the increased inflow of refugees and job seekers affecting negatively the social stability and political climate in Southern European states. The ensuing political repercussions in turn endangered the working of the Schengen system, another emblematic achievement of European integration.

The already precarious economic and political stability in the Eastern half of Southern Europe has been particularly strongly affected, casting a shadow on the modest improvements in the last decade. According to the statistics on armed conflicts around the world, recently compiled by the Uppsala Peace and Conflict Research Project, Europe among all continents has experienced the deepest drop since the last peak in the early 1990s. The real value of this finding should not be however overestimated. Similarly as elsewhere, although less intensively than in Asia and Africa, a considerable conflict potential still remains on or close to our continent. This is particularly true of South Eastern Europe and also and more so of adjacent regions across the Mediterranean, in Northern and Southern Caucasus and in the Near East. In addition to power politics, unresolved inter-state tensions, territorial and political disputes, domestic religiously-motivated extremism, competition for energy, water and other scarce natural resources, external meddling and other factors, the conflict potential in Europe’s neighbourhood has been enhanced by several aspects of globalization, including its mass information effects, and in the long-run by the inevitable progress of individual and collective emancipation.
The security background of South Eastern Europe

There has been a tangible inter-connection between geopolitical developments in the Euro-Atlantic area and regional security in South Eastern Europe (SEE). On one hand the shifts in power relations among major extra-regional powers have influenced the (in)balance between conflict and cooperation among and within the region. Some real or potential threats to SEE security endanger also other parts of Europe as well. In addition during the last two decades SEE itself has been a notable source of insecurity spilling over to other parts of the continent. Two features of SEE as region stand out – its extraordinary multifaceted heterogeneity and its high sensitivity to shifts in relations among major continental powers. In these respects SEE has differed very appreciably from other European regions, particularly Scandinavia. Not incidentally the geopolitical fault line stretching from SEE eastward, all the way to the Pacific was branded by Z. Brzezinski the “Euroasian Balkans” (Brzezinski 1997, 7-25, 29-45, 99-108).

The geopolitical instability in SEE has had deep historical roots. SEE overlaps partly with the Eastern Mediterranean, with Central East Europe and the Black Sea regions. The central part of SEE – the Balkans has represented a unique and culturally, linguistically and religion-wise the most heterogenous mixture of peoples and ethnic minorities in Europe, per square mile. (Johnsen 1995, 9-60). Consequently SEE has never become a coherent region in cultural, political and economic senses, clearly lacking its center of gravity.

The Balkans have long merited the distinction as the most volatile part of the European continent. Throughout XIXth and the XXth century wider social upheavals and wars between continental powers stimulated in the Balkans local, rebellions, revolutions, coups d’état, state breakdowns, warfare within the region, terrorism and other forms of violence. The latest bouts of armed violence and wars in the Balkans took place in 1991 – 1995 and in 1998-2003 (Blank 1995, ch. 2, 3, 5, 6). The former upsurge was largely triggered by otherwise positive developments in the Euro-Atlantic area – the end of the “Cold War”, the breakdown of Eastern European communist regimes, the dissolution of USSR and of the Warsaw pact and the ensuing transition towards democratic political systems and to market economies.

Social instability, economic difficulties and political unrest have very significantly
contributed to an explosion of inter-ethnic conflicts. Their severity has been further magnified by modern mass media and exploited by ruthless politicians. Political instability accompanied by violence has led since the 1970’s to the fragmentation of Cyprus, Moldova and Yugoslavia. The process of “balkanization” doubled from eight to sixteen the number of *de facto* existing states in SEE. It is estimated that the Balkan wars produced at least 130 thousand deaths and about two million refugees and displaced persons, with the most tragic results in Bosnia & Herzegovina (B & H), Croatia and Kosovo. Another destructive leftovers of the wars have been illegal cashes of small arms and ammunition which supply the Europe-wide black market controlled by organized crime. In addition there were by rough estimates at least a million planted anti-tank and anti-personnel land mines. Although de-mining activities, supported financially by USA and several EU members, have been quite successful, there are still about 2.100 sq. km of suspect areas in B&H and Croatia with possibly 400.000 planted mines. There are also thousands of mortally dangerous remains of cluster bombs in rural Serbia, the results of NATO bombing in 1999 (International Trust Fund 2012).

