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I. WITHER AN ALBANIAN QUESTION?

Most experts agree that there is an Albanian Question. It is relevant not so much because of the existence of a master plan for a "Greater Albania" or a "Greater Kosovo" but because it is symptomatic of two interrelated crises that are plaguing the countries of the Southern Balkans. The first is the pervasive weak nature of the states of the region and the headway that corruption and criminality have made in this weak institutional environment. The second is the crisis of representation, i.e., the distance between the elected élite and the citizens as a result both of the weak state structures and their inability to provide basic services.

It should also be said that there are many Albanian questions. Despite the contiguous nature of the Albanian populations across borders in the region, the Albanians in Albania, Kosovo, and FYROM each face different sets of problems related to the weak institutional setting they live in.

For Albania, the issue is not an ethnic divide but rather the inability of a relatively moderate government and an increasingly moderate opposition to overcome their fratricidal political conflicts and devote their full attention to the economic and political development of their country. In this setting, extremist groups with access to weapons and links to illegal crime, as well as a Greater Albania agenda (which favours criminal activities), have the potential to create further insecurity within and beyond Albanian territory.

In FYROM, Albanian assertions do have an ethnic tinge to them in their aim of a more equitable distribution of access to public administration, the police, and education between the Slavo-Macedonian majority and the growing Albanian population. The problem is that while the Albanians want the state to do more for them, for the Slavo-Macedonians the state is perceived to be collapsing, given its inability to reduce unemployment and to increase the population's purchasing power. In this context, Slavo-Macedonians are reacting negatively to Albanian demands for substantial access to the state, which does not seem to be able to guarantee their needs as a majority group, and much less those of the Albanians. Thus, given the slow implementation of the Ohrid Agreement of August 2001 (in part due to the inability of the institutions to reform and the Slavo-Macedonians dragging their feet), for some fringe groups an armed struggle for a Greater Albanian state is seen as an alternative.

In Kosovo, the problem is twofold. On the one hand, the Albanians as the dominant ethnic group have to provide equal access to Kosovo's fledgling institutions for the Serbs and other minorities. To date, the record is mixed at best. On the other hand, the international community, via UNMIK, has ultimate responsibility for Kosovo's governance. This also creates a crisis of representation, as the democratically elected élite feel that they are not in control of the political process. For a variety of reasons, the international community has also been slow in tackling the issue of criminality, thereby compounding the alienation that both Albanians and Serbs (not to mention other minorities) might feel with the state as such. A related issue here is the linkage of the Albanian question to the Serb national question and its impact on Kosovo's status.

The non-resolution of Kosovo's status complicates the equation. It leaves the Albanian Question on the front-burner and it deters the international community (the European Union, in particular) from devoting itself to a more comprehensive strategy of economic development and state-building for the region. There is a time factor at play as well. If the issue is not resolved within the next three to five years, the risks of Kosovo becoming a permanent protectorate could augment. It might also well be that the criminal elements of the region would become more difficult to dislodge. In other words, the sense of insecurity will continue to prevail to the detriment of the region's development and, possibly, the EU's security, with the local Mafia steadily expanding.

The impact on the transatlantic relationship should not be discounted. In particular with the more unilateralist and global-looking United States, American disengagement will put the burden of proof on the Europeans regarding their commitment to preserve multiethnic societies. The question is whether the Europeans will continue to devote more of their time to the political end of the spectrum rather than concentrate on a dual-track, comprehensive policy that includes development as well.

II. POSSIBLE RESPONSES

The aforementioned crisis of representation and the weak institutional state setting require greater involvement of the local élite in the future of the region's reconstruction and stabilisation. It might be worth considering linking the SEECP (South-East European Cooperation Process) to the Stability Pact. The SEECP is the only successful political regional process emanating from the states of the region that addresses the issue of local ownership. The example of the EU's Northern Dimension could be useful here, as it is an interface between regional and EU initiatives.

Related to the above is the issue of stabilising Albania, since it is a key country for the stability of the region. Albania has already demonstrated its willingness to seek a rapprochement with Belgrade (as long ago as when Milosevic was in power) but it cannot seem to get its economy in order and establish and consolidate the rule of law for a variety of reasons that have nothing to do with pretensions to a greater Albania. The European Union should move ahead with the signature of a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with Albania. This would send a message that integration in European institutions is a key priority for the European Union, and strengthen the weak state vis-à-vis its detractors.

Another interrelated issue is the need for major infrastructural reform in the region which is lacking in transport and energy corridors. This may necessitate rethinking the rationale for regional cooperation and the creation of a free-trade area in the Balkans. The benefits of a free-trade area are not only economic (most Balkan states prefer to trade with the EU rather than with each other) but linked to security and stability provided that investments are made in infrastructure projects. The energy crisis plagues all communities alike, as does the lack of transport corridors which would link the countries of the region with each other as well as the region with the rest of Europe. Again, such a policy would help in building up weak state structures.

On the political side, the focus, in particular on promoting and enhancing a dialogue between Belgrade and Prishtina, should be supported actively by the European Union. But it should be done within a framework that does not have negative repercussions that could destabilise the region. The same applies to any other kind of bilateral dialogue (for example, between Albania and Yugoslavia).

In other words, the focus on an integrated regional approach is fundamental. The linkage between the emphasis on regional development and the political track (Kosovo's status, post-Ohrid FYROM, Serbia-Montenegro talks) is crucial. While political discussions are usually of a bilateral nature, the issues of weak states, energy, roads, and criminality are multilateral. An integrated policy that accounts for all facets of the Balkans problems, in particular the Albanian question, needs to be seriously considered and developed.