CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract Why and how the Balkans came apart, and what the United States, Europe, the United Nations, and other international organizations did to put the region back together, is too important to be ignored. Doubts about the virtue of what was done abound, but the region is demonstrably in better shape today than it was in the 1990s. Understanding the Balkans can inform what we do elsewhere and help the region understand its own history, with a view to avoiding a future implosion. The Dayton agreements ended the war in Bosnia in 1995, the Kosovo War ended in 1999, and the armed conflict in Macedonia ended in 2001. It is time to take stock.

Keywords Balkans · EU · NATO · Intervention · International guarantees

The Balkans are on no one's list of priority areas to study these days. Nothing I say here will change that, but the difficult process, serious barriers, and relatively positive outcomes of international peace- and state-building interventions in the Balkans can shed light on challenges we face in other parts of the world and suggest ways to deal with them. The extraordinarily costly, highly militarized, and miserably unhappy, if not yet quite failed, interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan should not be the only ones that inform thinking about how to go about enabling

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people in conflicted societies to secure, govern, and prosper themselves. Nor should setbacks in the Balkans since 2008, after serious progress in the previous decade, make us abandon hope that the region can remain at peace. In an era when security gaps, governance failures, creeping autocracy, and social and economic exclusion are creating fertile ground for extremism, it behooves us to contemplate what has been achieved in the Balkans, even if the outcomes are less salubrious than many of us would like.

It is troubling that much of the Balkans story is forgotten, or mistakenly remembered as the outcome of deeply ingrained and seemingly interminable ancient hatreds. Many otherwise well-informed people know little or nothing about the wars that accompanied the dissolution of Socialist Yugoslavia, unless they are among the relatively few who have served there. They are puzzled why the United States intervened militarily in Bosnia and Kosovo. News headlines from the Balkans that focus on tales of woe discourage deeper inquiry. My colleagues at the State Department, in European foreign ministries, and in academia on both continents doubt much has been achieved. Some even deem the 1990s interventions a miserable failure. They rightly complain about corruption and abuse of power, state capture, autocratic tendencies, lack of accountability for war crimes and human rights abuses, persistent ethnic tensions, youth unemployment, lagging economic growth, growing extremism, and constraints on freedom of the press. All those ills plague the Balkans today.

But these complaints are an indication of progress, not failure. The ills were no less present during the most recent Balkan wars, but few complained about them when mass murder and genocide were ongoing. Today's reality in the Balkans is unsatisfying and the failures frustrating, but the outcomes so far are demonstrable improvements over the past. Although many people from the region will tell you that things were better under Tito, that reflects their appreciation of him for the recovery from World War II and palpable disappointments from the 1990s, not today's objective reality. Serious problems remain, but prospects for all the countries of the region eventually to meet the increasingly strenuous requirements to enter the European Union, and NATO if they like, are decent, provided they continue on the path of political and economic reform.

Other observers question whether the EU will be ready and able to receive the Balkan states who are not yet members even if they do

qualify for membership. The enlargement process has been frozen since Croatia's 2013 accession. The successful Brexit referendum in June 2016 and growing nationalist sentiment in Hungary, Poland, France, Denmark, the Netherlands, Italy, and other European countries threaten to make it impossible for the EU to continue to enlarge, as each prospective member will need its accession treaty ratified in all member states. Despite a European Commission commitment to unfreeze enlargement in 2025, on many days it appears Europe is becoming less democratic and more Balkan, rather than the Balkans more democratic and more European.

NATO is also in a period of introspection and doubt. It faces a serious Russian challenge in Ukraine and a growing one in the Baltics, both of which raise questions about whether the Alliance can defend even its current members, never mind new ones in the Balkans who will be able to contribute only marginally to NATO's defense. Donald Trump, elected president in November 2016, has expressed doubts about the value of the Alliance to the United States, an interest in partnering with Russia, and an intention of making security guarantees available only to countries whose military expenditures meet the NATO goal of 2% of GDP. Prospective members will face tough questions about what they are able and willing to contribute to the Alliance. No one can predict when, or if, wider Balkans membership in NATO will become possible, although the 2017 accession of Montenegro and Macedonia's 2018 invitation to join suggest that the door is not closed tight.