SEE has won the distinction of the only region in Europe having been the theatre of several UN peace-keeping missions and of the first NATO’s “out-of-area” military intervention. In 1995, following unsuccessful attempts by UN, CSCE/OSCE and EEC/EU (Burg 1995, 47-86) and only after considerable hesitation the USA-led Western powers decided to impose peace on the Western Balkans by force. The end of armed hostilities was finally achieved by 2003 in Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia.

Political fragmentation and armed conflicts as well as the failure of the communist policies of industrialization in SEE have caused huge economic dislocation and damage to the region’s economies and infrastructure (Altmann 2004, 69-84). As a result most former communist-ruled states in SEE still have not reached the pre-1991 levels of industrial and agricultural production. In some parts of the Western Balkans war losses, dislocation of human and natural resources, the breakdown of previously integrated transportation and energy systems, economic fragmentation and the loss of export markets elsewhere in Europe and on other continents have wiped out most positive results of the preceding economic progress. The very unevenly distributed damage has greatly increased the intraregional differentials in GNP p. c. (Batt 2004, 7-19) and in the levels of unemployment. In the poorest SEE states the latter have become the highest on the continent. The Balkan wars had led to a big increase in the
governments’ sponsored or tolerated trafficking in war materials. The wars also contributed to a spill-over of organized crime into Western Europe. High unemployment and poverty in parts of the region have stimulated corruption, organized crime, illegal migration and numerous kinds of illegal trafficking, particularly in narcotics and small arms.

The tectonic geopolitical shifts in the early 1990s and the crisis of neutralism and non-alignment led to a radical political and military realignment in SEE. With the greatly reduced Soviet/Russian influence practically the entire region has become politically and economically oriented towards the West. The end of the NATO/Warsaw pact confrontation and the lack of large-scale mineral, energy or other natural resources led to a very considerable decline of the region’s geopolitical importance. SEE has ceased to be an object of overt contests for political and military domination by superpowers. The extra-regional sources of conflict in, over or about SEE have been therefore reduced to a minimum. The Western Balkans are not anymore Europe’s powder keg as they were in 1914. The era of large-scale interstate wars of religion, of ideology and of violent redrawing state borders in the Balkans seems to be over. The region has in the process gained instead of international notoriety a label as a source of troubles and a costly nuisance.

The current security situation

The “European Security Strategy”, adopted by the European Council in 2003, posited as the main global threats to the EU members: the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, failed states, terrorism and organized crime, cyber security, energy security and climate change (Vasconcelos 2009, 38-41, 64-67). Other EU documents mention also as real or potential problems unresolved conflicts among and within neighbouring states and securing the EU external borders. The actual situation in SEE and even more so the public perception of security threats differ very substantially from these official EU assessments. Respondents in public opinion surveys in most European states have been generally more concerned with other aspects of human insecurity, such as unemployment, crime, corruption, natural disasters (floods, fires) etc.

Once imposed from outside the superficial tranquillity in the region has been maintained in the Western Balkans by international protectorates - in B & H and Kosovo. In B & H the NATO-led SFOR has been replaced by the much smaller 2000-strong EUFOR (supported by
a small NATO special unit and rapid intervention capability). In Kosovo NATO maintains about 6,000 soldiers in the multinational KFOR, while EU runs the 2,300-strong mission EULEX with international police, prosecutors, prison officials, administrative overseers etc. The latter mission is likely to be reduced in numbers by 2013. Since 1975 the line of demarcation between two parts of Cyprus has been guarded by the UN mission UNFICYP, today with about 600 peace-keepers. Two decades since a local mini-war, there are today about 335 Russian “peace-keepers” in Moldova.

Although much less intense than during the “Cold War,” the rivalry for influence in SEE between USA and the Russian Federation has been revived. The Russians have been using energy exports and sizeable parastate investments as their main tools, particularly in the energy sectors in Serbia and Republic Srpska in B & H and mostly in real estate in Montenegro. There are some US and Russian operational tactical nuclear weapons still present in or close to SEE. A brigade-size military outpost in Moldova, a large naval and air base on the Ukrainian territory in Crimea, the Russian Navy in the Black Sea and a rotating squadron in the Eastern Mediterranean mark the decreased Russian military muscle in SEE and its immediate vicinity, compared with the Soviet pre-1990 levels. The US military presence in SEE has, on the other hand, moderately increased due largely to the volatility in the Near and Middle East. In addition to the USN Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean and the US Air Force’s presence in Italy, Greece and Turkey USA has built up a substantial land base Bondsteel in Kosovo and acquired the rights to use military training and transit facilities in Romania and Bulgaria. In July 2011 USA concluded an agreement with Romania on placing on its territory a battery of antiballistic missiles. These activities presage SEE’s future role in the declared US and NATO’s Theater Missile Defense against potential threats from Iran while the Russians view this development and the entire NATO Missile Defense project very differently.

