

Negoslav P. OSTOJIC\*

## BETWEEN EUROPE AND THE MIDDLE EAST THE CURRENT CHALLENGE

**Abstract:** Once again, Europe and the Middle East are facing historic challenges. The withdrawal of the UK from European institutions, the rise of extremist national leaders, the challenges of Jihadist Islam in nearby regions, and the assertive policies of Russia under Vladimir Putin all pose new issues, seemingly without offering positive pathways toward the future. The period of peaceful post-Cold War evolution seems over, and no one can easily predict the ways in which Europe will evolve in the coming decade.

At the same time, the Islamic Middle East is gripped with an assertive, radical, and ruthless movement which calls itself Islamic State, but which is really an extreme and violent interpretation of Islamic teaching, disavowed by virtually all Islamic scholars and leaders. The spill-over effects of this violent movement have been felt from Paris to Afghanistan, and threaten peaceful societies across the globe.

In this situation, intellectual discussion of the issues, and development of mutual understanding and positive alternative policies, is more important than ever before, and Europe's think-tanks are active in this intellectual process. This is of course routine in places like Paris and London, but is less common, and badly needed, in Eastern Europe, Turkey and the Balkans. These are the regions where such thinking is needed most, and where new approaches and intellectual exchange will make an enormous difference in the way events move forward. Many countries and societies in these regions also have traditional ties to Russia, and so they are "in between" in many ways.

The region of the Balkans, in particular, is, once again, playing its historical role as the principal physical connection between Europe and the Middle East. It is route number 1 for the refugees fleeing war in Syria, and it is also a pathway for young Jihadist recruits heading for the Middle East. Its history, mixing Islamic and Christian influences, as well as Western European and Slavic cultures, makes

---

\* Director, European Center for Peace and Development (ECPD), Headquarters in Belgrade, Serbia

it particularly sensitive, and vulnerable, to unfolding nearby events. The region also has traditional ties to Russia, through language, culture, religion and history. More than ever before, the West should be reaching out to the Balkans, to the political and intellectual elites, to educators and religious leaders, and to young people from all backgrounds, with a message of inclusion, of understanding and of welcoming support. Local institutions which help in this effort are particularly deserving of support as these newly-independent states face serious new challenges.

But the Balkans is many things, deriving from its multi-cultural history — it has, over the centuries, been one of the European regions (the other being Spain) where Islam has challenged Christianity for dominance, and where whole regions were converted under the Ottoman Empire. And the Christians in this complex region are as likely to hold allegiance to Russian or Greek Orthodoxy as to Rome.

Belgrade, with its central location and history of regional leadership, is particularly sensitive to the dislocating events that are once again swirling around the Balkans. The countries which formed the Yugoslav state are now independent, and there is no going back, but there are nonetheless complex historical relationships among these countries and cultures, which remain, and cannot be erased.

In these circumstances, the West should be supporting active dialogue and open discussion of issues and solutions, in Belgrade and other Balkan capitals. And as it happens, there is an existing institution in Belgrade which supports and hosts such open discussions, and which has a central place among intelligentsia all over the Region — this is the European Centre for Peace and Development — the ECPD — created thirty-four years ago on the basis of a mandate from the United Nations. The ECPD survived the disintegration of Yugoslavia, with its home office in Belgrade and with affiliated institutions in a number of other Balkan capitals. The ECPD continues to pursue its UN-based mandate with discussion events, graduate-level courses of study, research and publications that are relevant to the region. It has an international Board, chaired by former UNESCO Director General Federico Mayor, worldwide contacts, especially involved in higher education, and support from individuals and private organisations in Europe, the USA, Canada and Japan. It gets no regular funding from any government, including the host state, and so must rely on voluntary contributions from foundations, institutions and the private sector.

The ECPD is currently planning, among other numerous activities, a major conference event in October, to analyse the current situation in Europe, Russia, and the nearby Middle East, and to identify positive ways forward through the many issues and problems that relate to this complex situation. It deserves broad support, because the Balkans region remains Europe's most vulnerable area and its gateway to the Moslem world. The Balkans are a sort of bell weather of what is in store for the surrounding regions, and understanding what is happening there will help to forestall more dramatic, and possibly tragic developments nearby.