
Report on the 2019 ASN (Association for the Study of Nationalities)

Convention at the Columbia University in New York

On Thursday, 2 May 2019, the Association for the Study of Nationalities national convention hosted a panel entitled "*Imagining the Balkans in a Post-Western Global Order*" chaired by Francine Friedman (Ball State University).

David Kanin (Johns Hopkins University) posed the premise that the West is in decline, meaning that we are currently living in the post-Western global order. This is due to the permanent change of resources and influence such that the old powerful countries no longer hold the supreme position that they used to hold. The European project, based on the decline of the old European empires, is no longer feasible. The U.S. is in decline, but is in denial that Western norms such as democracy and transparency are experiencing a loss of global importance and influence.

The Balkans were useful as Western objects, but are now not so easily manipulable. The Balkans could not previously construct its own regional power and economic structure, and it still cannot. While Western influence will remain, it does not appear that the Balkans will en masse join the European Union, or, if they do, it will be less to them than it could have been previously. The U.S. will seem further away from them than ever; the U.S. cannot get away with its mistakes like previously (i.e., we cannot any longer send many troops to try to mend a situation like we did, say, with Vietnam).

The norms touted by the West will diminish before Western forms disappear, so that the norms will have less content to them. Countries will use the forms, but they will put their own spin on them, particularly now that other alternatives are available. The prime example is China, which will assist any country that will give them access to resources. For example, China is constructing roads in the Balkans, but they are tailored to its own needs and will not particularly help Balkan development. We might look at Fikret Abdić as the model for the Balkan future. As China flexes its

muscles in the region and the West flounders, local patronage networks will be strengthened and the informal economy will continue, while political parties remain patronage networks. China will underpin these networks. Ethnicity will continue to matter with the local patronage systems, so that China must carefully choose which networks to support. China will support those patronage bosses that give them the best access to resources, but conflict is possible between patronage bosses regarding distribution of largesse.

None of Yugoslav's borders south of the Sava is finally set. For example, will there be a Kosovo/a in the future? It depends on which bosses win. Bosnia and Herzegovina is a failed state, and it will be part of the competition for who gets what in the region. The ethnic overlay there will ensure a perpetually fragmented region, lacking the hegemony of Western norms and the existence only of Western forms. The underpinnings will, thus, be synchronic and not diachronic.

Kanin suggested that, in focusing on the fragmentation of the Balkans, analysts should study the larger changes first and then look at local and smaller issues. He cited the philosophy that the "big man in the village should eat more, but not too much more" in order to maintain an orderly and workable political situation in the region.

Stefano Bianchini (University of Bologna) reminded the audience that the decline of the West continued the importance of discussion of the "Eastern Question" (conflicts among the great powers over conflicting interests). With the decline of the European Union project and the possibility that the U.S. will withdraw from the region, other powers have room to intervene. These new powers will have different desires for the region than the previous great powers. For example, while Russia is not as strong as it was during the Cold War, it still has influence in the region that could offer new possibilities if Western power and norms continue to decline. Also, Turkey has begun to invest heavily in the Balkans. How will that play out as Western influence in the Balkans declines?

Unlike in many other global theaters, the issues of World War I, World War II, and the Wars of Yugoslav Succession of the 1990s will still be in play because of the Western decline. For example, Slovene "national" history of the last two centuries is again becoming deeply contested, with important ramifications for the area.

The Balkans are also still geographically contested in the West. For example, France and Germany had a recent meeting about the interplay between major Balkan issues and European Union institutions. However, neither Italy nor Balkan representatives were invited to the meeting.

Thus, France and Germany tried to use the Balkans to reinforce the residual power of the West in the region. But they will be faced with other problems. For example, Serbian member of the Bosnian presidency, Milorad Dodik, has raised the question of why Republika Srpska is not permitted to leave Bosnia and Herzegovina if, as has been discussed, a Serb-dominated portion of Kosovo/a's territory could be ceded to Serbia.

