# Western Responses to the Crisis of Balkan Post-Communism*

## Tom Gallagher

Western governmental responses to the various political crises which erupted in the Balkans after 1989 have been remarkably uniform. There is a widespread feeling among governmental leaders and their policy advisers that western Europe ought to insulate itself from the various inter-state and internal conflicts which have periodically flared up in the region. No core western interests appear to be at stake, whether these are expressed in moral, security, or economic terms. Minimal intervention via the offices of the United Nations came about in Bosnia mainly because public opinion and the independent media were horrified by images of warfare mainly directed at defenceless civilians.

All political actors seemed to be guilty of pushing their differences to the point of violent division and fratricidal conflict. It was simply the pre-ordained Balkan way. The idea that certain peoples are historically programmed to be violent and external intervention is pointless in such situations of conflict, meant a retreat from the obligation to defend international law and certain basic standards of international behaviour. Interestingly, at key moments the leading west European players shared with militant nationalists the historically deterministic view that the ethnic problems of the region could only be settled by military force and the involuntary transfer of populations in order to create homogeneous states or regions. The differences between them was that west European leaders regretted the triumph of social Darwinism in the Balkans whereas ethnic hardliners viewed it as a natural course of events.

## A Defective West European Mind-set

Despite the Cold War, the chief external actors played down the connection between communism, particularly the national Stalinist variety, and the revival of inter-ethnic disputes. Chauvinist communists in a bid to resist the forces of democratization unfroze dormant ethnic conflicts and gave new life to the forces of ethnocentrism. Western governments preferred to adopt a longer time frame in seeking explanations for Balkan political instability. The problems of the area were historically recurrent and insoluble and could be summed up by the phrase *the prevalence of ancient ethnic hatreds*. The *ancient ethnic hatreds thesis* is analysed and criticised in two works.[1]

The policy of ethnic cleansing in order to create manageable political units from a mosaic of ethnic groups had been sanctioned at various international conferences convened by west European powers from the Congress of Berlin in 1878 to Lausanne in 1922 and meant to impose order in the Balkans. But after 1945 the widespread acceptance of international laws protecting the rights of minorities meant that it was less easy to uproot settled populations in the name of **realpolitik**.

However, the Balkans appeared to be an exception to the widely-held view (re-iterated at the treaty of Paris in 1990) that Europe must

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Major players, such as the USA, Germany and Britain, insisted that no force would be sent to Albania.
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never again become the scene of fratricidal conflict of the kind witnessed between 1939 and 1945. Old foreign policies relating to the Balkans were resurrected even if they stretched back before 1914 and had proved ineffective then as models for conflict resolution. Among policy-makers dealing with the Balkans, there was a barely-disguised feeling that fresh thought was useless given the deeply-rooted and atavistic nature of conflicts there.

The Balkans was a region that seemed scarcely fitted for democracy. Television images suggested that political fanaticism and general lawlessness were the norm. In such conditions, it appears futile to defend civilized values and shield civilians from the results of a breakdown of civilized behaviour.

The worst aspects of political life are seen as normal for the whole region. Thus leaders like Slobodan Milošević and Radovan Karadžić, far from being seen as aberrant figures, were viewed for a long time as fully representative of the political culture of the region. Instead, it was leaders like Kiro Gligorov in Macedonia who has struggled to preserve a balance of tolerance in his ethnically divided country, or else the representatives of Bosnian multiculturalism, who were seen as abnormal on account of their moderation.

Significantly, those engaged in shuttle diplomacy for the international community, consulted far more often with ethnic hardliners than with moderates, thus giving legitimacy to the former and withholding it from the latter. In 1996 it was still a cause of bitterness among the Serbian opposition, that Lord Owen, the chief European negotiator in former Yugoslavia from 1992 to 1995, only consulted with President Milošević on his visits to the Serbian capital.[2]

