
Report on the 2015 ASN (Association for the Study of Nationalities)

Convention at the Columbia University in New York

On 4 May 2017, *Francine Friedman* (Ball State University) was the chair of a panel entitled “The Eastern Question....Again” at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Nationalities in New York City at Columbia University.

Stefano Bianchini (University of Bologna) posed the question, what is the difference between today’s situation in the Balkans and the situation around the end of the seventeenth century, when the Balkans became interesting because of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the rising importance of the ethnic minorities in the region? He followed that with the question, Why are we seeing this situation arise again? He suggested that the answer lies in a formulation of Zygmunt Bauman about liquidity. That is, Bauman suggested that pre-existing social links are melting during transitional phases. As it was between the feudal and the modern eras, so also today we see a similar phenomenon as we pass from the modern to the post-modern eras. As a result, we see the rise of new, liquid conditions, some of which may remain in the new era and some of which may not.

The question of Southeastern Europe is still unsettled for different reasons than between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Bosnian war was not a traditional war, because it had several fronts throughout the borders of the former Yugoslavia and several enemies fighting each other at various times. Thus, we can view the war as liquid, using Bauman’s term. Furthermore, the war also led to a liquid ceasefire; that is, the Dayton Peace Accords, the Ohrid agreement, etc., were liquid agreements in that they were interpreted differently by each of the involved actors. More importantly, however, none of the actors in the war recognized defeat. Thus, international intervention by the U.S. and the E.U. achieved some type of peace treaties, but the international presence in the region itself is liquid. This presence was very differentiated: the U.N., OSCE, the Office of the High Representative, etc. Now Russia has become an important player, as Putin has become more aggressive in his foreign policy, although he may not continue to desire as strong a role since Southeastern Europe has expressed a strong interest in joining the E.U.

Nevertheless, Putin is attempting to expand Russia’s scope as fast and as far as possible in his drive to keep NATO and the US as far away from Russia as possible (for example, in regard to Syria). China and Turkey are also increasingly important players, which expands the sense of liquidity in the Balkans. Recently, the idea of the liquidity of language was launched in the area, as area scholars submitted a petition about the status of the Serbo-Croato-Bosnian language. People call this mutually intelligible language whatever they want.

One can also speak of liquid reconciliation in the area, as some Balkan leaders are launching initiatives to that effect, such as Lucic’s recent actions with regard to Srebrenica. Nevertheless, reconciliation in the Balkans is far from happening, because, to reiterate, none of the parties to the war accepted defeat.

Because conditionality in the EU is becoming increasingly liquid, as the EU is forced to deal with the problems of refugees, Brexit, etc., the entry of the remaining Balkan states into the EU is last on everyone’s to-do list.

So is there some way out of this situation? Some interest has been expressed in controlling problems in the region and in promoting reforms in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia in particular. But a positive outcome is doubtful. The decision-makers in Southeastern Europe still seem to think that we are living in the World War II era and have not been able to move beyond that thinking with their policies. And the citizens of the Balkan countries seem to be resigned to the fact that nothing will happen to assuage these problems or, in Bauman's terms, to transform such a liquid situation.

R. Craig Nation (Dickinson College) discussed Russia, which was an integral part of the attempt to resolve the original Eastern Question, that is, who would gain the advantage in the area being vacated by the retreating Ottoman Empire. Because of the international failure to generate a functional regional order after the end of World War II where there would be no vying for power, there is no stability there yet and the situation remains liquid.

Russia, along with the European Union, the United States, and Turkey, is again involved in Southeastern Europe, which is, again, a geographic shatter belt. For example, Russia cultivates Serbia as an ally (even though the latter emerged from the Wars of Yugoslav Succession as a pariah state), and supports the Republika Srpska's attempt to destabilize Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Russia sympathizes with Greece and has mended fences with Turkey, even while emphasizing its leadership of the Slavic Orthodox Churches. That Russia does not immediately pose a regional threat does not mitigate the mutual antagonism with the U.S. and the NATO hostility toward Russia, particularly as Russia opposes NATO enlargement in the Southeast European region.

There is a vein of U.S. national security decision-makers who remain hostile toward Russia, projecting an exaggerated and unhelpful conceptualization of Russia in the region. However, it might be useful if it spurs the U.S. and the E.U. to address European issues that are long overdue. We have tried for decades and have failed to address these issues; therefore, other approaches are needed. Some in the national security community are being sidelined, even though they might have the answers on how to resolve regional problems, for example, Macedonia. Instead, we have international competition for leverage. For instance, the U.S. has stated that it cannot work with Russia while it still holds on to Crimea and while it opposes our Syria policy. Nevertheless, we must look beyond those issues, because there are more important issues, which Russia could and should help us to address, such as improving governance and reducing corruption in Southeastern Europe; combating transnational crime; preventing transnational terrorism; promoting regional cooperation; supporting energy diversification; and managing refugee movement and migration. These issues have festered for many years, and it has become obvious that the most important problems are these local ones. Should they remain unaddressed, a new Eastern Question may, indeed, be in our future, but one that neither the U.S. nor Russia is well-positioned to play.

Julie Mostov (Drexel University) focused on how the Balkans remain an area where great powers still compete. The "Balkan route" is an old immigrant route (Turkey to Greece to Macedonia to Serbia) with the (recent) goal of moving on deeper into Europe. Now, however, the Balkans is a place for immigrants to stop and a place to manage this immigrant movement to assist European interests. Since Southeastern Europe sees itself as a part of Europe, it will comply with the European goal of immigration management.

This also plays into the relationship between Turkey and Europe. Turkey remains a part of the discussion because of its agreement to contain people movement.

Those who have already made it into Europe from the Balkans began this discussion again. They were the industrious, ambitious people who have been able to make a contribution to their new homelands. However, there is a difference in people's minds between economic migrants and asylum seekers. Now it appears to some that economic migrants are trying to take advantage of the

system. They are undeserving, dangerous, and are criminals taking advantage of Europe's largesse. Therefore, only a few of the immigrants deserve asylum.

As a result, the Balkan immigration route has become the place to stop the migrant flow and allow only the deserving to enter. The role of the Balkans is thus changing with regard to the flow of refugees. While the numbers of migrants were cut severely, a small number is still making its way, for example, through Serbia. But the role of traffickers and of migrant camps is increasing.

While the traffickers' treatment of the migrants is horrible, so also is the way the states are dealing with migrants. For example, Hungary is no longer a part of the Balkan immigration route, because it has become part of the West, not the Balkans, and has, therefore, decided to turn its back on the migrant problem.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has generated a 120-page Action Plan for Migrants, but not many migrants are going to Bosnia. Bosnia has signed agreements with its neighbors to follow the European Union rules regarding smuggling, which shows that Bosnia desires to continue to be connected with the "European solution" of this problem.

This is how we see the renewal of the Eastern Question in a disturbing fashion: acceptance of the EU's plans and arguments of how to help manage asylum and to define who is desirable and deserving of asylum status. This approach allows populism and authoritarianism to have freer rein, and ethno-nationalists can try to assert further control in their own regions over their own "troublesome" (i.e., ethnic) populations, as long as they continue to follow Europe's "rules."

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