Still others doubt that the 1990s interventions did any good, forgetting what would have happened had they not occurred. It is not plausible that things would have been better had NATO not intervened at all, leaving Balkan leaders to their own all-too-often homicidal devices. They had already killed about one hundred thousand people in Bosnia by the time of the NATO intervention there. Close to another ten thousand died later in Kosovo. It is easy to imagine how things might have deteriorated without intervention. Today's concerns about recruitment of foreign fighters in the Balkans to go to Syria and Iraq would be far greater if Bosnia had been partitioned, leaving a non-viable and resentful rump Islamic state at its center, or if some part of Kosovo had been allowed to merge with Albania or the Albanian-populated part of Macedonia. Those precedents for ethnic partition would have destroyed the international norm against redrawing borders to accommodate ethnic differences, making a situation like the one we face in Ukraine far more difficult to

manage than it is today, when at least the norm is clear if not the means of getting Russia to respect it. The results of intervention in the Balkans may be ugly, but the results of non-intervention would have been uglier.

Even those who accept that proposition will not always agree with my interpretation of events. What I say here about the Dayton peace negotiations, which I interpret not as a triumph of American diplomacy backed by force but rather as Milošević snatching what he could from near certain defeat, will be controversial. Some will take offense at my view that the Macedonia "name" issue has its origins in well-founded insecurity about Greek identity rather than irredentist territorial ambitions on the part of Slavs with no right to be called "Macedonian." Others may find me soft on Kosovo, which I consider a relative success in post–Cold War state-building, even if its sovereignty is still incomplete. Or they may object to my enthusiasm for the nonviolent protests that led to the fall of Milošević and initiated a democratic transition, also still not completed, in Serbia.

None of these are views I would have held in the form presented here as an American diplomat in the decade after the Berlin Wall fell. Time offers perspective, but interpretation in the Balkans presents enormous challenges. Memory can both hinder and advance understanding. Ethnic nationalists keep alive only the memory of what was done to their own kind and celebrate the victories of their own ethnic heroes. People whose parents were once citizens of the same country no longer have a shared sense of history, culture, or destiny. Despite the cultural similarities in language, music, and cuisine, nationalist Balkan leaders in the 1990s underlined mainly differences, in an effort to generate distinctions that would support their political perspectives and career prospects. Young Kosovars do not recognize the Serbian language, which a generation earlier their parents spoke fluently. Conflicts are too often preserved. Far less attention is paid to mutual dependency, common culture, or once prevalent feelings of solidarity.

The disintegration of Socialist Yugoslavia got quick and capable scholarly attention.[1] Susan Woodward identified state weakness as the main cause, induced in part by economic failure, the collapse of a bipolar world in which Socialist Yugoslavia had found a unique niche, and the stress caused by the international community's insistence on liberal economic and political reform. While not denying Serbian aggression and ethnic nationalism, she treated them more as consequences than causes.[2] Misha Glenny likewise traced the roots of what he termed

the Third Balkan War to a weak Socialist Yugoslavia, albeit with more emphasis on ethnic differences. Nationalist leaders, he demonstrated, succeeded in mobilizing popular fears to their respective causes.[3] Journalists Allan Little and Laura Silber wove a captivating narrative captured also in film, with more emphasis on Serbian nationalism and aggression.[4] More recently, Catherine Baker treats the 1990s wars as resulting from the interaction among opportunistic nationalist leaders who mobilized ethnic differences to compete for power within the context of a weak Yugoslav state, destroying it in the process.[5] Josip Glaurdić emphasizes the way European and American "realist" hesitancy to intervene enabled Balkan leadership's worst inclinations.[6] Eric Gordy believes scholarship has been excessively focused on a top-down view of states and political elites, without enough attention to the societies and people of former Yugoslavia as well as their interaction with the newly emerging states.[7]

Each of these approaches has merits. My own understanding corresponds to the canonical levels of analysis: individuals, domestic factors, and international factors.[8] Milošević's ambitions and capabilities, the ideological and practical implications of territorial ethnic nationalism he provoked within each of the Yugoslav successor states, and the breakup of former Yugoslavia combined to produce an astounding array of interlinked interstate and intrastate conflicts. With the Yugoslav state and its Marxist foundations collapsing in the aftermath of the Cold War, ethnic nationalists sought to gain and maintain power by promising to protect their respective ethnic groups, each of which felt threatened. Most were unable to do much harm on their own. But one Balkan leader, Slobodan Milošević, had the political will and military means to do more than the others. The Greater Serbia project he adopted became the main proximate cause of the Balkan wars of the 1990s, as nationalist leaders of other ethnic groups reacted to the threat he posed.[9] This was the ethnic version of a security dilemma: what the Serbs did to protect themselves made others feel less secure, creating a vicious spiral that resulted in civil wars in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo. Call it a post–Cold War domino theory if you like. The United States and Europe failed initially to invest the resources necessary to prevent war, but they eventually intervened to good effect with both military and civilian means to end the conflicts and build peace.