The balance of evidence suggests that influential western statesmen believed that in the Balkans, only strong and ruthless leaders were capable of controlling turbulent citizens and containing conflict in ethnic trouble-spots. Slobodan Milošević metaphorphised from being 'the Butcher of the Balkans' to being the region's chief peace-maker by the time of the 1995 Dayton Peace accord over Bosnia because of his ability to neutralise hardline forces, ones that he had originally brought into play to secure his own power by carving out a Greater Serbia from the ruins of Yugoslavia. His sultanistic practices, whereby he viewed public assets as his own private prerequisites, did not exclude Western recognition and backing from his regime once he was no longer seen to be acting as a regional troublemaker. Similar unqualified backing was extended to President Berisha in Albania despite the unsavoury features of his rule. While Milošević had forced the Bosnian Serb leadership to sign up at Dayton, Berisha

restrained Albanian nationalism in Macedonia and Kosovo.

The natural corollary of this approach was that a strong regional power was required to provide geopolitical order. Until 1995, the west European approach was to 'contain the fighting and to impose a settlement that would in effect acknowledge the Serbs as the victors.'[3]

EU states backed local despots because there was great scepticism about the ability of their populations to aspire to any better form of government. But this policy of excusing tyranny in the region had been undermined by the second half of the 1990s. By now it was clear that conflicts unleashed by despotic leaders could not be confined to the Balkans alone and threatened the security of the rest of Europe, also the internal instability produced by their arbitrary and rapacious rule had politically dangerous repercussions elsewhere. Cold War allies, particularly Britain and the USA, engaged in bitter quarrels as such a policy produced repeated failures. The prestige of the West was tarnished, NATO seemed an increasingly impotent security umbrella, and there was mounting unease that weakness and irresolution in the face of armed groups in the Balkans using terror as an instrument of war, would lead to the defiance of international norms elsewhere.[4]

In 1995 a US-led intervention in Bosnia led to the cessation of fighting there. The peace-building strategy, as enunciated by Richard Holbrooke, the chief architect of the Dayton accord, had a number of features of relevance beyond Bosnia.

1. The need to isolate nationalist hardliners in Bosnia itself and promote moderate forces capable of arranging compromises across the various ethnic divides.

2. A drive to contain ethnic tensions in other Balkan states which, in more limited form, contained some of the characteristics that produced conflict in the former Yugoslavia.

3. An increase in visible US interest in the Balkans which was no longer viewed as being an area of peripheral concern to US security. In 1996-97 the US has put some effort in trying to get Balkan states to overcome their distrust of one another by forming a South-East European Co-operation Initiative.

## The Crisis of Balkan Post-Communism

Popular challenges to governments with roots in the Communist era occurred across the Balkans during the winter of 1996-7. Ordinary citizens, facing impoverishment as the region's economy declined, abandoned their apathy about political change

and swelled protests about corruption, economic mismanagement, and fraudulent elections.

Except in Albania, where the prospect of penury unleashed mass anarchy, street protests were usually controlled and peaceful. These were not spasmodic bursts of rage of the kind which occur in repressive states after the lid on the political pressure cooker has been lifted. In Bulgaria and Serbia, the state did two things unusual for the Balkans: it made concessions to its political opponents without using violence and acknowledged that its authority had limits.

In Romania, the largest state in the region, a genuine contest for power which many thought impossible in such a flawed democracy, saw the triumph of the reformist Democratic Convention in November's elections.

Inter-ethnic conflict has been noticeably absent from the 1996-7 unrest. Cornered elites were this time unable to disable their opponents by stirring up ethnic hatreds. Indeed, the manipulation of nationalism by ex-Communists has been failing as a strategy of control for several years'.

The gravity of the crisis of the Balkan regional economy has made appeals to historic ethnic grievances redundant. The dismal record of regimes which had promised social protection to workers and peasants while allowing state assets to be plundered by party hacks and their clients, became impossible to conceal from ordinary citizens, at least in the cities, despite tight control of the state media.

The depth of the economic decline in the Balkans and the way it has spread through society, exceeds in magnitude the catastrophe that overtook the capitalist economies during the Great Depression: there are very few examples of infant democracies withstanding unaided the economic and social hardships which are the norm for millions of people there.

