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## **Security Threat Perceptions in Southeast Europe**

# Security Perceptions in Transition: an Introduction

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*E dietro che cosa c'era? Di là di quell'insospitale edificio, di là dei merli, delle casematte, delle polveriere, che chiudevano la vista, quale mondo si apriva? Come appariva il regno del Nord, il pietroso deserto per dove nessuno era mai passato?*

(Dino Buzzati, "Il deserto dei tartari", p.19)

## Introduction

This study, coordinated by CeSPI (Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale, Rome), commissioned by CeMiSS (Centro Militare di Studi Strategici, Rome), and in cooperation with the East West Institute (EWI) of New York, aims to identify, prioritise, evaluate and discuss a specific aspect of the political outlook of countries in Southeast Europe, namely security threat perceptions. Given its focus, the study is inherently skewed in favour of a negative dimension – the perception of threats and, more broadly, risks – thus inevitably downplaying the positive dimensions such as improvement in the security environment in the region. This qualification is in order because it is not the authors' intention to assert that encouraging elements are absent or marginal: our focus simply reflects a research approach and a practical need to delimit the scope of our analytical effort. In fact, we start from the assumption that making the perception of a threat the guidepost of a country's policies has significant costs: it may often mean sacrificing important goals and interests on the altar of a defensive – perhaps paranoid – view of the world. A "fortress mentality" has huge implications for the collective psychology of a people and the state leadership that makes policy on its behalf. As Dino Buzzati reminds us in his softly melancholic yet bitter style, referring to "the fortress" in his famous novel: "Tutto là dentro era una rinuncia, ma per chi, per quale misterioso bene?"<sup>1</sup>. At times, as Buzzati suggests, the fortress long outlives its original purpose, the feared enemies that the garrison was supposed to guard against.

Besides the distinctive perspective adopted here, a more detailed methodological premise is due. The importance of perceptions in human interaction can hardly be exaggerated and has been recognized by a wide array of disciplines, ranging from psychology to anthropology, and from sociology to international relations. One of the fathers of contemporary Western sociological

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<sup>1</sup> "Everything in there was a renunciation, but on behalf of whom, of which mysterious good?" (p.21)

thinking, Max Weber, argued forcefully that ideas (how individuals see and perceive the world) are the prime movers of history.

The specific field of strategic studies has often been dominated by “rationalist” approaches, but even theories predicated upon rational choice, such as game theory, do incorporate the possibility of highly subjective images of the world and even distortions of whatever “objective reality” the observer is able to isolate. As a classical study of perception and misperception in international relations argues, a better understanding is needed of “the problem of how even a perfectly unemotional and careful person would go about drawing inferences from highly ambiguous evidence in a confusing and confused world”<sup>2</sup>.

We set out to analyse perceptions by keeping in mind that there is a distinctive “security problematic” which – as formulated in a 1998 study specifically devoted to the issue – typically revolves around the questions of *who does security, on whose behalf, and with which instruments*<sup>3</sup>. In this connection, perceptions are closely linked to how the security realm is defined in the first place, because this definition will largely determine the outcome of the politics – or discourse – of and on security, that actually precede the formulation and pursuit of security policy. For instance, if the policy elite succeeds in defining a given issue as a “security issue”, it has already achieved the important goal of a high degree of political mobilization: public opinion is much more alert and ready to listen when the possibility that the country is not “secure” is openly raised. Of course, the degree of consensus for any proposed course of action that the leaders will obtain is far from predetermined, but it is true that the ability to raise the public awareness by for example launching a campaign on the media almost gives the leadership a role of gatekeeper of public perceptions. Manipulation is thus a central factor in each of the cases under consideration, so that threats or risks are sometimes “perceived” because they are in fact “constructed”, often deliberately. From the vast literature on ideas, identity, “belief systems”, and decision-making, we borrow the fundamental notion that there are at least two types of perception-related phenomena constantly at work: a series of systemic “cognitive distortions” – recurring patterns which are common to most decision-makers in high-level political positions and are thus partly predictable – and an array of specific, often unique thought processes linked to interpersonal relations in a given environment and to individual psychology<sup>4</sup>.

What we have not done is engage in a systematic analysis of how the problem of perceptions – and misperceptions – affects security issues in South Eastern Europe with a view to developing a full-fledged theory of security perceptions. However, the present study rests on the assumption that perceptions are ubiquitous and that identifying what they are (specifically, in the field of security) is an exercise that goes beyond the simple description of domestic politics, the manipulation of public opinion and the cynical fabrication of invented threats.

This brings us to the issue of communication in complex societies, which is obviously central to any analysis of perceptions: it is through an extensive and continuing process of communication that perceptions are generated, passed on or spread around, established and at times crystallized, but also challenged, contested or refuted. Social and political change occurs by way of communication, in the realm of security and threat perceptions just as in any other.

Perceptions are based on the interpretation of external stimuli or signals. According to an established field of study in psychology<sup>5</sup>, it can be argued that all behaviour is communication, and

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1976, p.3.

<sup>3</sup> Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, Jaap de Wilde, *Security. A New Framework for Analysis*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder, Col, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> See for example Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane (eds.), *Ideas and Foreign Policy. Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1993.

<sup>5</sup> The school of “Neuro Linguistic Programming” – in the field of behavior analysis and therapy – may be of particular interest in connection with complex communication exchanges. Although this field of study has not been directly linked

all communication is behaviour. There is no individual or group behaviour which does not send a signal of some sort – deliberately or otherwise: these signals will be registered and interpreted by others. This in turn generates some kind of response, or “feedback” – again, deliberately or otherwise – which is the essence of communication. In this sense communication (and thus the perceptions that communication engenders) is not a one-directional, linear phenomenon, but rather a circular or cyclical process. In most circumstances, it is actually impossible to identify an exclusive “sender” and “receiver” of signals at any given time, as when an individual is speaking and another is listening silently while sending signals nonetheless, for example by nodding, shaking the head or looking interested or bored.

The implications of these basic concepts on security threat perceptions should be evident: feeling secure is first and foremost a state of mind, and is therefore affected by all sorts of perceptions especially regarding other people’s intentions and capabilities. Taking this line of reasoning to the level of state institutions or other sophisticated human networks, one finds that communication is usually filtered by complex “media”; yet, security can still be seen as primarily a state of mind.

If we agree with the famous definition by political scientist Benedict Anderson that a nation is, as most other human groupings, an “*imagined community*”, we might argue that security is the image of a “secure imagined community” (be it a nation, a state, an ethnically or religiously defined entity, etc.).

In a secure imagined community, political elites still seem to hold a primary role but, due precisely to the circular nature of communication dynamics, have to carefully consider public response. In effect, leaders tend to define what exactly is to be secured – for instance, by publicly stating that the integrity of the state is threatened, economic reform is a top priority, or domestic opposition itself is undermining governance – and act accordingly. However, the *imagined community* that is purportedly at risk – or conversely, secure – is not a passive object or recipient but rather a collective actor or agent itself.

In any case, the expected response presents an almost irreducible degree of uncertainty. The role of the media further complicates the picture, contributing to shape perceptions in both directions, from the public to the elites and viceversa. In addition, as we will see more in detail, in almost every country or entity under consideration perceptions are never shaped independently from a Western oriented state of mind: national elites do, often explicitly, assess threats and risks in a way they calculate is compliant with a supposed Western agenda, and they do their best to project an image of the country as a good candidate for accession to the EU, or as a trustworthy and necessary ally of NATO.

## **The focus of the analysis**

Our analysis focuses on perceptions that could have a direct impact on the policymakers or on the social and political climate in which security policy decisions are made. Whence, our choice to concentrate on the public debate, mostly reflected in the media, and on elite opinion. Grassroots opinion is constantly in the background as a factor affecting the top decision-makers themselves, but an in depth analysis of a relatively large sample of ordinary people has been conducted only with regard to Serbia proper, Montenegro, and the FYROM (Macedonia). In each of these three cases, the entity study has been accompanied by a polling exercise conducted by SMMRI group in the last three months of 2000.