Bianchini also discussed the European parliamentary elections. He questioned whether pro-Europe parties would be able to maintain a majority in the parliament. The European Council must appoint the Commission, but the appointments might be conflictual. He also raised the problem of conditionality, which was necessary for the post-Soviet countries, but that policy is not working well today. He concluded by saying that it is difficult to predict the future, especially in light of the increased fragmentation of the region.

Craig Nation (Dickinson College) queried, how do the Balkans fit into the emerging world order? He recalled the old Eastern Question, what great powers would benefit from the collapse of the Ottoman Empire? Balkan geography is permanent; it is diachronic, but the region is of great relevance. Its north-south axis connects Europe to Western Asia. It has great natural resources. It is important to European markets. It has a distinctive (European) culture. Finally, it is a strategic platsbydam, that is, a jumping off point to project power.

Thus, while the nature of its interactions has changed over time, its importance has not. For example, the first Yugoslavia was part of the cordon sanitaire. It was somewhat self-sufficient but was destroyed by the World War II German invasion. Tito re-created Yugoslavia, which became the Cold War in microcosm, if its non-aligned status between the East and the West is taken into account. In the 1980s, this position was shattered.

In the 21st century, we can ask, again, how does the region fit into world politics? The transition agenda for the region failed after the Bosnian War because it was not well integrated into Europe. Can the region fit into the emerging world order? We are now experiencing a new cold war, as several great powers contend in this fragile region with strategic importance. The conflict among the US, China, Russia, the European Union, and Turkey (the latter being closer to Russia now than to the US, even though Turkey is in NATO) has turned the region into a shatterbelt.

While the West seems admittedly to be in decline, it is still there as a player. The US will not leave the area, still encouraging NATO enlargement, which will bring new countries, such as North

Macedonia, into the West. Of course, this leads to disputes with Russia over contested leverage. If the West continues to successfully engage, there will not be a post-Westernworld, as some analysts warn, because the West will still exert great influence. However, Russia has interests in the region, such as increasing economic interactions, as well as cultural influences through its assumed role as the protector of Orthodoxy in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Russia also is acquiring real estate influence in the region (Russians own approximately 40% of Montenegrin real estate), as well as banking influence. Therefore, while Russia still has limited influence, it is still an important player in the region.

China seeks access to Europe through the Balkans, attempting to deny influence to the US and Russia as much as possible.

Thus, the question can be posed, how should Southeastern European microstates deal with the dynamics imposed by outside powers? The answer is to create more regional associations that can assist the region to balance its interests in what may be the post-American, quasi-hegemonic situation that looms.

Julie Mostov (New York University) stated that ideas like “the East,” and “the West,” for example, are not static. Therefore, we must discuss agency.

Ethnocrats claim to define and defend national interests and will use network connections to put forward the needs of “the nation” in order to counter those who would invade their space. Thus, the narrative put forward is very important.

Those who control the narrative will point at “others” as enemies, making them a salient object. This can lead to shifting borders and manipulating citizenship so that some people no longer belong to “us.” This occurs often when there are economic tensions. Autocrats control this narrative through the press, through the definition of what is “the truth,” through control of the police, military, etc. In this way, they define the context of the message.

The more the proffered model becomes accepted, the more dangerous “they” (that is, “the other”) can be made to seem. Where institutions are already fragile, there is a greater impetus for autocrats to hold onto power.

What is left for ordinary people under these conditions of autocracy? People become more impoverished in many ways every day.

Is there something else, or do we have to live with this situation? In order to break out of such situations of impossibility, the answer must be systemic. Some people recognize that there

are already-existing cross-border connections and mechanisms. These mechanisms must be used to address economic issues, climate change, water power issues, migration, education, technology, internet, gender, and health issues. Cross-border collaboration can assist in resisting autocratic closure of popular space. Thus, there are examples of youths in fragile states resisting being pawns of the great powers. There must be further construction of institutional structures and economic tools that break the narrative of “us” vs. “them” and create new, more positive political associations.

Written by Francine Friedman, Ball State University