

LACK OF INTERETHNIC UNDERSTANDING AND THE ROLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY IN THE FY REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

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The most striking thing to come out of the survey – in my opinion – is an almost total lack of understanding between the two main ethnic communities. If we look at table one, we see that the causes of the conflict are perceived completely differently. The two top reasons for the Slav Macedonian community come at the very bottom of the ethnic Albanian list, and vice versa. We see almost exactly the same situation on table two when we look at the priorities for peace and stability – in other words, for ways out of the crisis.

This is not a misunderstanding. This is an almost TOTAL lack of communication between two communities which would appear to be living not WITH each other in one country, but NEXT to each other and not communicating at all. And this poll was not conducted among the political elite... but at grassroots level. The results do not mean that neighbour isn't saying "good morning" to his neighbour because the neighbour belongs to a different ethnicity, but it DOES mean that they do not understand each other's concerns, fears, hopes. The understanding and convergence of opinions that we see in some fields – like the joint desire for fair and free elections and problems of crime and corruption – is a sign of hope and a reason for some optimism. Some, not too much. In order to find a way out of the crisis and a permanent solution for the country the two main ethnic communities need a much greater degree of mutual understanding than they have right now.

Ultimately, the responsibility for this lies with them. Since my origins are also in the former Yugoslavia, I reject all notions that is this or that country's fault for the catastrophic 1990s. Or that it was this or that conspiracy at work. It was and is OUR fault that we embarked on the road to fratricide. Similarly, in the case of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, it is up to the Slav Macedonians and the ethnic Albanians to decide if their future lies in peace or in war. But while they are still deliberating what to do and how to reconcile different political goals and ambitions, the International Community DOES have its own options and choices to make... and can either stand aside, do too little or too much. Do the right thing or do the wrong thing. And whatever route it chooses, it will also bear the responsibility and the consequences.

During the 1990s, we have seen all possible variations of the International Community's role in the Balkans. Starting with none or next to none in the case of the last pan-Yugoslav government of Ante Markovic in the late 80s and 90-91. For a moment, please try and imagine not just the lives saved... but also the effort and moneys spent into peacemaking and peacekeeping since 1991. A fraction of that amount COULD, I am saying COULD, not necessarily WOULD have saved the day.

We have the case of too much too early as shown by the early recognition of Slovenia and Croatia in December 91. This step, according to many political analysts, triggered the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

We then have the case of too little too late in the case of Bosnia right from 1991-95. For far too long, the International Community just stood by and did too little.

And, we have the case of too much too late – Kosovo 99 and the air strikes against Serbia and Montenegro. A timely inclusion of Kosovo on the agenda – for example in

Dayton in the fall of 1995 could have made the Kosovo war redundant and also, once again, the huge costs of rebuilding and peacekeeping through KFOR unnecessary.

Finally, we have a case study which started off pretty well, but it's unclear where it will end – former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. The initial deployment of a modest UN military contingent went a long way towards keeping peace in the country through the nineties. But with the Kosovo war and deployment of NATO, the focus shifted and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia became little more than a logistics base for the Kosovo based troops. This became painfully clear in the spring of 2001 when the international troops made sure they stayed well clear of the fighting. The zero casualty policy meant that none of the NATO troops would be used in trying to stop the fighting. And when they got a meaningful job - disarming ethnic Albanian rebels – it wasn't really disarming we're talking about, it was a case of just registering the weapons that the insurgents were willing to hand over.

The diplomatic efforts were there, Skopje almost became the EU foreign policy supremo Javier Solana's second home. But the achievements are pretty slim. The parties were dragged kicking and screaming to the negotiating table in Ohrid and as for the Framework Agreement – let me say just this: There is only ONE official version of the agreement. It is in English and not in Slav Macedonian nor Albanian. If none of the sides could be trusted to translate it properly... can you try and imagine how genuine the sides are going to be about the implementation?

As far as the United States are concerned, the Balkans are obviously NOT a priority any more. The number of American troops both in Bosnia and in Kosovo will go down very shortly. But while Washington can maybe afford to forget about the Balkans, Europe can not. I have no solutions to offer but one. For far too long in the Balkans, the International Community has chosen to see what it wants to see simply because it was politically correct to do so. And for far too long it has refused to see what was patently clear on the ground because what was there, was politically incorrect. The only GENUINE, EFFECTIVE solutions can be the ones that are based on the reality, no matter how nasty the reality is. So let us be brave enough to see it for what it is. And one of those truths is that dealing with the likes of Slobodan Milosevic and his clones elsewhere helps towards creating a criminalised society about which Vladimir Milcin has already spoken. Now that the universal bogeyman is imprisoned in the Hague, maybe it will be more difficult to take the easy option – blame it all on one person and ignore everything else.

And... let us remember one thing. PRE-conflict investment and diplomacy is MUCH cheaper than POST-conflict management, peacemaking and peacekeeping. Not to mention the feeding and housing of refugees and dealing with the consequences of forced migrations or ethnic cleansing as we call it nowadays. Greece, as former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia's first neighbour and the only EU and NATO member in region and as the EU chair from January next year has a special interest and responsibility in trying to get a genuine peace process in motion to the north of its border. The key word here being GENUINE. Thank you.