We tried to assess the perceived security and political risks in the single countries and entities under consideration, identifying the priorities and/or the main cleavages between political elites, and analysing the impact of these perceived risks on the political orientations of the

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to political analysis, the sociological implications of viewing human behavior as inherently a form of communication are significant. See for instance Diltz, R., *Roots of Neuro Linguistic Programming*, Meta Publications, Cupertino, 1983.

country/entity and on inter-state as well as trans-national relations in the region, against the background of the public debate on these issues. We concentrated first on possible perceived threats concerning the very existence of the country or entity under consideration, in the form of disintegration through the loss of important parts of its territory, partition, failure to achieve a viable status, political disorder or civil strife; we then tried to reckon if relations with neighbours were perceived to pose a threat whatsoever, if there were threats deriving from the evolving international scenario, in the form of declining international attention and political and/or financial assistance to the country/entity under analysis, and finally if economic collapse was a perceived threat.

We then turned to threats which not appear to undermine the existence of the country or entity, but nonetheless are very serious, such as crime and corruption, the decline of living standards, environmental degradation.

On the basis of the perceived threats we identified, our aim was to see if and how these threats define some major political, ideological, national or ethnic divide within the political elite and within the country and finally to understand how threat perceptions actually influence policies and political objectives in each country/entity, through the analysis of official documents, policy statements and interviews.

We submitted to each author a paper outline with these guidelines in the form of direct questions, as a starting point for the author's independent analysis. We have identified the following recurring themes in prevailing threat – and risk – perceptions: the transition process in its multifaceted dimensions; perceptions of exclusion and inclusion; a “neighbourhood” problem; the existence of various cleavages in the societies of the region. The final section of this Report will briefly discuss additional areas of potential risk that have *not* been consistently emphasized by the country and entity studies.

### **The “transition syndrome”**

An underlying theme of the research findings is the view that the perception of threats or risks is closely intertwined with the complex phenomenon of transition from pre-1990 regimes. Of course, the specific perception has to do with the political, economic, ethnic, geographical features and recent experience of each country, but there is a common thread in terms of transition politics being a major source of anxiety.

As is well known, the profound transformation of state and social structures is a common feature in Central, Eastern and Southeast Europe since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The particular conditions prevailing in Southeast Europe have made the transformation especially harsh and unsettling for large sections of the population: the weaker economic foundations have certainly had a major impact, while the extensive repercussions of the violent conflicts in former Yugoslavia have aggravated existing problems. As a result, to the extent that market-oriented reforms and some aspects of democratisation (in the specific context of transition to liberal democracy at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century), ultimately produce more – not less – uncertainty, these key components of the overall transformation process often become an immediate source of risk to individuals and groups. For instance, privatisation schemes and even the kind of “tyranny of the majority” which emerges from the ballot box may well constitute significant threats in the context of weak states, fragmented civil societies and economic stagnation or recession – however temporary these phenomena may be. Thus, we might refer to a kind of “transition syndrome” which induces certain recurring perceptions of threats to the integrity (or rather gradual and peaceful development) of the state, civil society and the polity as a whole.

A closely related point is that state-building is very much at the core of political life in all the countries under consideration. Again, a steady process of state-building, and subsequent state consolidation, can be seriously threatened by a very broad array of factors, depending on who (which kind of elite) is pushing the process forward and on what basis (the “democratic ideology” one author refers to, moderate nationalism/patriotism, unrestrained nationalism with expansionist/irredentist ambitions, etc.). One author adopts the expression “transitional democracy” to capture the challenges and opportunities his country (Macedonia) is facing. The combined traits of a “weak state” can be found in several cases: typically, the weak standing of the political and administrative elites interacts with the immaturity of voters who tend to mistrust, misunderstand or disregard even the genuine calls for deep (and usually painful) reforms on the rare occasions when these are issued in a credible manner. To a large extent, lack of trust between citizens and their representatives is an obvious legacy of the communist era, but there is a broader problem of adjustment to truly democratic practices, in which the accountability of elected politicians ought to be paralleled by the responsibility of electors in behaving as law-abiding citizens and resisting “populist” temptations.

Such fundamental weakness of the democratic process produces important effects: one of the most conspicuous is that because state institutions (and particularly the democratic transfer of power through open, free and contested election) are seen as fragile by both elites and voters, important linkages are often made between domestic political developments (for example the composition of governing coalitions) and relations with neighbouring countries, on the one hand, and Western institutions, on the other. This is especially true when ethnic politics is at the forefront, as in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, and of course Kosovo. Certain external threats – perceived, regardless of whether they are simply presumed or somehow proven by recent events – are used as a legitimating tool (mostly, the risk arising from large and politically active ethnic minorities), but over time this is often damaging for the governing elites (for instance by hindering inclusion in Western institutions).

The following are the main manifestations of what we call the “transition syndrome”:

a) The process of state-building – or state consolidation when conditions are more mature – is inextricably linked to the way threats are identified, presented to the electorate in the political discourse, treated by the media, and addressed through state policies. In the older days of “Westphalian” international order, it used to be the case that “the state made war, and war made the state”; now we can probably adapt and rephrase this traditional statement as “the state makes up threats (or issue threats to others), and threats make the state”. Even so, the monopoly of “legitimate threat definition” is challenged by the circular nature of communication we described earlier: indeed, political elites, once they identify a threat and try to use it to strengthen their power base, have to deal with reactions from the public that are rarely completely predictable, while the role of the media and international actors of various kind further complicates these dynamics.

b) Another (related) item in an ideal “threat map” is institutional weakness as such, which often emerges in the form of concern over crime and corruption. Although, except in the cases of Albania and Kosovo, there rarely seems to be concern over violence *per se*, organized crime is indeed perceived as a threat to the peaceful development of the country involved, endangering the fabric of society itself and undermining political and economic stability. Even so, we found that threat posed by crime was somewhat underestimated, considering the proven dimension of the phenomenon, and the perception of it outside the region. There is also, among national political elites and media, a tendency to blame neighbouring countries emphasizing the regional and trans-border nature of crime and illegal trafficking, thus diminishing the single country’s responsibilities.

c) Corruption is instead ubiquitously perceived as a central concern, affecting both ordinary people in their daily life, as an undesired toll that needs to be paid to obtain basic services, and higher echelons of state administration, which are commonly considered corrupt or very prone to corruption. The latter have, in the meantime, incorporated the need to fight corruption in their political discourse but are seldom trusted by the citizens. Corruption ranks first among threats perceived in many countries of the region, is widely felt by the public and features very high on the media's agenda; in some cases, as in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, corruption scandals led to significant political changes, orienting voters toward parties considered less involved in corruption practices. In this respect, a significant schism may be developing between voters and elites, sometimes generating a growing sense that a generational change is required<sup>6</sup>. Crime and corruption alike are perceived as threats also to the international image of the country, with important repercussions on the process of accession to Western structures.

d) Poor economic performance is also widely perceived as a constant gap between the present condition (transition) and a viable, more sustainable status, since steady and orderly economic development is viewed as a basic pillar of successful transition. The poor economic situation of most countries under consideration is still a primary matter of concern for political elites, who constantly fear the political backlash from a failure to achieve meaningful improvements in this field. This is especially true with respect to the often overriding goal of meeting the criteria for EU accession, where this is a reasonably near-term goal.

Ordinary people tend to perceive economic disarray much more directly and dramatically in the form of a daily struggle for survival and subsistence, and is reflected in new, deep social divisions.