While Slovenia won its war, the other domino wars of Yugoslav succession ended in negotiated agreements: Croatia (the Erdut Agreement

in 1995), Bosnia (the Washington Agreement of 1994 as well as the Dayton Accords of 1995), Kosovo (UN Security Council Resolution 1244 in 1999), and Macedonia (the Ohrid Agreement of 2001). All these resulted in part from international pressures, sometimes military and sometimes diplomatic and political, with economic relief and benefits thrown in for good measure. In conflict-management terms, the United States and Europe, working in tandem, "ripened" these situations in order to produce the kind of "mutually hurting stalemates" regarded as necessary for negotiated settlements.[10] The willingness of the Americans and Europeans to guarantee peace, while leaving in place many of the wartime leaders, made negotiated arrangements enticing that would otherwise surely have been rejected. This is consistent with Barbara Walter's scholarly work, which emphasizes the importance of promised international guarantees to negotiation processes.[11]

But negotiated settlements are compromises that do not necessarily remove the drivers of conflict. In the Balkans they allowed both warring parties and their ideas to survive, at least in the political realm. Women, who played almost no role in taking the region to war, played little more in shaping its aftermath.[12] Statistically speaking, the exclusion of women makes peaceful, democratic outcomes less likely.[13] The postwar transitions in the Balkans were managed almost entirely by men without high-level purges (except for those indicted for crimes committed during wartime), people-to-people reconciliation efforts, and the kind of sustained dialogue within and between civil society actors that scholars and practitioners think vital.[14] United Nations, European Union, and American administrators and diplomats as well as peacekeeping troops from many countries played vital roles in stabilization and reconstruction, but they also committed crimes, sometimes allegedly on a grand financial scale. Transparency and accountability were lacking. The example the internationals set was not always a salubrious one: instances of corruption and sexual misconduct cast a broad shadow. More than one American ambassador in the region resigned under that cloud.

The construction of new political orders was highly conflictual. Studies of them have been fragmented, reflecting the situation in the region.[15] Studies elsewhere have identified two main factors affecting peace implementation: resources, including political will as well as troops and finances, and the difficulty of the environment.[16] The Balkan peace processes have not lacked resources. It is even arguable that Bosnia eventually suffered from too much international commitment, and Kosovo

was a luxury peace implementation mission almost from the first. The environment in the Balkans was difficult because of both neighboring countries and local elites, which are known to be decisive factors.[17] The postwar international peace missions in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Macedonia were at least partly successful because they provided vital international guarantees of peace implementation and blocked violent moves supported from neighbors (from Croatia in Bosnia, from Serbia in Kosovo, and from Kosovo in Macedonia) as well as demilitarizing and co-opting local elites. The Balkans generally lack a third environmental factor known to be detrimental to peace-building in other contexts: readily tradable commodities like oil or minerals that can support resistance to peace implementation, though some might argue that trafficking in cigarettes, drugs, and people has played an analogous role.

The international agreements and other commitments that brought peace to the region were all based on the principle that preexisting borders should not be moved to accommodate ethnic differences. Yugoslavia did not just disintegrate. It fell apart into its component federal units, namely, the republics that had constituted Socialist Yugoslavia, as recommended by the Badinter Commission to the European Community in 1991.[18] Since the borders of those federal units did not correspond to ethnic identities, this meant each republic faced issues with ethnic groups that did not constitute a numerical majority. The main non-majority ethnic groups included Serbs in Slovenia and Croatia, Serbs and Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albanians in Serbia and Macedonia, and Bosniaks as well as Albanians and Serbs in Montenegro. Much of the history of the wars and the subsequent peace revolves around the interactions among these groups within each post-Yugoslav state and between adjacent states.

Ethnic identity in the Balkans is defined today along both religious and linguistic lines. Apart from the atheists in the region, some of whom still identify themselves as Yugoslavs (South Slavs), Serbs usually identify as Orthodox Christians, Croats as Catholics, and Bosniaks as Muslims. But theology has nothing to do with their contemporary conflicts. You can forget about the *Filioque* (an arcane but historically important dispute on the relationship among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost) and the resulting Great Schism that split the Roman Catholic Church from the Eastern Orthodox in the Middle Ages. The number of ministerial posts and jobs in state-owned industries is today far more important to people who claim to be defending their cherished religious identities and heritages.