The level of external support for reformist governments and opposition movements in Romania, Bulgaria and Serbia will help to decide their fate. Targetted assistance in the Balkans to help governments rebuild collapsing national infrastructures and reduce the pain of economic shock-therapy will probably be more beneficial for West European security than an emphasis on NATO enlargement or the extension of the EU into the Balkans which will remain a mirage for a long time to come.

Western governments were slow to appreciate the growing weakness of post-communist regimes in the Balkans. Until the scale of the urban revolt against President Milošević became clear, Britain and France were emphasising the need to build profitable economic links with the incumbent regime in Serbia. Milošević's need to find large sums of cash in order to keep his regime afloat lay behind his decision to privatise lucrative sectors of the economy rather than any belated conversion to free market economics.

In February 1996, the junior Foreign Office minister, Sir Nicholas Bonsor led a British trade mission to Serbia to see what was on offer. Later in the year, Douglas Hurd, the chief architect of the West's minimalist approach to the 1991-95 wars in ex-Yugoslavia, arrived in Belgrade looking for contracts. He secured for his employer, the National Westminster Bank, a contract worth $15 million to organize the privatization of Serbia's telecommunications. Accompanying him was Dame Pauline Neville-Jones who was the Foreign Office's representative at the Dayton talks. Both of them eventually withdrew in face of hostile press coverage, including a stinging editorial in **The Times**.[5]

Another newspaper, **The Independent** complained that 'Western countries are all too ready to offer foreign capital to prop up his (Milošević's) gangster-ridden economy and make some money for themselves in the bargain'.[6] However, by early 1997, some Western governments were beginning to re-assess their previous Balkan policies. The scale of the grassroots revolt against Milošević after he annulled local elections of November 1996 which he had lost, produced a re-think about the merits of retaining him in office. The opposition was no longer dismissed as a force of permanent losers. The **Zajedno** coalition began to be viewed as an alternative power centre to Milošević and its leaders were invited to Paris and London for top-level meetings. Meanwhile, Washington made it clear that a violent repression of protesters would invoke a restoration of sanctions. Against this background, cynical views about the alienation of the Serbs as a race from democracy were heard less often. The commitment of the hundreds of thousands of young, middle-class, and working-class protesters in Belgrade and other centres to rejoining Europe was unmistakable.

## Western Europe and the 1997 Albanian Crisis

Disciplined and moving rallies against neo-communist rule in Serbia and Bulgaria and a peaceful transfer of power in Romania provided the Balkans with a more positive image in the west than it had obtained for a long time and suggested that the region was capable of following the reformist path of countries like Poland and Hungary. But the social breakdown and collapse of state authority which occurred in Albania in March 1997 revived negative images of the Balkans in western Europe and the half-measures proposed to contain the crisis

were similar to the ones recommended in the early stages of the Yugoslav crisis.

The collapse of fraudulent pyramid schemes in which a large proportion of citizens had invested their savings was to trigger a popular revolt against the increasingly arbitrary rule of president Sali Berisha. The disintegration of the army, mass breakouts from prison, and the circulation of looted weapons among the population, created disturbing television images that revived familiar stereotypes about the Balkans. Against the background of the country's fabled isolation and turbulence, it was easy to depict the Albanians *per se* as a race of wild fanatics. These negative stereotypes were reflected in the actions of western leaders and not a few commentators. But anarchy was not a result of any Albanian predisposition to violence. The government had blocked the route to peaceful change in previous years and left Albanians only with limited options, to emigrate or take to the streets to air their grievances.[7] Until its final months, the Berisha government had been shored up by key western governments, particularly Britain and Italy. No real pressure had been put on Berisha when he suppressed the independent judiciary and attempted to do the same with the media. The fraudulent election of 1996 were allowed to stand as a result of the intervention of the Italian and German ambassadors who overrode the objections of a majority of international observers whose report on the poll revealed serious irregularities'.[8] Berisha was viewed particularly by Britain as a pillar of anti-communism despite his previous role as an important functionary in the previous regime. According to Sir Reginald Hibbert, a former British ambassador to France (whose knowledge of Albania stretched back to the Second World War when, as a British Army officer, he was stationed there behind enemy lines), interference from top British politicians on behalf of Berisha ultimately helped to deepen Albanian divisions.[9] The West largely turned a blind eye to the pyramid schemes which could not have survived for so long without the active backing of the government. It lauded Berisha as a pioneer of free market economics in the Balkans (Albania receiving the highest per capita level of EU aid of any East European country), even though privatisation was carried out in an arbitrary and uneven way.[10] The West above all failed to check Berisha's slide towards despotism because he was viewed as the best person to restrain Albanian nationalism in the southern Balkans.