Complete economic collapse is rarely perceived as an imminent threat, and we have cases where dire economic conditions have protracted for years producing the effect of people getting used to them (this seems to be very much the case in Albania, where the threat of economic collapse is also mitigated by the strong belief that Europe would intervene in case of a dramatic and sudden worsening of the situation): we can thus refer to a sort of “permanent transitional state of mind”. Still, in other cases such as Romania, analysts underline the danger of economic decline especially when combined with other negative trends, such as a progressive dissolution of state authority.

In countries whose economy is largely based on international aid/assistance, the shift towards more full-fledged market practices – in terms of transition, towards completion of the process – may also pose a threat, for the social costs this would imply. Even in countries not completely dependent on foreign assistance, the road towards accession and integration into the European Union can be understood as the advent of a “society of uncertainty”, or, much pertinently in our case, the “risk society”, as two famous sociologists, Zygmunt Bauman and Ulrich Beck, define Western society at its present stage<sup>7</sup>. It seems, however, that this is not – or not yet – a widespread threat perception in the region: for now, the social costs of transition in terms of more difficult access to basic services, such as health care, the widening gaps between wages and an increasing cost of life, are not immediately associated with a more scrupulous adherence to Western economic recipes. These trends are already beginning to affect the countries enjoying a comparatively better economic performance.

That the societies of Southeast Europe are already experiencing the strains of “post-modernity” – while still completing their shift from central planning to a market system – is no more than a working hypothesis: it is probably too early to assess. Yet, it is worth bearing in mind that

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<sup>6</sup> In this perspective, Giovanni Scotto has applied a specific approach to post-conflict situations, based on the role of “peace constituencies”, suggesting that reform processes should focus on the middle levels of the elites and facilitate the emergence of a new generation of leaders. See Giovanni Scotto, “Peace constituencies e alleanze per la pace – esperienze in Bosnia-Erzegovina”, *Laboratorio CeSPI*, N.5, Marzo 2001 (in print).

<sup>7</sup> See Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in Fragments. Essays in Postmodern Morality*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1995 and *Postmodernity and Its Discontents*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1997; and Ulrich Beck, *The Risk Society*, Sage, London, 1992.

additional pressure on fragile societies may come from economic, technological and social forces which are largely out of control even in the most advanced economy systems of the West.

In any case, it is already clear that economic risks are perceived as serious threats in relation to their social and political impact, further confirming the nature of transition as a multidimensional process.

It is fair to emphasize that, in spite of the inherently skewed character of the present study (which concentrates on threats rather than threat-reduction policies), it clearly emerges from various contributions that there is a bright side of transition.

Although the fact that the territorial and cultural/ethnic nature of the state remains an open question – as in FRY/Serbia – is openly recognised as a lingering source of uncertainty and potential instability, there are strong signs that a truly innovative and path-breaking method for resolving even the most delicate issues has been adopted: in practice, this is constitutional democracy. In large measure, the prospect for success of the post-1990s governments such as those in Zagreb and Belgrade is predicated upon the assumption that a constitutional-democratic political system can afford to leave these previous “existential” questions temporarily unanswered while concentrating on reforming the economy, making state institutions more accountable and efficient, mending fences with neighbours, international partners and domestic elements, and allowing for a thorough liberalization of society. In other words, transition is far from completed and can turn into a “syndrome” in a worst-case scenario, but also represents the best hope for progress.

This can be seen as an emerging strategy for threat reduction, which is articulated, with slight local variations, in all our entity and country studies.

### **The EU and NATO: perceptions of both exclusion and inclusion.**

Inclusion in the major Western institutions is a central goal, especially as it is believed to entail almost immediate economic benefits and prestige both domestically and internationally. The inevitable adjustment costs are usually regarded as decisively outweighed by the expected positive effects. Anything that hinders constructive relations with the EU and the major financial/lending agencies is viewed as also a threat to the political viability of the country: indeed, survival of the political elites often rests on the widespread feeling in their respective countries that a march toward inclusion (ultimately full accession) is underway. This aspect is of special relevance to the issue of threat perception because it is itself a matter of perceptions: what really counts is indeed projecting the image of being a worthy partner of the West, in other words ensuring international recognition, symbolic as much as substantial.

Serbia might have constituted an exception to this general rule, at least as long as President Milosevic remained in power. Yet, even there the electoral success of the former opposition (now itself in power in Belgrade), based on a pro-Western platform (albeit with some reservations) confirms the great importance attached to integration in “European space” and the boost this can give to legitimising new and untested leaderships.

As to the EU, the key question in the short term is to what extent the Stability Pact (an EU-led project) is affecting security threat perceptions, for instance by encouraging countries in the region to pursue regional cooperation with neighbours. In the longer run, the geographically articulated process of effective EU accession, with different timings for different countries, is likely to create distinct threat perceptions standards, reducing the perception of certain risks, mostly related to economic or political stability, only in countries that will join first, thus generating (self-perceived) secure and insecure bordering communities, with negative – real and perceived - effects especially on the immediate ring of countries bound to be EU external frontier.



NATO is a unique case, due to its role in steering regional politics over the last decade and its current function as the key political-military enforcer of the minimum common denominator which now constitutes “the policy” of the Euro-American coalition. The Alliance has had a major impact on perceived threats, especially with regard to Bosnia-Herzegovina (which is practically held together by the presence and commitment of NATO forces), FRY (meaning Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, in terms of the “entities” we have looked at), Croatia, Macedonia, and to a lesser extent Albania (particularly in connection with the Kosovo issue). The cases of Bosnia-Herzegovina and FRY are of course the ones most directly affected by NATO’s policies, but this has produced a whole set of implications for the entire region: we might conclude that there is by now a NATO-induced security (and insecurity) dynamic, which overlaps the local dynamics. At present, it is admittedly very hard to identify exclusively endogenous security/insecurity perceptions independent of NATO.

Overall Western concern for the region, and not only NATO’s military presence, is often viewed as a safety net preventing tensions and problems from escalating up to the level of emergency, or possible crises from having violent repercussions. The common belief that the EU and NATO would necessarily take the responsibility for “rescue operations” is in some cases combined with a fatalistic attitude, as in Albania, while in others is related with the awareness of the strategic relevance of a specific country and thus its presumed value for the West. On the negative side, this belief is reflected in the expectation of what would happen if Western institutions were not to intervene, or were simply to reduce their level of concern – and commitment to – the region or one country in the region. In this context, we might refer to “conditional perceptions”: a number of problems are not deemed to be critical or are not perceived as immediate threats as long as a visible international presence is guaranteed, but it is commonly held that in the case of a withdrawal or disengagement the very same problems would soon produce dangerous effects, and dormant cleavages might soon erupt into open conflict. This is very much the case for Bosnia and Herzegovina, but similar perceptions are quite common in the region. A quotation from a high level Romanian politician offers a fitting example: “If Romania is accepted into the EU and NATO, the risk of division along ethnic lines is practically close to zero. Outside the EU area, the risk is likely to increase [...]”<sup>8</sup>.

Therefore, even if international disengagement from some of the most problematic spots may not be scheduled and not foreseen in the short term, and the constructive influence of these “conditional perceptions” may prevail, the sheer possibility of a change in the international agenda is in itself a source of anxiety and uncertainty. Excessive reliance on external support has of course deep negative effects on local “capacity building”,<sup>9</sup> on citizens’ trust in national political elites, on genuine civil society development, and ultimately on the viability and self-sustainability of the state. All this, in turn, can only affect negatively the process of transition.

