

**Regional Politics: Political Transition and Institution Building<sup>1</sup>**  
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The National Democratic Institute, NDI, is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nongovernmental organization that supports democratic reform worldwide. NDI focuses on political party development, legislative strengthening, election processes, and citizen political participation through civil society organizations--the institutions that occupy the space between government and citizen. NDI's role is to help make these intermediary institutions more participatory, inclusive, accountable, and transparent, so that government serves the public interest, people accordingly feel enfranchised, and that democracy is not only found on paper but conveys real meaning to people. In this respect, NDI views democratic rule as the ultimate foundation of political stability.

NDI has worked extensively with political, legislative, and civic institutions in the Balkans dating back to the early 1990s. As concerns political stability in the Balkans, and based on NDI's experience in the region, I want to start with an optimistic message, then deconstruct it a bit, and end with a few recommendations on proceeding forward.

My optimistic message is that the region is stabilizing in ways we've not seen before.

First, for as problematic and destabilizing as the region's core issues are--principally between Serbia and Kosovo on the latter's independence and on Bosnia--the threat of armed conflict has been measurably reduced and perhaps altogether removed. Governments have eschewed militaristic policies, the armed forces are among the most reformed institutions in the region, and the international structures on the ground--both governmental and military--have ensured peace.

Second, at a political level, there are increasing signs of cooperation between capitals. Most notably, Belgrade and Zagreb are cooperating on a host of bilateral issues, and both are proving themselves generally constructive in their relations with next-door Bosnia. For their size and prominence, Serbia and Croatia in many respects drive the region; the health of their relations sets a tone that others take their cues from. Turkey's recent diplomatic overtures involving Belgrade and Sarajevo, concurrent with what appears to be a bid for stronger economic ties with Serbia, are also welcome. Albania and Serbia are growing closer, as witnessed by the recent visit to Belgrade--and importantly, south Serbia--by Albania's deputy prime minister. Macedonia's and Montenegro's respective diplomatic recognitions of Kosovo, done not without measurable political risk at home--have also contributed to stability.

Third, the region was conferred a "European perspective" at the 2003 EU Thessaloniki Summit, and is on track to incorporate into the European Union. Most will find their way

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<sup>1</sup> Remarks given at a May 10, 2010 conference organized by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) entitled: Transforming the Balkans--Security, Political Stability, and Economic Development

into NATO, as Croatia and Albania have already done. For Brussels and Washington, the Balkans represent the remaining piece of the European puzzle. And for the Balkans, EU accession and NATO membership provide the ultimate security blanket. So the mutual interest is there. This year's EU visa liberalization for three of the countries, with Bosnia possibly on deck, and NATO's consideration of Membership Action Plan (MAP) status for Bosnia, help people in the Balkans look forward, not to the past.

Fourth, even the most longstanding and intractable problems the region confronts—conflict between Serbia and Kosovo over the latter's independence, Bosnia's inability to cohere a functional system of government, and Macedonia's persistent name conflict with Greece—are playing out in an environment where they don't represent the existential threats they might have once did. For all of its vituperation, Belgrade insists that it will pursue its Kosovo policy through peaceful recourse to international law. Bosnia's situation, though politically dire, is not hitting up to the level of renewed conflict, and Athens and Skopje are circling around potential formulas concerning a workable solution to the name conflict, although, to be sure, domestic politics in either country do not necessarily favor a quick resolution.

Finally, buttressing all of this is public opinion in the region. People don't want to go back. They want to get on with things. In poll after poll, jobs and the economy, not inter-ethnic relations or territorial issues, top the list by a wide margin.

Lest I sound too sanguine, and at the risk of contradicting myself, let me dent this optimistic scenario by mentioning some challenges and complications--although I still retain my core optimism.

First, the legacies of the 1990s are by no means gone. Kosovo and Bosnia will continue to experience challenges to their governmental integrity and political cohesion. Both are subject to irredentist talk in certain quarters around partitions or separation. This becomes dangerous for the region as a whole if it establishes a foothold in mainstream politics, as arguably is the case today in both Bosnia and Kosovo. The regional repercussions, from Vojvodina, the Sanjak, south Serbia, to western Macedonia, not to mention Bosnia and Kosovo themselves, would be alarming.

We can find some reassurances, for example, in Serbia's voters who in the 2008 election cycle unequivocally stood up for EU integration over Kosovo, or the fact that people in Banja Luka, preoccupied as they are by economic concerns, are not spending time marching for the independence of Republika Srpska. Still we know that politicians can and will play the ethnic conflict card, whether cynically out of a need to deflect attention from economic issues, or as believers in the cause, and that significant portions of the region's electorates are not immune to messages of division and mistrust. In this sense, it does matter who's in government, and that means elections still matter--Bosnia this year and Serbia two years from now in particular.

