

Lt. Gen (ret) Ioannis Zoukas

## SECURITY AND STABILITY IN THE BALKANS

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The Balkans are a peninsula in South-East Europe, which with the seaways surrounding it, connects Africa, Asia and Europe. Also it controls the sea-line connecting Mediterranean and Black Sea and provides to the Western countries the necessary area to approach the unstable regions of Middle East and Caucasus. Recently this region attracted the international interest for an additional reason. The main pipelines which will take gas and oil from Central Asia to Europe, have been planned to pass through the Balkans.

During the last few centuries, the Balkans are thought of as the tinderbox of Europe because of the many wars which started at the region and split over to the rest of Europe. The most classical example of a military conflict like this was the World War I, which, as it is known, started in Sarajevo, BiH. Also, in the Balkans we had in the past a lot of people's movements. Especially, a lot of people moved from other regions to the Balkans, from the Balkans to other regions and from one place to another in the region. The aforementioned phenomenon in combination with the way that the demarcation of the international borders took place, had as a result the existence of many minorities in several countries of the Balkans.

After World War II and during the Cold War period, we had in the Balkans five countries. These countries were: Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Albania and People's Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The aforementioned Federation included six republics: Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia - Herzegovina, Slovenia, FYROM and Montenegro. Also it included two autonomous provinces (Kosovo and Vojvodina) which were subordinate to Serbia.

During the cold war period, only Greece belonged to the western democracies while the rest of the Balkan countries introduced the actually existing socialism. Greece as the only non-Communist country of the region, among others, became member of NATO in 1952, member of EU in 1981 and introduced the common European currency since its establishment (on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2002).

Immediately after the collapse of the actually existing socialism in the years 1989-1990, the Communist countries of the Balkans, at that time, had some common characteristics. The most interesting of these characteristics were the following:

- a- All these countries moved from an authoritarian regime to democracy. This movement took a lot of time and was not easy enough.
- b. All these countries moved from an economy planned, controlled and directed exclusively by the state, to the market economy. The aforementioned movement was painful enough and took a lot of time.
- c. These countries felt a vacuum of security, which they tried to cover approaching initially NATO and becoming later on members of the Alliance.
- d. Nationalism in these countries and mainly in former Yugoslavia, rose up and in combination with the bad relationship among the democracies of Yugoslavia Federation and the lack of Human and Minority rights of the ethnic minorities, had in the region a lot of civil wars. The final result of these military conflicts was the disintegration of the Former Yugoslavia and the creation of some new countries.

Today we have in the Balkans 11 countries, one of them, "Kosovo" in quotation marks, instead of the five we had during the Cold War. It is

obvious that the collapse of the actually existing socialism triggered major changes in the region and created a new geo-strategic environment in the Balkans. I put Kosovo in quotation marks for the reason that it declared its independence unilaterally in February 2008 and so far it has been recognized only by 93 countries out of the 193 UN members.

I am optimistic, to some extent, about the future of the Balkan countries, even though I see that there are some significant problems in the region, which should be resolved as soon as possible.

I am optimistic since I see that an acceptable level of democracy prevails almost everywhere in the region and the market economy has already started bringing the first positive results. Unfortunately for the former communist countries the recent world economic crisis had negative enough impact on them. Today, 6 out of the 11 Balkan countries are NATO members, while the rest of them are trying to approach the alliance through the PfP program. NATO members are: Greece, Slovenia, Croatia, Romania, Bulgaria and Albania. The rest of the Balkan countries are PfP members, except for Kosovo. Of course, as it is well known to all of you, a country's accession to NATO means vertical increase of its security and stability. Also, today 4 out of the 11 Balkan countries are EU members, while the rest of them are supported too much by Greece and some other European countries in order to become EU members as soon as possible.

The EU members are: Greece, Slovenia, Romania and Bulgaria, while one more country, Croatia, is becoming EU member on the 1<sup>st</sup> of July 2008. Also two of the EU members, Greece and Slovenia, belong to the Euro Zone. As you know, an EU member should have a democratic political system and an acceptable economic and social level. Having a democratic system, the country provides all the human and minority rights to ethnic minorities and reduces in this way the tensions. Also, having EU member an acceptable economic and social level, it

increases its social cohesion.

Among the problems I see in the new democracies of the region are the high percentage of unemployment, the low level of prosperity, the organized crime and the corruption in many of these democracies. Also I see the need for better cooperation among the Balkan countries. But the most dangerous problem of the region nowadays is the stability it faces in three countries. These countries are the following:

a. Bosnia - Herzezegovina is unstable mainly for three reasons:

First because of the way that the state is organized, second, since 36% of its inhabitants were killed or left the country during the last civil war, because the Serbs are staying far away from Muslims and Croats. The EU troops deployed in B-H and the UN Special Representative are safeguarding for the time being the peaceful coexistence of the three communities.

The Muslims are about 43% of the total population, the Serbs are about 33% and the Croats are the rest.

b. Kosovo is unstable because of its fragile interethnic relations.

Also the ethnic and religious significance of Kosovo for Serbia increases the tension between the Kosovo Albanians and the Serbs. The calm situation which we have today in Kosovo is because of the presence of the NATO force deployed at the area.

c. FYROM is unstable because of its fragile interethnic relations and since the relations of this country with its neighbors are not the best ones.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I have already presented to you an overview about the Balkans. Especially, I presented some geographical and historical data of the region, I mentioned the main of its problems and I talked about the security and stability of the Balkan Peninsula. Even though I am optimistic, to some extent, about the future of the Balkans, I

have to say that, if the problems of this region will remain unsolved for a long time, the instability of the Balkans will be increased and its security will be affected negatively. These problems in order to be resolved the Balkan Countries should increase their effort and improve the cooperation among them. Also the international community it is necessary to provide additional support to these countries.

Comin to the end, thank you for the invitation to talk about the security and stability of the Balkans, congratulations for the excellent organization of this workshop and all the best to your Association.

Thank you.