As a confirmation of the ambivalent nature of threat perceptions stands the perspective of integration into the EU, which is clearly perceived as a carrier of tangible benefits, as well as an ideal goal. Although it may appear to be far over the horizon, this distant goal still provides a powerful antidote against the multiple dangers of a demoralized society dealing with immature state structures. For exactly the same reason, possible exclusion from Western structures is conceived as a threat. We can conclude that in this permanent and inescapable tension lay the range of policy choices and outcomes of each transition process: a virtuous cycle of hope, commitment and achievement, or a vicious cycle of frustration, backlash and failure, are equally possible.

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<sup>8</sup> Ioan Mircea Pascu, vice-president of PDSR and appointed minister of national defence.

<sup>9</sup> Bosnia and Herzegovina is here the most clear example, but also Albania, where foreign assistance though not having the formalized shape it has in Bosnia is wide and crucial to the country, is a relevant case.

## **Bad neighbourhood/Perceived neighbours**

Relations with neighbours do represent a problematic issue, in terms of perceptions, especially between countries where open conflict has marked recent history and, in some case, the very process of (new and unfinished) state/nation-building. The main reason why the large civil and, most of all, military international presence in the region is seen as key to preventing new outbreaks of violence (both between countries and within each country) is precisely that several scores may still be waiting to be settled. It is true that the influence of “the internationals” generates an overall security dynamic, but a powerful endogenous dimension is an equally decisive factor: in fact, external actors are systematically dragged into commitments designed to affect the local power balance.

Even so, the identification of threats posed by neighbouring countries is still a central feature of official security policies, and an ingredient of the domestic political struggle. In Albania, for example, a Serbian threat is clearly articulated in the strategy of national security and, until not so long ago, in the broader outline of the country’s foreign policy. Also in Albania, a Greek threat is vocally denounced by the current political opposition. In other cases, neighbours are perceived as “bad examples” (Albania is perceived in Kosovo as “a model of animosity”), and their recent experience is seen as a very undesirable yet realistic scenario, as if the neighbours’ past could become one’s own future. This is especially true in countries that used to have war zones at their borders, with the ongoing fear of instability spreading inside their territory; similarly a possible worsening of the situation in Romania, as elsewhere, is called a “Yugoslav” scenario.

If we look at what should be a common path for all the countries in the region, the aspiration to integration in the European Union and to membership of NATO, we may note that these goals are viewed first and foremost as a *national* objective, regarding each country as a single unity. Consequently, it is easy to understand why the commitment to seek accession seems to have generated in each country of the region an antagonistic or at least competitive, rather than a cooperative attitude toward one another<sup>10</sup>. There is apparently little push towards the intra-regional and horizontal cooperation that, according to the EU Stability Pact, should precede European integration. To be true, there has been some progress in this field, and in any case it was to be expected that widespread readiness to cooperate would kick in only gradually.

Another example of bad neighbourhood relations, and of significantly diverging perceptions in the region and in the international community, is given by the way political developments in the region, very positively greeted in Western capitals, are perceived in neighbouring countries. Even a long awaited democratic evolution in a country (as in the recent cases of Croatia and then Serbia) is viewed with concern by other countries in the region because it might cause a diversion of financial aid and international attention in general from one country to another. In other words, progress by a neighbour on the road to reform may be a threat to international assistance as seen from the viewpoint of an individual country. This seems to be a common perception in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Albania, and, with a different emphasis, in Croatia, in the wake of democratic developments in Belgrade and the ensuing change of attitude by the international community towards the new Yugoslav leadership. In the case of Kosovo, where better relations between Western countries and Yugoslavia are directly associated to a lesser support for Kosovo independence, these evolutions amount to what we have defined a perceived existential threat.

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<sup>10</sup> Bulgarian premier Kostov, complaining that his country’s progress towards meeting the criteria for EU accession is underestimated, has declared that Sofia wants the EU to assess country performances in line with their respective achievements or failures, and not by “patching them up into groups”. Interview with the German daily *Financial Times Deutschland*, 16 January 2001.

Difficult bilateral relations between countries are somehow reflected in grassroots perceptions as investigated by the polls conducted in Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia. The representative sample of people interviewed has shown a very negative perception of neighbouring nations, while interpersonal relations inside each of the three entities under consideration are marked by an impressive and widespread lack of trust. It would be too simplistic, though tempting, to draw direct connections between grassroots orientations and regional political patterns, and between bad interpersonal relations and a recent history of difficult international relations. The former may well be a consequence, rather than a cause of the latter. It is perhaps more useful to refer to theories enhancing the importance of “social capital” for a healthy state and society development.

### **Cleavages: not only ethnic**

Ethnic belonging has consistently been indicated as a major cause of the violent outcome of the Yugoslav dissolution in the 1990s. The common (we might say prevailing) media and academic discourse on the war in Bosnia argued that ethnic nationalisms were somehow unleashed by the collapse of the socialist system in Yugoslavia, generating an irresistible drive towards the establishment of ethnic states. Because the creation of ethnic states requires a high degree of homogeneity in a given portion of territory, violent conflict ensued in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where these supposed ethnic “nations” were more intermingled than anywhere else. This interpretation deeply shaped the international response to the war, thus preventing a more complex and articulated reading of the phenomenon (and ignoring decades of coexistence among Serbs, Croats and Muslims in Bosnia, as well as elsewhere), and possible alternative responses to it<sup>11</sup>.

Our research findings suggest that ethnic belonging is not a “necessary” or “inherent” feature of the current prevailing perceptions in Southeast Europe. Indeed, among the different factors affecting a sense of security, the failed coincidence of nation and state is not a key cause of concern. If the tendency to think (and act) politics in ethnic terms is a heavy legacy of war both in Bosnia and in Kosovo, elsewhere in the region ethnic categories, though an important component of the political discourse, are not the primary movers of policies and perceptions. This is shown both by the case of people with recognized common ethnic origins, as the Albanians (living in different countries and with different agendas, not seriously contemplating the establishment of a single state), and by the cases of minorities that are relatively well integrated in the political life of their state, as in the Bulgarian model (however imperfect given some continuing problems with Turkish and Roma minorities). We might argue that for citizens and elites in Southeast Europe self-identification on ethnic lines is one of several political options, rather than a sort of biologically inherited feature, and the enlargement process of Western institutions has become a major instrument to determinate the relative weight of the different options.

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<sup>11</sup> For this argument, see in particular: International Commission on the Balkans, *Unfinished Peace. Report of the International Commission on the Balkans*, The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C., 1996.

Reassessing the importance of ethnicity in SEE politics is then not only meaningful in retrospect, but also to orient more appropriately research activities, and possibly future Western policies, in order to pay adequate attention to emerging perceived divisions of a non-ethnic type, such as social and economic cleavages. Political divisions run through ethnic lines also in Bosnia, and the widespread perception of some common, trans-ethnic problems, such as corruption, might actually help overcome ethnic divisions.

Here follow three of the main division lines we can identify, beyond the well known “ethnic discourse” and the (pejorative) logic of “Balkanisation”.

- *Reformers versus survivors*

A dividing line that is acquiring increasing importance is between those segments of the population with a high stake in sweeping reforms and those with a vested interest in a continuation of past practices, especially as regards the exploitation of official positions for personal gain and illegal activities. The latter category includes not only long time criminals, but also individuals who adapted to the particular conditions of unreformed post-communist states, war (or deep crisis) economies, or the even more peculiar circumstances of regimes under heavy international sanctions: these could be seen as survivors, in the sense that adjustment to rapid and radical reforms would be objectively very costly to them while the status quo is at least affordable and less stressful. The numerous episodes of bureaucratic inertia or deliberate resistance to change are evidence of this widespread phenomenon. It has to be borne in mind that a profound change is taking place in the entire state apparatus of all countries in the region, often with strong injections of younger officers at all levels: in such evolving context, stop-and-go dynamics are probably inevitable.