One important aspect of security in SEE since the end of the “Cold War” has been a very considerable change in the levels of defense spending, military manpower, stocks of conventional weapons, arms production and exports. These movements are reflected in the holdings of heavy conventional weapons prior to and soon after the implementation of the CFE Treaty (signed in 1990) and in 2011(see Table 1).
The table shows that the former Communist-ruled states reduced drastically their defense outlays, both for political and economic reasons. This applies not only to the two former WTO members (Romania and Bulgaria) but also to the former non-WTO states not included into CFE- to Albania and to seven ex-Yugoslav states. The present levels in seven states existing today on the territory of the former SFR of Yugoslavia are as follows (see Table 2).

In this group of states the reductions took place after the termination of Balkan wars in 1995 and 1999 they brought to much lower totals military manpower and heavy conventional weapons compared with those in the 1980s in the now defunct SFRY. The reductions of active armed forces have been roughly by a half while those of the reserves and heavy conventional weapons by, at least, two thirds. On the other hand, the two older NATO members (Turkey and Greece) have continued with unabated high defense spending due, i. a., to the unresolved disputes over Cyprus and the airspace over the Aegean Sea. This policy in Greece has contributed significantly to an almost state bankruptcy. Due to disagreements between NATO and Moscow the CFE treaty, adapted in 1999 has not been fully implemented.

Another aspect of regional security relates to the existing nuclear installations. There are only five operating nuclear power stations in the region and a small number of nuclear research reactors. Although all SEE states adhere to the NPT regime, the problem of nuclear safety (including the disposal of nuclear materials) however exists. Its acuteness has been reduced by the shutting down, under the EU pressure of four out of six older Soviet-built reactors at Kozluduy in Bulgaria.

The suppression of armed violence did not add up to long-term stability in the Balkans, as has been manifested since 2001 by outbursts of violence in Kosovo, Serbia and Macedonia, by the paralyzed central government in Bosnia & Herzegovina, by the destruction of a border station, by road barricades close to the Kosovo – Serbia border, the Serb’s armed clashes with KFOR soldiers and violent incidents in Macedonia in 2011-2012.

There are in the region three de facto existing states whose legal status has been contested – the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, Republic of Transdnistria and Republic of Kosovo. In the adjacent region of Transcaucasia there are additionally three flashpoints of sharp interstate tensions which in 2008 resulted in serious armed conflicts with the use of heavy conventional weapons and in 2012 in deadly border shootings. They have involved directly
not only three secessionist and internationally practically unrecognized parastates – Abkhazia, Southern Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh but also the Russian Federation, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. All three “frozen conflicts” remain on Europe’s security and political agenda (Clement 1997, 46-74). Kosovo – the latest addition to the list – has contributed to political tensions between USA and major West European states, on one hand, and the Russian Federation, on the other, Kosovo’s proclamation of independence in 2008 has also divided the members of EU and NATO. Although its existence has been secured Kosovo remains a very weak state, lacking in addition the control over its entire territory, population and borders.

The unsettled situation of the secessionist states provides ample grounds for new potential conflicts. Moreover, there have been recently public threats by and accusations of secessionist intentions against some prominent politicians and public figures in Bosnia & Herzegovina and in Serbia. So the potential for sharp inter-ethnic conflicts (also in Macedonia and Bosnia & Herzegovina) and for further fragmentation in the ex-Yugoslav space has not yet been fully exhausted. Moreover, among the six internationally recognized ex-Yugoslav states there remain a number of unresolved touchy issues of succession, including contested segments of interstate borders on land, on the Danube and in the Adriatic Sea. These issues, if exploited by political demagogues and magnified by mass media could lead anew to serious deterioration of the regional security situation.