Albanians are mostly Muslim in religious affiliation, if they have any (especially in Kosovo, many do not). They define themselves linguistically: an Albanian is someone who speaks Albanian (or whose parents spoke Albanian), an Indo-European language with little in common with the Slavic languages today identified as Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian, Montenegrin, Slovenian, and Macedonian. The first four, known until the wars of Yugoslav succession as Serbo-Croatian, are mutually comprehensible. The distinctions among the dialects were originally geographical, but today ethnic nationalists claim they are distinct languages. Macedonian and Slovenian are Slavic languages more difficult for Serbo-Croatian speakers to understand, though many do.

Balkan Muslims, both Bosniak (the non-religious term often favored by Slavic Muslims, whether they live in Bosnia or not) and Albanian, owe their existence to the Ottoman Empire, which dominated the southern part of the region for more than 450 years, from the conquest of Constantinople (today's Istanbul) in 1453 until World War I. The Ottomans governed their empire without homogenizing its population. Non-Muslims were second-class citizens not usually permitted to hold administrative or military power, but so long as they paid their taxes and did not challenge the Ottomans militarily or politically, they could exercise some degree of autonomy within a distinct "national" community (*millet*), especially concerning personal status issues like marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Otherwise, governance was administered by patriarchal warlords whose power depended on plunder rather than productive economic activity.[19] Consent of the governed was enforced with violence.

The *millet* practice is the root of the idea that ethnic groups have rights to govern themselves and not be forced to do things that other ethnic groups want them to do, even if the decision is taken by a numerical majority. Numerical majorities only count within ethnic groups, not between them. This concept of group rights survived the end of the Ottoman Empire, became a foundational idea in monarchical as well as Socialist Yugoslavia, and remains an issue throughout the Balkans, as well as the Middle East. Ottoman culture and language are by no means limited to Muslims. Their traces are found in majority-Catholic Croatia as well as in majority-Orthodox Serbia, even if it will not always be appreciated if you say so.

Group rights differ from individual rights. The U.S. Constitution starts with the words "We the People." It protects (especially in its first ten amendments) individual rights. Balkan constitutions often enumerate

"constituent" peoples, those groups that have the privilege and responsibility of forming the state. It is as if they start "We the Peoples." That small difference is a big one. If you are not enumerated, your group will not have the same status or political role as the groups that are. If you are listed, you are not considered a "minority," no matter how small your numbers. In most of Europe, rights of groups, not just individuals, to culture, education, religion, and language are explicitly recognized. Only France has refused to sign the European Framework Convention on Protection of National Minorities, which includes group rights (albeit for numerical minorities) that are not recognized there or in the United States.

In addition to the Ottoman legacy of group rights, there is one other historical episode that bears on events since 1989. World War II and its aftermath in the Balkans is still remembered, though not always accurately, including atrocities committed against many individuals and ethnic groups.[20] Croats and Serbs still dispute how many of each group the (World War II fascist) Independent State of Croatia killed in the concentration camp at Jasenovac. The conflict within the Yugoslav resistance between Communist partisans led by Tito and monarchist "chetniks" led by Draža Mihailović, who were more devoted to creation of a Greater Serbia than to defeating the fascists, was also ferocious, especially at the end of the war. Many Serb nationalists are still unabashed admirers of the chetniks, whom they regard as worthy predecessors.

This Communist/anti-Communist split has survived the end of Communism in much of the Balkans. In the 1990s, most Croatian attitudes toward World War II were equivocal, but among the extreme nationalists, including among the Bosnian Croats, the fascist pedigree was a source of pride. It was on prominent display after Croatia in July 2018 managed to finish second in the World Cup. The historical connection between modern-day Croatian nationalism and World War II fascism is in any event often assumed by non-Croats and much resented by those who associate themselves with the Communist partisans. In 1995, the mayor of a central Bosnian town justified his resistance to letting Croats return who had been ethnically cleansed by the Bosniaks during the war by producing a photo of his former neighbors dressed in fascist uniforms and giving the straight-armed salute. "These are the people you want me to welcome back?" he asked rhetorically.