- *Economic disparities*

Significant cleavages are determined by the deep changes in the economic system experienced in all the countries under consideration, though in varying forms. They are all struggling to absorb major shocks and continuing pressures: the rapid introduction of free market rules and Western styled reforms; the impact of war directly involving a country or raging at its borders; the redrawing of borders which has facilitated the growth of trafficking and gray-black economies; the loss of traditional markets. Each of these factors has contributed to reshaping the economic landscape of the region, often resulting in striking, unprecedented inequalities among the population within different countries, at least in the short to medium term.

If war has produced massive numbers of refugees and displaced persons, who experience all the difficulties of being eradicated from their own communities and occupy the lowest ladders of society in the location where they now reside, it has also provided good business opportunities for small groups, often closely intermingled with political and nationalist elites. In countries not directly affected by war, but bordering war zones, smuggling has become an enormous source of wealth and in turn, of social (and at times political) status. Ineffective judiciary means and weak state authority also make it relatively easy to convert illegally produced wealth in social and political power. Widespread corruption is itself a factor creating new disparities, since there are professional categories who, due to their position and role, can profit more from it.

Economic changes have been so far a major source of cleavages, creating new rich, but also new poor, for instance among people who used to enjoy a relatively good social status under previous regimes, such as teachers and physicians. Where the international presence is an important source of employment, and thus economic wealth, as most notably in Bosnia and Kosovo, people who can be hired by international agencies or find ways to establish economic relations with the “internationals”, experience much better economic conditions than those who cannot. In contrast, certain sectors of the economy can be virtually cut off from international economic exchanges, as is the case with many agricultural producers and old industrial assets.

Emerging social/economic cleavages, which in turn affect political dynamics and thus also threat perceptions in the region, deserve constant monitoring and a close scrutiny. Perhaps a new “class”-based analysis, though certainly not fashionable at this juncture, might offer some useful insights. In any case, the very broad categories of civil society, transition economies, weak states, are insufficient to account for the complex picture that is evolving before our eyes.

*- Official perceptions and a potential elite-public cleavage*

The influence of widespread threat perceptions on official documents varies greatly from country to country. Where national defence and state security are under the strict control of international actors, such as in post-war situations like Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the analysis of official security policy seem to present few surprising elements: the security climate and official policies are determined almost directly by NATO and the other relevant international actors. But even where official documents are autonomously elaborated, they do tend to comply with the main western concerns, and are typically NATO-oriented, with each government striving to position itself favorably vis-à-vis the major international “security providers”.

Interestingly, “official” threat perceptions and threat assessments might help identify a further cleavage, i.e. between political elites, who tend to emphasize outward-oriented concerns, and the public at large, which is more concerned with domestic factors, related to government policies in other areas, overall economic conditions etc.. In essence, common citizens in the region seem eager to embrace a wider concept of security than many governments are willing to swiftly formalize. Sticking to a more traditional security conception may pay off in the short term, but may well leave elites (particularly military professionals) out of tune vis-à-vis the civilian population. “War fatigue” and “crisis fatigue” seems to have already set in among large segments of the population in the region.

## **Unperceived threats?**

We finally recorded that certain threats were given less importance than we – and possibly outsiders in general – expected.

Relatively little importance was given to threats to the natural environment, or at least environmental degradation as a source of threat to the well-being of the local population and/or to economic development. Present environmental risks in South Eastern Europe derive both from past and present industrial polluting activities, and, more in general, an irresponsible use of territory. As is well known, the problem of depleted uranium has partly reopened the debate on the NATO intervention in Kosovo, as well as Bosnia, and the circumstance of its use by NATO forces is raising new and legitimate questions on the concept of humanitarian military intervention. However, the recent public discussion does not appear to have significantly heightened the level of alarm in the region with regard to the overall problem of environmental degradation. This provides further evidence that environmental awareness seems to be less widely spread in the region that one would expect given the massive and long term effects of proven and likely damages.

The issue of “war guilt” and the possibility of some sort of post-conflict national catharsis as a crucial phenomenon affecting politics, either in a positive or in a negative way, do not seem to be a major source of concern. Given the crucial role of identity and diverging interpretations of history in fueling or at least rationalizing the conflicts of the 1990s, this is somewhat surprising. All the more so in light of the ongoing debate sparked by the constant pressure to deliver suspects indicted for war crimes to the Hague War Crimes Tribunal. The various delicate transitions most countries in the region are undergoing already impose more than enough stress on state institutions and common citizens: coming to terms with the recent past would probably represent a kind of overload that few

are eager to contemplate. Yet, the time may soon come when the issue will have to be faced, and one can only hope that societies will have developed sufficient maturity and capability for introspection.

Last, but not least, the research has highlighted the lack of a clear sense of priorities in terms of risks and threats: undifferentiated “risks” of various kinds seemed to prevail in the first stage of the research project. A possible interpretation of this finding is that the unsettled and shaky conditions of most state institutions, coupled with the relatively weak standing of civil society, make it difficult to differentiate with precision among various levels of risk or threat. Societies with higher levels of “trust” or “social capital” would probably show a clearer sense of priorities, given that most potential threats are rendered extremely remote by the effectiveness, reliability and accountability of both formal and informal institutions. In other words, a certain difficulty in ordering priorities (in terms of major, mid-level, minor threats, let us say) is in itself a sign of the weak standing of state institutions and of the usually concomitant low level of “social capital”.

# Security Perceptions in Transition: an ex-post Assessment

**Roberto Menotti and Alessandro Rotta**

The present study comprises entity papers and opinion polls that were completed around the end of 2000 or in the first few weeks of 2001. In the “CeSPI Report”, we have attempted to identify and develop four major themes: a “transition syndrome” affecting in various ways all the entities under consideration; perceptions of both inclusion and exclusion vis-à-vis the EU, NATO and other Euro-Atlantic institutions; the importance of relations with neighboring countries as a crucial component of “reconstruction” strategies; and finally the existence of different types of cleavages, most of which are not ethnic in nature (although they may be portrayed in terms of an ethnic discourse).

The period between completion of the individual entity studies and publication has seen various important developments in the region, but we believe that the basic nature and structure of the problems facing each country as well as the international community have not changed radically. Therefore, this short chapter aims at bridging a chronological gap but relies on the same analytical tools used in the rest of the study: it can be viewed as a first *ex post* assessment of the hypotheses the authors developed in the course of the year 2000.

## **The mixed flavor of transition**

Events in the first six months on 2001 have concentrated the minds of policy makers, analysts and observers on Southern Serbia and FYROM/Macedonia, as the two spots where the most acute instability emerged. In both cases – which are obviously interrelated – a threat to the very essence and viability of established states (FRY and FYROM/Macedonia, respectively) has been perceived by the incumbent governments as well as by the “internationals” with a stake in the peaceful evolution of the entire region. At the same time, a larger and more indirect threat to the uncertain future of the whole region, given the possibility of negative repercussions of one breakdown of order on other parts of South East Europe, particularly Bosnia-Herzegovina. In the light of the unresolved status of Kosovo and the uncertainty of future relations between Serbia and Montenegro, a continuation of instability in the name of ethnic nationalism can produce potential repercussions in areas such as Vojvodina and Sandjac.

Just as important, the type of response that has been given to the open challenge posed by the ethnically Albanian guerrillas in the two areas has been strongly affected by the “transition to democracy” currently underway in both countries. In the case of Serbia/FRY confronting the guerrilla movement located primarily in the Presevo valley, the negotiations carefully conducted by Serbian vice-Prime minister Nebojsa Covic on behalf of the Federal and of the Serbian government have been widely praised as a practical demonstration of a commitment to peaceful means and the “legal-constitutional” approach frequently referred to by President Kostunica. A central concern has been to not only contain or crush the movement militarily – actually, such an outcome could represent a solution which is worse than the problem – but rather to provide an acceptable framework for addressing the grievances of the local Albanian population. In more abstract political terms, an attempt has been made (so far, successfully) to reconcile the evolving moderate nationalism of post-Milosevic Serbia (a notion dear to Kostunica though one that, admittedly, most

Albanians find almost as troubling as Milosevic's policies) and the new leadership's attachment to peaceful means, special restraint in the use of police and army units, and strictly legal procedures.