The second complication is about European integration. The ever-present call to join the EU—despite its obvious clarity and unquestionable benefit—is meeting up against some Euro-skepticism. There are several reasons.

- First, people in the Balkans know there are internal EU pre-occupations over financial stability, immigration, and economic revitalization that fuel enlargement fatigue. That fatigue is also based on enlargement itself, as the EU seeks to ‘downshift’ after the 2004 wave and the 2007 accession of Bulgaria and Romania. After Croatia’s accession, Brussels is likely to step back from additional members for a few years.
- Second, next-door Greece and the broader financial and economic problems inside the EU, and within the Eurozone to be more precise, are quickly becoming a cautionary tale: EU accession doesn’t automatically confer social cohesion, economic growth, or for that matter political stability.
- Third, the actual integration process, through Stabilization and Association Agreements (SAAs), official candidacies, and *acquis* negotiations, has moving goal posts and conditionality that stem from the 1990s conflicts and Europe’s checkered past in trying to manage them, and are also explained by the political pre-occupations noted above.
- Fourth, some EU member-states are implicated in the very constitutional and territorial issues that are impeding accession progress (Slovenia’s border dispute with Croatia, Greece’s constitutional name dispute with Macedonia, the lack of EU consensus on recognizing Kosovo sovereignty). In this sense, for Europe, the countries in the Balkans are not so much detached foreign lands as they are neighbors living down the street, with the attendant disputes that arise from such proximity. This may not be fully appreciated by those of us in Washington looking for more coherent and dispassionate European leadership on political issues in the Balkans.

All of these reasons complicate European Union accession in ways not seen with the 2004 enlargement wave. The region’s commitment to EU membership will remain steadfast. But the ability of the EU to sell the prospect of membership as the basis for continued political and economic reforms may take a knock, as might the ability of governments in the region to continue to ‘make the case’ to electorates no less committed but increasingly disgruntled and impatient, and susceptible to Euro-skepticism if the message becomes hurry-up-and-wait.

The third emerging challenge to stability in the Balkans, I would argue, concerns domestic politics. As inter-state relations moderate—we hope—an emerging challenge is found within the political systems of the countries of the region. Political stability first and foremost turns on the state of relations among ethnic communities. From Bosnia to Serbia to Macedonia to Kosovo, ignore ethnic and sectarian tensions at your peril.

That said, I sometimes think we’re too reductionist in using the presence or absence of ethnic tensions as the measure of political health of these countries. I think there’s a

competing narrative to the post-conflict, ethno-centric framework that centers instead on democratic politics and governance.

These countries still have considerable democracy deficits that strain social cohesion, detract from economic development, and impede European integration. Those deficits include weak political institutions; deleterious power imbalances--both governmental, as between the executive and legislative branches, and political, between government and opposition parties; and a political propensity to polarization and self-interest that feeds corrupt practice, politicizes civil society and media, and stymies the kind of policy-driven public discourse that should emerge in new democracies.

Politicians should be developing ideologically coherent and legislatively sound policies in response to citizen demands on such issues as jobs, education, and healthcare. Many are trying but too many are not. Instead they're playing with election codes, walking out of parliament, stonewalling on compromise, and pursuing private interests. Intermediary institutions—parliaments, political parties, civic groups—which should be forces of moderation, are not yet strong enough to center politicians on the public interest. Save for a courageous few, civic groups are too often on the sidelines, depriving the public of nonpartisan voices that can round out partisan discourse and steer politicians toward workable solutions. An almost corporatist style of governance is emerging that does not bode well for societies in need of inclusive political systems. This kind of instability, then, may not be alarming in presaging a return to the 1990s, but instead be considered as a lower-grade, more chronic type of instability.

How then might we minimize factors that precipitate political instability? Two thoughts come to mind:

Sustained diplomatic initiatives are still needed on the core issues of Bosnia, Serbia-Kosovo, and the Macedonia-Greek dispute to prevent the region from sliding into stagnation, or worse. The U.S. presence remains indispensable in partnership with EU and transatlantic institutions. The visit of Vice President Biden to the Balkans last year set an appropriate context in which America's bilateral relations and regional leadership can be reinvigorated.

Democracy support can contribute to political stability in two fundamental ways. The first is strengthening the institutions occupying domestic political space—parliament, civil groups, media, and political parties—to manage political conflict and to promote government accountability and transparency, so that current democracy deficits—polarization and corruption chief among them—are reduced. Second, these countries need to enlarge their political spaces by having more people enter the fray--in parties, in civic groups, inside and outside parliament—debating more issues, more often, in more venues. Political space is overly constricting, commanded by too few people who effectively dictate and too easily manipulate public discourse. Politics in the Balkans needs to become more dynamic, more “multi-polar”, and more issue-driven, to reflect the region's growing social, economic, and political complexity and diversity. Put simply, politics in the Balkans needs to spur reform and progress, not hold them back.