

Search for Balkan Stability

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The West is redoubling its efforts to help reconstruct the Balkans, but regional stability remains a somewhat elusive goal.

The long-awaited Balkan funding conference in Brussels this week produced pledges of assistance worth \$2.4 billion - substantially more than expected - for short-term reconstruction projects across south-eastern Europe.

The Brussels package is meant to provide the economic underpinnings for the Stability Pact announced at the Sarajevo summit in July last year.

The summit followed NATO's 11-week military campaign, which put an end to what might have become a protracted war between the Serbian security forces and the Kosovo Liberation Army.

Such a conflict threatened to spill over into Albania and, perhaps, even more dangerously, into the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia, FYROM.

NATO's action managed first to contain and then, for the time being, to remove the regional impact of the Kosovo crisis. The potential hotspots for conflict now are more firmly within the remaining Yugoslav federation.

Within Serbia, the combination of President Slobodan Milosevic's authoritarian regime - now engaged in a fresh crackdown on the independent media - and a divided opposition that has missed several opportunities to mount a viable challenge, has produced a seemingly apathetic population.

However, further economic privations or repressive measures could turn the public's discontent, now simmering under the surface, into a violent outburst. In the absence of a democratic framework through which the bitterness could be channelled, an uprising might turn out to be the only way to bring about change.

It is not only Serbian opponents of the government who feel the rising tensions. "As long as the Milosevic regime is there, potential conflicts exist", says Petre Roman, the Romanian Foreign Minister "The daily life and daily mood of the Serbs today is quite similar to the one Romanians had in the last years of Ceausescu."

One way to divert the Serbian public's attention from the misery at home might be for the Belgrade leadership to embark on a confrontation with Montenegro in a bid to halt its drift towards independence.

But that would be a huge gamble: it could trigger civil war not only in Montenegro but also in Serbia itself. Besides, it might also get NATO sucked into the conflict - and that could prove disastrous for the Milosevic regime.

The participants at the Brussels donors' meeting pushed such bleak prospects as far to the back of their minds as possible. But no one was able to gloss over the fact that the Stability Pact - and its economic reconstruction package - will continue to have a hollow ring to it while Serbia remains something of a black

hole in the middle of the region.

Albania and FYROM are the countries most exposed to the negative impact of Belgrade's pariah status and to the threat of further turbulence within the FRY. "We are watching carefully the developments in Montenegro", says Albanian Foreign Minister Paskal Milo, "but we wouldn't say that a conflict there is just a few weeks or months away. Milosevic is thinking more of strengthening his position in Serbia itself than to think about Montenegro."

However, there is concern in Tirana and Skopje because Albania and Macedonia share a geographical proximity to the potential Yugoslav trouble spots as well as dire economic conditions. In addition, Albania's precarious public order situation and the presence of a restive ethnic Albanian community in Macedonia combine to hinder their hopes for stability.

In a less dramatic way, Romania and Bulgaria also remain badly affected by the aftermath of the Kosovo conflict. With the Danube still cut into two by the debris from bridges in Yugoslavia bombed by NATO, their trade with key central and west European markets continues to be disrupted.

Their hopes for compensation have been dashed, although the reconstruction funds pledged in Brussels will go some way towards alleviating their economic pain.

Already on the eve of the Brussels conference diplomatic pressure from the EU succeeded in persuading Romania and Bulgaria to settle their eight-year-old dispute about where a second Danube bridge linking the two countries should be built. The agreement followed clear signals from the EU that Bucharest and Sofia would be included in a speedier process of European integration.

Indeed, the EU's decision at the Helsinki summit in December 1999 to invite Bulgaria and Romania to hold formal accession talks was, in part, a reward for their governments' strong backing for NATO's military action against Yugoslavia.

Even Romanian opposition figures, albeit those on the pro-Western side, accept that their country has benefited diplomatically from their government's wartime stand. "From the political point of view", says Teodor Melescanu, leader of the Alliance for Romania, "I would say that the solidarity we have shown was returned to us."

However, while public enthusiasm for the EU remains strong in Bulgaria and Romania, backing for NATO membership was dealt a big blow during the bombing campaign. The two governments' decision to open their countries' air space to NATO's aircraft was unpopular, as many Bulgarians and Romanians feared it might bring the war even closer to home. Support for joining NATO is now making a slow recovery.

However, in Romania, at least, elections due before the end of the year could bring nationalists to power. That would mean a severe setback for the Balkan integration process, if it were to lead to a cooling in Bucharest's relations with Brussels. It would also affect those ties indirectly through a possible deterioration in relations with Hungary, NATO's newest member and probably one of the EU's next.

In the western Balkans there has been a marked improvement in stability. During the NATO bombing conditions in Bosnia remained calm and the Bosnian Serbs posed no challenge to the SFOR peacekeepers.

Since then Milorad Dodik, the pragmatic prime minister of Republika Srpska, has managed to consolidate his control. Meanwhile SFOR has arrested several high-ranking suspected war criminals. And Wolfgang Petritsch, the High Representative of the international community, has removed from office over 20

diehard opponents of the peace process from all three sides of the ethnic divide.

The death of Croatian President Franjo Tudjman and the electoral defeat of his administration have removed a key factor of instability from Bosnia. The new Western-oriented government in Zagreb is not interested in Tudjman's dream of annexing Bosnia's Croat-inhabited areas. At the same time Serbia has been much weakened by its defeat at NATO's hands, and its capacity for stirring up trouble in Bosnia has been greatly reduced.

In spite of these developments, Petritsch is concerned that the break-up of what is left of Yugoslavia could undermine the efforts to reintegrate Bosnia's two entities. "We do not want new sovereign states in the region," he says, "because this is a concept of the past. The establishment of new states, as in the case of Kosovo or Montenegro, should be avoided."

The question mark hanging over Kosovo's future status, the continuing presence of the Milosevic regime and the uncertain fate of the FRY in general, pose one of the key threats to the precarious stability that has been established in the Balkans in the wake of the Kosovo conflict.

The display of unity between the West and most of the Balkan nations during and since the Kosovo crisis has brought hopes for a greater degree of stability, co-operation and prosperity across region. But so far those hopes have only been partially translated into practice.

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