The same attitude has been positively tested in the context of the return of FRY troops into the previously demilitarized zone designated by NATO as part of the June 10 agreement in 1999. The process has been completed without incidents or friction, further confirming Belgrade's growing standing as a reliable partner for NATO and the UN.

In light of these recent experiences, we might conclude that transition processes remain extremely fluid but there are reasons for cautious optimism. It is probably excessive and simplistic to argue conclusively that the "Serbian problem" was the one key to all other issues and conflicts in the region (at least in former Yugoslavia plus Albania); yet, positive evolutions in and from Belgrade, and the defusing of tensions emanating from Serbia, allow to rethink problems in the region in a more constructive way.

Thus, on the one hand the "black hole" theory is difficult to prove and just as difficult to discard; on the other hand, it seems reasonable to infer that having gradually eliminated the immediate causes of a pathological use of nationalism in Croatia and Serbia, the peoples of the region stand a better chance of developing democratic institutions and coping more effectively with the "transition syndrome" they are inevitably experiencing – and will continue to experience for several years.

A tougher case is of course that of FYROM/Macedonia, where the meaning of transition is different, especially – and perhaps paradoxically – given its status of a presumed "success story" in conflict prevention; in other words, a case that had generated higher expectations than anywhere else in former Yugoslavia (with the exception of Slovenia, for well known reasons). Various interpretations can be offered to explain and possibly predict the evolution of Macedonia:

- The shifting "Albanian national question", which seems to behave like a bubble under a carpet. Whether the trend is towards an exhaustion of its conflict potential or instead a negative spin-off is very much an open question.
- The failure of the assumption that keeping Kosovo under freeze would facilitate reaching a lasting solution to the Albanian issue elsewhere (especially in Macedonia itself) and to the Serbian question, through gradual evolution (the bright side of transition politics, so to speak).
- The failure of the Macedonian state model as such: in this view, it is precisely the inability of the government in Skopje to properly address Albanian concerns in the country that has led to the emergence of the guerrilla movement.
- The ubiquitous destabilizing influence of criminal groups and activities, which thrive in conflict situations and are inherently opposed to the consolidation of state authorities. In this interpretation, the nature of the current armed insurgency both in Macedonia and Southern Serbia, as well as factions of the disbanded KLA in Kosovo proper, has very little to do with a genuinely national-territorial project. The central objective would be to produce instability, and impose sharp limitations to the exercise of sovereignty by the official authorities on the ground. Here, causing the civilian population of all sides to perceive an existential threat becomes a specific goal of certain political actors – however contested and not officially recognized. Of course, given the complexity of political and social conflict (not necessarily to be identified with violence), it is very likely that only a combination of these and additional explanations can be satisfactory.

Worrying patterns, though at a definitely less critical level, have manifested themselves in Bosnia as well, where the stabilization and de-nationalization "from above" implemented by the military and civil international presence, though physically preventing the escalation of tensions to



open confrontation between communities, does not seem to have helped address the roots of these very tensions. Large economic subsidies (both direct and indirect) from the international community have not meaningfully improved the viability of Bosnia Herzegovina as a single state - or even of one of its two entities, for that matter. Thus, from a “transitional” perspective, the Bosnian case looks very static, with its politics and economics affected by the artificial nature of the state framework on one hand and by the persistence of old, dangerous dynamics on the other.

In the Republika Srpska, the attempt to emphatically break with the past, and to mark an important symbolic step towards real coexistence, by starting to build new mosques in Trebinje and Banja Luka, has been contrasted by violent demonstrations by the local Serb population.

On another, broader front, the successful proposal of a non-nationalist figure for the post of all-Bosnia Prime minister has been accompanied by the unwelcome return of signals of HDZ sponsored Croat separatism, with HDZ political representatives deserting common institutions, and referring to parallel, “purely” Croat, power structures. More than the continuing tendency by well defined political subjects to articulate political demands – if only to counter the loss of political influence – in national-ethnic terms, it is significant to register that these demands are addressed directly to the perceived source of political power, i.e. the international community. The outstanding role of an external actor in local dynamics, the effective impediment to a recourse to violence, and the changes intervened in neighboring countries, namely the new policy of the government in Croatia of actually supporting the unity and integrity of Bosnia by severing special ties with Croat nationalist forces, all contribute to reshape local political actions, such as Bosnian Croats, in demonstration of strength aimed at obtaining more political gains. In Bosnia, as in other realities where the international presence is of major importance, local leaderships appear to quickly develop the ability to detect what behaviors can effectively “move” or “pull” the international community. This circumstance can have good and bad consequences: on one hand, it is a loose and indirect source of influence on the behavior of local actors, through punishments and rewards; on the other, it creates perverse dynamics by drawing the internationals in local politics in ways that are not always transparent or coherent.

In all these cases, then, the development of local capacity and, in parallel, the gradual pulling out of the internationals, has to be seen as one of the objectives of post-conflict (or institutional post-collapse) transition.

Croatia presents the observer with mixed result of late: in the May local elections, the government coalition has substantially held ground but where HDZ has performed very well, now being the 1<sup>st</sup> single party in terms of votes.

Croatian politics seem to prove that the removal of politicians who are *personae non gratae* to the international community is only the beginning, not the end of the process. Consistently, in a pattern that might be repeated in Serbia, in the medium term enthusiasts of radical change and genuine, well-meaning reformers might find that their plans collide with “normal” transitional problems, such as the slowness of economic but also social improvements, political and electoral dissatisfaction, apathy or a single-minded popular concern with short-term needs and aspirations. In addition, coalition governments are inherently vulnerable to variation in voters’ support as well as intra-coalition politics and tactics: the ruling coalition in Zagreb has proved increasingly fragmented, and Premier Racan has expressed the wish that the poor result at local elections will act as a stimulus to the parties in his coalition to pursue unity more wholeheartedly.

The focus of media attention on the Milosevic-the Hague affair has partly overshadowed Croatia’s own problems in relations with the ICTY, and more generally in coming to terms with its recent

past. But these delicate issues are bound to re-emerge over time, and constitute inevitable steps on the road to successful transition.

The issue of the relations with the Italian minority, resurfaced after the halt to a law passed by the Istrian assembly that improved the status of the Italian language to that of an official language, shows that there is still room for improvements in the field of establishing a fully civic and non-nationalist model of state.

On the positive side, as far as regional and international relations are concerned, signals of improved regional cooperation, including with Belgrade, have begun to manifest themselves.

In Bulgaria, in the 17 June legislative elections, nearly half of the voters chose the former king Simenon II and his newly formed party, the National Movement Simenon II (NDS); the reasons for the severe setback suffered by outgoing premier Kostov's United Democratic Forces Government, which obtained only 18% of the vote, are very meaningful for an analysis of what we have labeled the "transition syndrome" and its impact of voters' perceptions. The Kostov government had successfully achieved macroeconomic stability as required by the IMF, and had managed to significantly change the negative reputation that Bulgaria had in terms of reliability among NATO and EU countries. An important symbolic gesture on part of the EU was the removal of the visa regime for Bulgarian (but not Romanian) citizens at the end of 2000. Furthermore, the fact that these were the first elections after a full parliamentary term prove that a significant level of political stability had also been achieved.