Thus democracy was sacrificed for regional stability and west European actions in the period between the rigged May 1996 elections and the anti-Berisha revolt of March 1997, revealed a big responsibility on the part of several governments for the unfolding violence and disorder.

But it was Britain and Germany, two countries which had shielded Berisha from condemnation despite his tyrannical ways, who insisted that the conflict should be allowed to burn itself out and that foreign intervention would do no good. This was the message Franz Vranitzky, the former Austrian chancellor and OSCE representative in Albania was given when he reported that order could only be restored in Albania with help from abroad. Vranitzky said on 8 March that 'a coalition of those willing to take action' should be organized by governments belonging to the EU or the 54-nation OSCE.[11]

But appeals to mobilise the law-abiding majority of Albanians against a criminal minority profiting from the turmoil fell on deaf ears because of the prevalence of negative stereotypes about this Balkan state. Calls for a police action designed to restore order, disarm citizens as far as possible, and pave the way for the return of an elected government based on the rule of law, were only supported by states which felt directly at risk from the Albanian disorder. Italy felt most at risk. It feared the effects of a lucrative trade in drugs, military hardware and illegal immigrants which had already made Albania one big transit depot for all kinds of contraband. France, aware of the dangers of uncontrolled emigration across the Mediterranean because of the Algerian conflict, feared that Albania could become a bleeding ulcer exporting crime and misery across the continent. Denmark, far removed from the Balkans, held the chairmanship of the OSCE, had peace-keeping troops in the former Yugoslavia, and was aware that their lives could be at risk by an inadequate response to such an emergency.

Although major players like the USA, Germany and Britain insisted that no force would be sent to Albania under the auspices of the UN or NATO, minimal agreement on sending a small outside force with a limited mandate was secured by Italy which had most to lose from inaction over Albania. A 5,000 strong force whose purpose would be limited to protecting, to supervising the distribution of humanitarian aid, was agreed by the end of March with the first contingents starting to arrive in April. Italy was providing half the force, several other countries agreeing to send small contingents. But NATO refused to be formally involved and the EU is powerless to act because of the failure of western states to build on one of the key objectives of the 1992 Maastricht Treaty that the EU should develop a common foreign and security policy.[12]

Italy was effectively abandoned by most of its other EU and NATO partners and left to spearhead an international mission to Albania which many felt to be doomed from the start because of its limited

mandate and resources.[13] 'The painful truth is that Europe is not ready to carry out such missions because governments have neither the capacity to carry them out nor the will to do so', said a senior NATO diplomat interviewed by the Washington Post in March 1997.[14]

If a fragmented Albania becomes a zone of disorder in which an Italian-led force supervising relief becomes a pawn of warring parties, it will be a replay of events which unfolded in Bosnia between 1992 and 1994. The Italian-led force in Albania like UNPROFOR in Bosnia before it lacks the power to disarm civilians, the amount of weaponry in civilian hands going to the crux of the Albanian crisis. The political shock-waves of a poorly-conceived intervention are already being felt in Italy where a weak left-wing government is struggling to remain in power against a strong centre-right nationalist opposition.