Among other political issues in the Balkans one should mention the situation of under-privileged ethnic minorities (e. g. the Romas) and of, at least, a half million refugees and displaced persons. SEE has recently witnessed mass unrest, violent demonstrations and vandalism provoked by economic troubles, high unemployment and political dissatisfaction in Albania, Serbia, Croatia and Greece. Even worse social and political conditions exist however elsewhere in the Balkans. Greece has been also under strong pressure of illegal migration, principally from the Near and Middle East. From among up to 120.000-150.000 estimated irregular migrants p.a. across the Mediterranean at least a third reaches EU via South Eastern Europe. The increased flow has led to troubles and subsequent militarization along the short EU external border between Greece and Turkey. On the other hand, the newest EU member states- Romania and to a lesser extent Bulgaria “exported” part of their own social insecurity when a large number of Romas migrated to and overstayed in illegal encampments and as street beggars in Italy, Spain and France. Harsh police countermeasures
produced political ripples in EU institutions while the flood of other Romanian job seekers in Spain posed additional problems for the freedom of movement of persons within EU.

SEE has been exposed to a number of other non-military threats to security. Some of these have originated in SEE itself, while some have been imported from or linked to similar phenomena in states outside the region. Prominent among non-military threats are organized crime and corruption. According to some analysts they have the potential of becoming the most dangerous threat to regional security. Prominent among non-military threats are organized crime and corruption. According to some analysts they have the potential of becoming the most dangerous threat to regional security (Grahovac 2012). Organized crime from the Balkans, often in cooperation with Italian and other extra-regional criminal organizations has been active in bank and post office robberies, in various forms of smuggling and illegal trafficking, including in humans, human organs, drugs, arms, counterfeit goods, tobacco products etc. It has been estimated that about three quarters of heroin (mostly from Afghanistan) and a considerable part of cocaine (from Latin America) enters Western Europe via SEE. The single biggest source of light weapons illegally exported from SEE has been reportedly the Russian-protected and internationally unrecognized Republic of Transnistria in Moldova.

Since the termination of last wars, the Balkans – previously a hotbed of political terrorism – have lost a good deal of this notoriety and become mainly a transit or hiding area while its parts safe havens for groups of extremists. Among real or potential non-military security threats which affect SEE (and other parts of Europe) one should mention also natural and ecological disasters, climate change and energy security. Parts of the region have suffered recently from devastating floods and forest fires. The Russian-Ukrainian squabbles over gas transit have exposed the fragility of energy security in SEE. The interruption of gas supply in winter 2008/2009 hit worst the city dwellers in B & H. The already high dependence of SEE on imports of carbon fuels is likely to further increase. Several competing projects of trans-regional gas pipelines, notably the EU-backed Nabucco and the Russian-promoted Southern Stream, envision crossing SEE. If and when implemented these very demanding undertakings will strongly impact on energy security not only of SEE but also of EU at large (Altmann 2011, 37-41).

South Eastern Europe and the wider international community
The “frozen” political conflicts over Cyprus and in Moldova, as well as those between Serbia and Kosovo, Macedonia and Greece have testified to the Balkan elites’ inability to find pragmatic solutions through compromise and mutual accommodation and to assure regional stability. So far none of the regionally generated initiatives of enhanced cooperation has proven viable. The efforts to infuse from outside cooperation with and among the region’s states have been more promising (Delevic 2007, 31-72). These efforts have resulted since the 1990s in a web of international organizations, almost exclusively Western in origin. This web has included the “Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe”, CEFTA, SECI, NATO’s “Partnership for Peace”, “South East Europe Initiative”, et. al.

The international record of dealing with the sources of instability and insecurity in SEE has highlighted the complexity of its problems which defy quick uni-dimensional solutions and the underestimated links between the region’s security and the security in other parts of Europe. There is a need for a robust international action to improve the economic and social situation in most of the Balkans while avoiding the vicious circle of the region’s external dependency. Foreign military and police presence will be still needed probably for many years to come. The international community’s ability to help manage numerous problems could be best enhanced by further strengthening EU’s and NATO’s role and influence in SEE. The NATO Strategic Concept of 2011 stresses the aim of “facilitating Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans … [in order] … to ensure lasting peace and stability based on democratic values, regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations” (NATO 2011, 31).