However, Kostov paid electorally the high social costs of the policies he pursued; Bulgarians felt much poorer in 2001 than in 1997, when his government took office; as the chapter on Bulgaria emphasized in the present study, corruption was the main perceived threat at the popular level, and, against a non-perfect record by the outgoing government, king Simeon II had a program centered on the moralization of political practices, leveraging on the outrage by the population coping with a bad economic situation at the luxury lifestyle allegedly displayed by high state officials.

In Albania, the run-up to legislative elections has presented a picture of a country where "transition" means most of all exiting from the state of permanent emergency that has been experienced since 1991, and the consolidation of relatively stable economic and political conditions that might then become the basis for a possible "normal" path of development and for a future real progress on the way of integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. Once again, as was already noticed at the time of local elections in October 2000, the way the electoral campaign was conducted, the fairness of electoral procedures and the acceptance of results by all political actors are considered more important than the specific outcome *per se*.

Election results have confirmed the Socialist government in power, which has somehow reversed the negative trend in the country's social and political dynamics since 1997 and has, particularly vis-à-vis Kosovo and Macedonia, proved very responsible in the field of regional relations.

*Still, there is a conspicuous lack of innovative political alternatives: claims of electoral frauds by former president Berisha to justify poor electoral performances have become a sort of constant feature after each*

*campaign, while the Democratic party has so far proved unable to free itself of Berisha's tutelage, and no "third" opposition forces have emerged) and the persistence of dire economic and social conditions, continue to make of Albania the most effective demonstration of how transition might end up becoming a "permanent" condition, or more likely a self-justifying state of mind enabling elites to remain in power without addressing key problems, thanks precisely to the indefinite timing of "transitional" measures.*

#### Inclusion/exclusion dynamics in an evolving neighborhood

The past six months have confirmed that perceptions of neighbors are crucial to the identification of risks, challenges and threats, and therefore to the formulation of regional policies. Given the pervasive role of the "international community" in shaping the future of most countries in South East Europe, it is obvious that intensifying ties with the major lenders of financial resources is an absolute priority, which usually brings with it the related need to meet specific political and other conditions. This pattern has thus continued, producing a mixture of incentives and disincentives for regional cooperation and good-neighbor policies.

In this context, the issue that we have labeled "inclusion/exclusion" clearly overlaps with the one we have treated in the preceding section, i.e. the "transition syndrome". Indeed, all international organizations involved in the region continue to struggle with the correct "sequencing" of measures to be implemented to best pursue both transition and inclusion at the lowest possible costs. In its extreme formulation, the "sequencing" problem can be presented as the traditional argument between "democratization first" and "economic reforms first", which has occupied the minds of development experts and academicians for decades. In other words, how to prioritize reform in the complex situations of the real world remains an unresolved intellectual challenge, and although calls for simultaneous processes are often heard, it is also reasonable to think that societies in transition can only afford a given amount of simultaneous outside pressures and endogenous strains. Such a concern has been paramount in dealing with the reintegration of the FRY and normalization of its relations with most international bodies.

In terms of foreign policy, the governments in Belgrade, Tirana and Zagreb all seem to have settled for a kind of prudent but minimalist "do no harm" stance, which has been highly appreciated by the Western countries, especially in connection with the Macedonia issue. As compared with the recent past, an attitude of restraint by neighboring countries towards a (largely cross-border)

guerrilla movement marks a very significant step forward in the direction of stabilizing the whole region and making each episode or source of conflict containable and relatively isolated.

On their part, Croatia and Serbia are deliberately attempting to distance themselves, on the path to transition and gradual integration in European and transatlantic structure, from the South of the region (Macedonia and Albania, but possibly also Bulgaria), following – however haltingly – the Slovenian example after 1995. This tendency may soon engender a new regional division: countries/entities with a degree of autonomy in decisionmaking which have the ability to exploit the flexibility of international conditionality – while still being strongly affected and constrained by external stimuli; and countries/entities under direct international supervision and even administration. The latter seem to develop political elites that actually specialize in interpreting a certain role vis-a-vis the internationals.

Against this background, the EU continues to juggle with the dilemma of maintaining the pace of transition and development in individual countries while trying to encourage regional cooperation. This said, it appears that one Western message has been getting across to the countries of Southeastern Europe over the past few months: that regional cooperation is an essential ingredient for stabilization. Indeed, it is increasingly understood that a modicum of regional cooperation is necessary to the consolidation of security in the region. Some progress has been made in recent months in the fields of refugee return and mutual recognition of minorities which, if consistently implemented, could produce visible results with regard to the security perceptions of the citizens of the region. However, it is undeniable that progress remains painstakingly slow.

The positive steps in the area of regional cooperation and refugee returns has been made under the framework of the Stability Pact. The agreement between Croatia, Bosnia Herzegovina and FRY is certainly the most significant development, though Serbia still suffers from the problem of Serb refugees from Kosovo, a potentially radical group that could upset internal stability. The countries of the region have also agreed to the creation of a Free Trade Area by the end of 2002. Although the economic advantages are likely to be secondary compared to trade with the EU, this type of agreements should encourage greater cooperation between the countries in fields such as border control and management.

These developments reflect the EU's strategy of creating a virtuous circle of democracy and cooperation, developed after NATO's intervention in Kosovo. Zagreb and Belgrade's change of regimes, although due largely to internal stimuli, in a sense vindicate this policy. But there are two main caveats. The first is the risk of exclusion and the creation of new divisions within the region. The confusion over the difference between the EU's enlargement process and the Stabilization and Association Process, coupled with the possibility that some countries overtake others in their path to EU and NATO integration (read the "new entries" in the good books of the international community Croatia and FRY against the countries undergoing ten years of transition stress without reaching desired results, such as Albania and Romania), could create a string of unstable and corrupt countries stretching from the Adriatic to the Carpathians, separating Greece from the Northern Balkans.

The second caveat is the EU's still conspicuous policy vacuum in terms of security, which will persist at least until the 2003 headline goals are reached. EU strategy towards the region rests of four pillars: economic assistance and aid, trade liberalization, political dialogue and the institutional process represented by the Stabilization and Association Process. This makes the arguably most important international organization working in the region reliant on other structures (NATO) for security guarantees and ill equipped to deal with any immediate security threat. Macedonia represents a case in point. The first of the Stabilization and Association Agreements was signed with FYROM paradoxically at one of its peak moments of crisis in April. It is evident that the SAA contains no leverage for short-term conflict management, making the EU still handicapped in the field and reliant of Solana's shuttle diplomacy. However, the effects of SAAs are still to be seen, as

they do potentially contain long-term conflict prevention qualities similar to the Association Agreements signed by the candidate countries of Central Europe.

On a more specific front, Zagreb has made it clear that it intends to join NATO's Membership Action Plan and there is increasingly open talk in Belgrade and Brussels of FRY getting involved in PfP activities. This clearly signals the importance attributed by local elites to any venue and forum with an "integrationist" potential, at all levels. PfP is a logical choice for at least two reasons: an attempt to mend fences with NATO as an organization, and the relative ease with which PfP participation can be granted by the Alliance as opposed to the much stricter and demanding conditions of most other "outreach" activities by the major Western organizations. Especially for the FRY, PfP can be perceived as more "benign" than NATO membership, still strongly opposed by public opinion. In addition, PfP can be seen as a stepping-stone towards EU membership, thanks to its stabilization potential and the sheer fact that so many of the conditions set by NATO and the EU for all sorts of intensified contacts are almost identical.

Events in Macedonia proved one more time that borders are highly contested notions and symbols, rather than clear lines of separation: how "the neighborhood" is perceived depends only in part on the demarcation of official state borders, as it is increasingly obvious that Kosovo, Southern Serbia and Macedonia, with the possible addition of at least northern Albania, share a cross-border problem in which criminality and political goals are closely intertwined.

