
45th Annual Convention of the Association for Slavic, East European & Eurasian Studies

On Friday 22 November 2013 at the 45th Annual Convention of the Association for Slavic, East European, & Eurasian Studies, a roundtable entitled “From Nation-State to Liquid Society: What Kind of Change in the EU and the Balkans?” The chair of the panel was Francine Friedman (Ball State University).

Sara Barbieri (Europe and the Balkans International Network) described the problems of perpetuating ethnic separation in Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. She discussed the lack of efficacy of the “two schools under one roof” model of education noting that positive student educational outcomes suffer in this situation. Nevertheless, ideological and parochial interests continue to prevent people in these countries from joining together to resolve common problems in a more rational way.

David Kanin (Johns Hopkins University) focused on the liquidity of politics in the Balkans, noting that this situation continues to make it difficult to formulate solutions to the many problems of the region. In fact, the Balkans are still dealing with problems similar to those facing the region at the end of the eighteenth century. For example, it is unlikely that Bosnia and Herzegovina will be able hold together in its current trajectory. He posed some questions to consider: Will the Croats eventually get their own entity? What will be the final status of the (currently dysfunctional) Bosnian Federation? With regard to Kosovo/a, how will that entity finally organize itself? What role will the U.S. play, particularly in its currently disorganized situation; is the U.S. a reliable patron anymore? The solution to some of these problems may lie in making better decisions about economics and infrastructure. If solutions can be reached on a regional basis through transactional relationships, there is a better chance of deriving further benefits for the region. However, if the players in the region continue to look to the EU to solve their problems, it is likely that there will only be a continuation of the same stale politics.

Julie Mostov (Drexel University) discussed shifting spaces and alliances in the Balkans and how they could lead to realignments because of dynamic movements. She pointed out that even the politically far right is creating cross-border alliances to undercut the EU. The focus will now be on functionality of new partnerships, recognizing synergies and emerging strengths. There is a potential in the shifting of spaces for forward movement in transportation, energy, research and development, water, and gender mainstreaming issues, because people in these areas are themselves looking out for the larger economic and social interests. Because of increased competitiveness, understanding of smart growth, decreased tariffs, promotion of investment, there is potential for significant collaboration. If this forward movement does not take place, however, the economic situation throughout the area will only worsen.

R. Craig Nation (Dickinson College) questioned some of the traditional barriers to transactional movement. For example, he asked whether the nation-state is still a pillar of the international arena. Is sovereignty still a desirable condition of statehood? Sovereignty is still a constraint, is still being claimed by new actors, and, thus, is still relevant. However, should we not be focusing on how sovereignty is evolving in the 21st century? At the minimum, the traditional idea of sovereignty is being diluted (liquefied) by today's conditions. Therefore, how can we use what sovereignty is becoming to encourage peaceful development? For example, what is the relevance of national-cultural autonomy, federative associations, joint sovereignty? Could these newer forms of association be utilized to create positive effects to promote liquidity? Could popular support of communications strategies encourage elites to embrace cooperative solutions of problems by surrendering some of their sovereignty for the greater good? Church, military, and educational authorities, among others, should have a voice in the conversation and could play roles in international mediation and supervision of problem-solving. Shared jurisdiction would be important, especially in post-federative contexts, such as in the post-Yugoslav and post-Soviet spaces. The EU is not a panacea for all the problems of the region, although it is an example of prudent conflict management in certain areas. Nevertheless, we should be somewhat skeptical of the EU rhetoric about pooled sovereignty for pursuing liquidity, as sovereignty is still a concept in flux.

Stefano Bianchini (University of Bologna) talked about changes in the region beyond the nation-state component. He posed a number of questions: Can we assume that European integration, including enlargement with Southeastern European states, will be a viable process toward a liquid society? He pointed out that people in the region are being forced to use three standard languages toward the aim of increased common communication without implying common cultural roots. Family and other cultural elements are put under question with the creation of new EU powers, leading to the penetration of local governments through economic and other means. Mobility through the Schengen Agreement is a revolution for Europe; however, this policy questions the sovereign right of the ruler of a country to control the country's fixed population because of the threat of resulting huge migration flows. Is the EU ready to accept the implications of these movements? Apparently, there is strong resistance both institutionally and locally to these conditions. Can the majority of a population vote against minority rights through referenda? There appears to be occurring a simultaneous reshaping of local borders and reshaping of elite powers regarding the EU hierarchy of important issues. The result is social, political, and economic tensions among states as resistance to liquidity is appearing throughout the region. Thus, the many open questions might lead to a crisis in the political arena, which could also negatively affect Balkan reconciliation.

Francine Friedman
Ball State University