If Albania becomes a rogue society whose lawlessness threatens western Europe, no western state whose security is harmed is likely to stand by and endure the fall-out. But if future intervention to impose peace is punitive in its conception and carried out when well-armed factions have solidified their power, an outside force is likely to come to grief.[15]

The OSCE's representative Franz Vranitzky who was probably the west European public figure most aware of the gravity of the situation when the Albanian crisis first exploded, argued then that there was no alternative to outside intervention and that 'the decision had to be taken very quickly'.[16] But historically West European leaders have been incapable of concentrating their minds on crises in the Balkans and thinking through the steps that need to be taken to dampen down conflict. The only decision which was easily arrived at was the one to hold elections in Albania under OSCE supervision on 29 June 1997. Not a few political practitioners and analysis on both sides of the Atlantic see elections as an instant panacea which can draw the poison out of conflict-ridden situations and allow moderate forces to ineluctably come to the fore. This was the hope when elections were hastily-arranged in wartorn Bosnia in September 1996 only to result in the advocates of ethnic politics strengthening their hold. The American thinker Henry Adams, when referring to his own country, described elections as 'the systematic organization of hatreds' and with civil society shattered and armed groups able to intimidate civilians with impunity, his words may bear fruit in Albania in a way that will once again reveal the bankruptcy of the Western response to a crisis in a Balkan state which western interests contributed to in the first place by their short-term and partisan behaviour.

## Conclusion

Western governments have a chronically defective approach to the crises which flared up in the Balkans during the 1990s as a result of the failings of communist rule and longer-term problems connected with state-building and reconciling conflicting ethnic aspirations. The area is seen as essentially non-European and its populations incapable of aspiring to post-1945 European standards of political behaviour. Obsolete policies which in some cases dated back to before World War I, were applied despite radically altered conditions in the Balkans. Competing agendas based on outworn formulae led to paralysis and division between various western countries. Short-term approaches to specific emergencies were preferred to a total policy approach based on effective conflict resolution, insistence on good human rights regimes, and backing for a strategy of social and economic reconstruction.

The Bosnia crisis produced no learning curve in the major West European foreign ministries. The response to the Albanian crisis of 1996-97 showed that key Western players were unwilling to learn from past mistakes in Bosnia. Key actors such as Britain's Lord Owen, former US Secretary of State James Baker, and numerous officials down to the level of ambassador, could commit serious mistakes, sometimes resulting in tragic human consequences, and not risk serious official censure or a termination of their public roles because neither the Balkans nor its peoples are taken very seriously by western policy-makers. The survival of ancient stereotypes about the Balkans in a post-modern era means that the region is placed near the bottom of a geo-political hierarchy, at least in the eyes of influential west European statesmen. Its inferior ranking means that minimal standards of international law and morality do not need to be defended when they are comprehensively violated, as they were in Bosnia. Official western Europe's main impulse is to prevent the problems of the Balkans contaminating its own space, but only a minority of politicians realise that a policy of containing disorder rather than tacking its root causes, is only likely to worsen matters for all concerned, western as well as south-eastern and central Europe.

Despite the obsession with historical stereotypes, there is an unwillingness to recognise that previous west European (and Russian) interventions contributed to many of the problems which the west is unwilling to face up to today. A diplomatic carve-up of the region among the Great Powers between the end of the Crimean war in 1854 and the treaty of Versailles in 1919, created unviable territories, rebellious minorities, and states which felt they had

been cheated of real estate that was rightfully their's. It is hardly surprising that the track record of west European states (and the Russian one in its Tsarist and Leninist manifestations) towards the region over the last one hundred years, has fuelled defensive nationalism among insecure local elites.

Since 1995 there have been signs that liberalism, a desire for regional co-operation, and a rejection of chauvinism are beginning to emerge as tangible features of Balkan politics. Romania and Bulgaria have led the way in peacefully displacing neo-communist regimes. Macedonia has kept a precarious peace on account of the skills of its President; and even in prostrate Albania, there are opportunities amidst the chaos to promote a new political elite which will make national reconstruction the priority rather than expropriate public property for private gains as happened in the Berisha years.

West European policy makers will only lose their defective mind-set towards the Balkans if they are pressed by local leaders with an electoral mandate as convincing as theirs, to qualitatively improve their approach to the area. Emil Constantinescu, a geologist who was elected President of Romania in 1996 after championing civil society initiatives in a country which faced one of the severest forms of totalitarian rule witnessed anywhere in the Soviet bloc, has led the way.