In any case, the neighbors' reaction to the guerrilla conflict in Macedonia also seems to indicate that how decisions are made (constitutional procedures in a democratizing context) does matter: as noted above, Serbian in particular restraint has been crucial to contain both the deterioration and the geographical spillover of the conflict in its early acute stages. Similarly, the moderate tone adopted by Tirana is notable for its effect of depriving the guerrillas in Macedonia of a powerful "pan-Albanian" political argument. Although the impact of specific measures of "inclusion" sometimes appears to be negligible and slow, especially when compared with excessive expectations, the web of multilateral relationships built around the major Western organizations has shown the ability to gradually change the perception of interests, if not yet the perception of identities and history.

#### Multiple cleavages: perceiving complexity?

The preceding observation on identities and the understanding of history brings us to the issue of cleavages, which has also taken on renewed significance particularly in light of the Macedonian events. The signals from Macedonia are in fact mixed: as this goes to print, the country is still on the brink of full civil war and is in danger of definitely losing its status as the one regional "success story" in terms of multi-ethnic statehood. Yet, on the positive side, a large portion of the Albanian minority living in Macedonia seems to recognize that its interests are better served by working to raise their living standards and acquiring more rights within FYROM rather than by fighting alongside the guerrilla to carve out an ethnically defined territory with a most uncertain future. The circumstance that a "greater Kosovo" project – however unlikely – appears today somewhat more realistic than any version of "greater Albania" may be a sign that the time for ethno-nationalist projects is truly over. Conflicts still arise, of course, but their impact may have become easier to isolate.

On the negative side, the crisis in Macedonia, (now almost six months old), especially because of the repeated outbursts of violence, has undoubtedly radicalized relations between the ethnic Macedonian majority and the Albanian minority. However, the identification of two homogenous, static communities confronting each other – an "essentialist" vision in anthropological terms – only serves the interests of the various groups who expect political and economic gains from enhanced

nationalism, and, most of all, helps to hide, not to cope with, many different questions lying at the core of the present Macedonian situation. These can be summed up as:

- the nature of what has been called the Macedonian system, according to which all appointments, in public administration as in the security services and in the army, are decided by party affiliation, and then contribute significantly to the political (intra-community) polarization;
- the similar nature of Macedonian-Albanian coalition governments, which also imply a power spoiling agreement, rather than equitable political deals aimed at enhancing the status of the Albanian minority in the country;
- the corruption and the poor legitimization of the political elites vis-à-vis their respective communities;
- the role of the international community, and its influence on intercommunity relations. This influence manifests itself firstly through the whole issue of the intervention in Kosovo, with the actual presence of a NATO contingent in Macedonia and the bombing of Yugoslavia, which were viewed by the two communities in opposite ways, as our polls did detect well before the escalation of the crisis. A related problem is that the current status of Kosovo provides a possible “model”, which includes the NATO intervention, that radical Albanian groups can try to apply in Macedonia replicating the same escalatory dynamic used by Uçk. A third form of influence is of course the failure by the international military presence in Kosovo in patrolling the border with Macedonia, which has been decisive to the igniting of the crisis. Beyond the military components, it has been noted that also innovative policies of NGOs support, where not accurately implemented, can actually lead to enhanced radicalization of the relations between the two communities; finally, Macedonia is one of the cases where the relationship between local elites and the international community tends to be based more on the well established roles the local leaderships play in order to be legitimized, rather than on a frank assessment of their democratic credentials.

It should be quite obvious that these questions actually run across the intercommunity cleavage, and that they have great importance for the improvement of Slav-Albanian relations in the country.

Looking at developments inside the FRY, the stalemate over the fate of Montenegro is a testimony to the strange ways in which democratic (or democratizing) politics can channel the popular will: groups that are perhaps less vocal and yet numerically significant have the ability to tilt the balance and produce political arrangements which stand simply for lack of any viable alternative, as in the case of the current FRY configuration. In this context, President Kostunica seems to be relying precisely on the complexity of existing cleavages to keep the federation together – and his current job.

The transfer of Slobodan Milosevic to the Hague, as well, can be viewed in the perspective of domestic cleavages: the internal debate over what to do with Milosevic also reflected – and may have hardened – differences of approach vis-a-vis outside pressures, with considerations of both interests and principle somehow involved. To some extent, this is stimulating a debate among Serbs on their own recent past, which is bound to be painful and potentially divisive.

In Kosovo, relations between the local (now tiny) Serbian minority and the Albanian majority are unmistakably colored by the 1999 experience, and by the ensuing lack of basic individual security in the province, which, though certainly constituting a major problem for Kosovo as a whole, has affected more dramatically the Serbian community. Recent efforts by the international administration to implement local self-government, through the Constitutional Framework, have not had any significant effect in mending these fences. Some participation by Serbs to the November general elections in Kosovo still seems to be possible, but it is doubtful how a meaningful Serb role in the administration of the province can be achieved if the present intercommunity relations do not improve. Furthermore, the international military presence has not succeeded in altering the sense of

danger felt by Serbs in Kosovo, and particularly their related perception that a secure community is a separate community.

The Serbian – Albanian cleavage in Kosovo is so deeply rooted that the idea of a partition of the province has been discussed with more insistence than in the past, and has been openly, though not officially, advocated in Belgrade. The obvious, enormous difficulties implied by this option, and the almost paralyzing effect of the majority-minority divide on all other possible solutions for the future status of Kosovo, testify how challenging and delicate this issue will be for years to come.

Once they take root in the structure of local politics and institutions, cleavages of all kinds are hard to eradicate or overcome: Bosnia remains the clearest demonstration of this structural problem, as all the efforts of the international community continue to clash with the scars of the Bosnian war(s). As we already observed, trans-community (trans-ethnic) political forces have recently experienced encouraging electoral trends and have been awarded key institutional appointments, but these gains, and the perspective of a political landscape less influenced by the logics of national belonging, and more oriented to the addressing of general, “normal” political questions, appear yet not irreversible and still under the threat of renewed, ethnically portrayed, though politically motivated, fencing within the Bosnian society.

Applying the notion of cleavages to Bosnia-Herzegovina remains all too easy: this is undeniably a sharply divided “country” – the need to put the word in quote is telling of our enduring conceptual difficulties. The combination of persistent separation and creeping “internationals’ fatigue” does not augur well.

Yet, we should not forget that the nationalists’ appeal could diminish over time especially if the recent trend of relative detachment from the larger countries neighboring Bosnia-Herzegovina (Croatia and Serbia in particular) crystallizes and becomes a normal state of affairs. It is clear to all that the cleavages we now observe have been largely the product of deliberate policies pursued in the specific historical context of the early 1990s.

Looking briefly at other cleavages we considered noteworthy in our previous analysis, and that emerged from the various entity-papers in this study, insufficient attention seems to have been devoted, both by international strategies toward the region and by local governments, to the new social and economic divisions that appear to be a by-product of transitions: in Bulgaria, as we described, the social costs of transition have been among the cause which provoked the electoral defeat of the outgoing government, but in Croatia also recent electoral results partially awarding the HDZ might be the result of social discontent, while in Serbia similar worries are centered around the way the money from the next donors’ conference will be used.

We can summarize the continuing mixed scenario of fractures and cleavages by noting that complex – i.e. more sophisticated, less black and white – perceptions can develop in many ways, in part also through intense interaction with an often confusing and incoherent “international community”. Even learning the skills of manipulating large organizations by playing one against the other, or extracting the best concessions from a plethora of special envoys and “high representatives” is, after all, an embryonic form of complex politics. The related negotiations and compromises can perhaps begin to reduce the depth of hard-edged cleavages. In any event, such highly asymmetrical negotiations will be a constant feature of political life for the less autonomous and self-sustaining entities in South East Europe. For the governments enjoying a stronger level of legitimation and more solid institutions, the task will be less frustrating (or humiliating) but no less difficult.