Despite numerous hurdles, EU and NATO have actively fostered multi-faceted regional cooperation, also in security matters and particularly among the ex-Yugoslav states (Rupnik 2011, 17-30). Since 2008 the net of EU stabilization and association agreements has been extended to cover the entire region, except Kosovo. These agreements have served as steps in bringing closer to and eventually admitting all remaining Balkan states into the ranks of EU members. In 2011 the pre-accession negotiations have been concluded with Croatia, Turkey has after a very long waiting period obtained the status of an official candidate but negotiations have been stalled due largely to the Cyprus problem. Serbia and Montenegro entered the rank of candidates in 2012, Macedonia’s candidacy (both to EU and NATO) remains in limbo due to Greece’s ridiculous veto over Macedonia’s name. Albania, Bosnia &
Herzegovina and also Kosovo (within the context of UN Security Council Resolution no. 1244/99) remain potential candidates. The admission of Croatia and Albania into NATO in 2009 also contributed to stabilization in the region.

The NATO summit in Chicago in May 2012 reconfirmed Macedonia’s candidacy, welcomed Montenegro’s progress towards NATO membership, praised Bosnia & Herzegovina’s membership aspirations, expressed support for Serbia’s Euro-Atlantic integration and for the EU-facilitated Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue as well as for further consolidation of peace and stability in Kosovo. In the decades to come the process of EU and NATO enlargement indeed provides the best hope for progress of SEE regional security.

However a note of caution would be in order. The projected inclusion of the entire region into Euro-Atlantic integrations would be clearly insufficient. The record shows that in spite simultaneous belonging of both states to the European Union it took Great Britain and Ireland more than three decades to reach a symbolic reconciliation and conclude the compromise Good Friday Agreement on Ulster. After a similarly long simultaneous membership in EU and NATO the conflict between Great Britain and Spain over Gibraltar still remains unresolved. Sixty years of two countries’ membership in NATO have not stopped the arms race between Greece and Turkey and brought closer a resolution of the Cyprus problem. The admission of the Republic of Cyprus in EU also did not advance the problem’s resolution and perhaps made it more difficult. Today, more than 60 years since the country’s joining NATO and the European Communities the relations between the two main national communities in Belgium are worse than they have ever been. etc, etc.

The historic record also shows that in the 1860s, late 1870s-early 1880s, in 1908-1913, 1914-1921, 1937-1945, 1947-1949, mid-1970s, late 1980s, in 1991-1995 and 1999-2003 the flare-ups of violence have almost regularly punctured the periods of relative peace in the Balkans. This time peace did not come from within the region but was imposed by the West’s military intervention. The underbrush of nationalism, intolerance and inter-communal hatred unfortunately still survives in the Balkans reflected in a paralysis of central institutions in Bosnia & Herzegovina, in worsening inter-communal relations in Macedonia, violence at the Kosovo-Serbia border crossings etc. This is why in order to break with the negative pattern of the last 150 years the Balkan elites need to show much wiser and responsible behaviour. In addition to its own efforts the region will need for years to come the attention, assistance and selective surveillance of its crisis spots by the international community.
Most countries in the region have undergone radical transformation of their political orders. Instead of authoritarian and, among them also totalitarian regimes in the late 1980s, the region is composed today of, in various degrees, democratic political systems. And democracies almost never fight wars among themselves. Moreover, the considerable demilitarization in most Balkan states has greatly reduced their war-fighting capabilities. The Balkan elites have hopefully also learned from the negative experience of the last two decades and of its consequences. Unlike in 1990-1991 the hottest potential trouble spots in the Western Balkans are today under international surveillance in the form, i. a., of present foreign troops, civilian controllers and two *de facto* protectorates. In addition the countries of the region are recipients of considerable financial assistance and developmental loans. There is also a web of the above-mentioned regional cooperation schemes, including those in security and defense matters. All this provides good reasons for moderately optimistic expectation that the Balkans will become one day a region of democracy, prosperity and stability enhancing and not diminishing the security on and around the European continent.
List of Tables

Table 1.

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About the Author:

Anton Alex Bebler earned his Ph. D. in Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, USA in 1971. Since 1972 he has taught at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia and authored a dozen books and over 400 scholarly articles. In 1991 he founded the Slovenian Council of the European Movement, in 1992-1997 served as Permanent Representative at the UN Office in Geneva and since 1998 has been President of the Euro-Atlantic Council of Slovenia.