In a recent interview Constantinescu spoke frankly about his dismay on seeing that Western governments were actively prepared to support authoritarian governments in the Balkans in the interests of stability:

'The neo-communist regimes in Eastern Europe are often very convenient for the Western World. It provided them protection against organized crime and unwanted immigration and even gave them a basis for feeling superior... But by supporting them the west betrayed those fighting for democratic change... Today our illusions have ended. We understand clearly that we cannot talk for real with the West, except in terms of profit and mutual interest.'

Western Europe needs to radically re-think its strategy towards the Balkans. It should think of integrating the region into a common European economic and security system rather than sweeping its problems under the rug. Balkan leaders in opposition and government with a proven commitment to pluralism should ask if countries like Britain, Germany and France really want peace in the Balkans and, if they, do how much are they willing to invest in it. There is a need to take the Balkans seriously, to view its problems from a Balkan perspective, and not form that of outmoded balance-of-power concepts.[18] Until Western Europe buries its damaging Balkan complex, it will continue to make avoidable policy blunders stemming from arrogance and stupidity that will jeopardise security and well-being throughout Europe.                                                                           ∎

## Notes

1. See Noel Malcolm, **A Short History of Bosnia**, Macmillan, London 1994, and Sabrina P. Ramet, "The Yugoslav Crisis and the West: avoiding "Vietnam" and blundering into "Abyssinia", **East European Politics and Societies**, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1992, pp 207-13.

2. **The Independent** (London), 9 January 1997

3. Mujeeb R. Khan, 'Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Crisis of the Post-War International System', **East European Politics and Societies**, Vol. 9, No. 3, 1995, p. 486.

4. For more in-depth criticism of the nature of the Western approach towards the multiple crises in the former Yugoslavia, see Jane M.O. Sharp, **Bankrupt in the Balkans: British Policy in Bosnia**, Institute for Public Policy Research, London 1994; Tom Gallagher, '"This Farrago of Anomalies"': The European Response to the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 1992-95', **Mediterranean Politics**, Vol. 1, No 1, 1996, p.p. 76-94, and Noel Malcolm, 'Bosnia and the West: A Study in Failure', **The National Interest**, Spring 1995, pp. 3-14.

5. Editorial in **The Times**, 4 February 1997.

6. Andrew Gumbel, 'West vacillates as the Balkans slip into chaos', **The Independent**, 8 February 1997

7. Ardian Klosi, 'Anarchy By Resign', **Warreport**, No. 50, April 1997, p. 6

8. Edi Rama, 'To find my country', **The Guardian**, 14 March 1997

9. Letter To The Editor, **The Independent**, 5 March 1997. Hibbert has also criticised the rationale of British policy in the Yugoslav theatre of conflict. See his article, 'The War in Bosnia: can the Balkans be saved from Balkanisation', **The World Today**, August-September 1995.

10. Miranda Vickers, 'Tinder-box in Tirana', **The Guardian**, 5 March 1997

11. William Drozdiak, 'European Reject Call for Help in Albania', **Washington Post**, 15 March 1997

12. Ian Davidson, 'Polite hypocrisy', **The Financial Times**, 19 March 1997.

13. John Hooper, 'EU allies abandon Italy to a doomed Albania mission'. **The Guardian**, 5 April 1997.

14. **Washington Post**, 15 March 1997.

15. This argument made by me in an article in the **International Herald Tribune** of 20 March 1997 entitled 'European Can't Afford to Dodge Intervention in Albania'.

16. Tom Gallagher, 'This is no time for western powers to sit on their hands', **the Sunday Times** (London), 16 March 1997. Austrian former Chancellor Vranitzky would not have been unaware of the connection between uncontrolled emigration from a collapsing Albania and the rise of political xenophobia in his own country.

17. Colin Woodward, 'Interview with Emil Constantinescu, **Transition**, Vol. 3, No. 6, 4 April 1997, p. 43.

18. Points made by Reginald Hibbert in 'The War in Bosnia: can the Balkans be saved from Balkanisation', **The World Today**, August-September 1995, p. 157.