The split between people who trace their lineage to the Communists and those who trace it to anti-Communist nationalists is apparent not only in Serbia and Croatia but also in Macedonia, Bosnia, and Montenegro.

To outsiders, it is surprising, and disturbing, that even today this split is so palpable. Americans may have forgotten who was a Communist, or not care any longer, but people in the Balkans have not. This is especially true in Albania, where some of today's Socialists (presumed former Communists) and Democrats (presumed former anti-Communists) loathe each other with a passion usually associated with ethnic distinctions, not political ones. That ethnically indistinguishable Albanians can hate each other as much as Bosniaks and Serbs, or Serbs and Albanians, suggests that ethnic divisions are not the root of the problem.

The distribution of political power is. After explaining why the Balkan conflicts became so important in the 1990s and are again worthy of our attention now (Chapter 2), my narrative begins in still-ailing Bosnia and Herzegovina, with its war's prelude, disease, and sequelae (Chapter 3). We consider there why a decade of postwar progress has given way to more than a decade of stagnation and even backsliding. Next comes Macedonia, where international prevention under the UN flag proved better than a cure (Chapter 4), even if war was not completely avoided and difficult issues persist. There is now hope for major progress that would put Macedonia on a quick road to NATO and EU accession. In Serbia and Kosovo (Chapter 5), "divide and govern" became the necessary and still not quite complete outcome. They need to normalize their relations so that both countries can continue to progress. Montenegro and Albania, which remained mostly at peace with their neighbors (even during the near collapse of state authority in the latter), get short shrift in these chapters, but they make important cameo appearances, along with relatively peaceful Romania and Bulgaria, in the discussion of whether the Balkans can become part of the West (Chapter 6). My story ends in Ukraine and the Middle East (Chapter 7), much of which shares with the Balkans a past in the Ottoman Empire, a present plagued by war, and an uncertain future. Something analogous might be said of parts of Ukraine, which endured a similar relationship with the Russian Empire and faces some similar problems, but without the overlapping, multi-sided complexity of the Balkans and the Middle East.

Notes

1. For a masterful survey of the issues raised in the relevant academic literature up to 2005, see Sabrina P. Ramet, *Thinking About Yugoslavia: Scholarly Debates About the Yugoslav Breakup and the Wars in Bosnia and Kosovo* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

2. Susan L. Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution After the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1997).
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4. Laura Silber and Allan Little, *The Death of Yugoslavia* (London: Penguin Books, 2010). Also see Vittorio Vida, "The Death of Yugoslavia." BBC Complete Documentary, YouTube video, 4:54:30, posted September 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oODjsdLoSYo.
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9. James Gow, *The Serbian Project and Its Adversaries: A Strategy of War Crimes* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003).
10. William Zartman, "Ripeness: The Hurting Stalemate and Beyond," in *International Conflict Resolution After the Cold War*, ed. Paul C. Stern and Daniel Druckman (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2000), 225–249, https://www.nap.edu/read/9897/chapter/7.
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12. Swanee Hunt, *This Was Not Our War: Bosnian Women Reclaiming the Peace* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).
13. Valerie M. Hudson, Bonnie Ballif-Spanvill, Mary Caprioli, and Chad F. Emmett, *Sex and World Peace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).
14. Harold H. Saunders, *Sustained Dialogue in Conflicts: Transformation and Change* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
15. Richard Caplan does, however, include the early Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo experiences (as well as East Timor) in his comparative study, *International Governance of War-Torn Territories: Rule and Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
16. Stephen John Stedman, Donald Rothchild, and Elizabeth M. Cousens, eds., *Ending Civil Wars: The Implementation of Peace Agreements* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2002).
17. James Dobbins, Laurel E. Miller, Stephanie Pezard, Christopher S. Chivvis, Julie E. Taylor, Keith Crane, Calin Trenkov-Wermuth, and

Tewodaj Mengistu, *Overcoming Obstacles to Peace: Local Factors in Nation-Building* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR167.html.
18. Maurizio Ragazzi, "Conference on Yugoslavia Arbitration Commission: Opinions on Questions Arising from the Dissolution of Yugoslavia," *International Legal Materials* 31, no. 6 (November 1992): 1488–1526, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20693759.
19. Jasmin Mujanovic, *Hunger and Fury: The Crisis of Democracy in the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 22.
20. For a sampling see John Connelly, "Language and Blood," *Nation*, September 29, 2014, https://www.thenation.com/article/language-and-blood/.