

Former Yugoslavia patches itself together

Entering the Yugosphere

Aug 20th 2009 | BELGRADE
From *The Economist* print edition

Almost 20 years after political bonds were severed by war, day-to-day links between companies, professions and individuals are quietly being restored

AT A recent summit of the cold-war relic called the Non-Aligned Movement, Serbia's president, Boris Tadic, remarked that companies from former Yugoslav republics should join forces to bid on construction projects or specialised military-equipment contracts. His Croatian counterpart, Stipe Mesic, responded approvingly. Companies from "our countries", he said, were too small to compete in other markets by themselves.

On the face of it, these comments were both obvious and inconsequential. The firms are indeed small by global standards. Yet the use of the term "our countries" by the leader of one ex-Yugoslav republic to refer to everyone in the group, enemies as well as friends, points to a bigger change. From Slovenia to the Macedonian border with Greece, most people in the region still have a lot in common, even if they do not talk about it much. Every day the bonds between them, snapped in the 1990s, are being quietly restored. Yugoslavia is long gone; in its place a Yugosphere is emerging.

This huge shift in the daily life of the western Balkans is happening without fanfare. Few people have even noticed it. Those within the sphere take it for granted. Those outside are blithely ignorant. Perhaps that is not surprising. Good news is no news: the preparatory meeting to set up a south-east European firefighting centre, part of the Regional Co-operation Council, is hardly worth mentioning even in Sarajevo (where it took place), let alone anywhere else.

Yet it is precisely the fact that soldiers who were fighting one another not long ago now train together, or that firemen co-operate on a routine basis or that everyone from vets to central bankers meets with almost dreary regularity which constitutes the good news. That Regional Co-operation Council in Sarajevo has been patiently ploughing through a mass of dull, necessary work. It is a process, not an event.

The Yugosphere has its roots in shared experience, in trade and in business. Most former Yugoslavs—Bosnians, Serbs, Montenegrins and Croats—speak the same language with minor variations. Many Macedonians and Slovenes still speak or understand what used to be called Serbo-Croat as a second language. Within most of the region, people can travel freely using just their identity cards.

They like the same music and the same food. Political, religious and ethnic differences persist of course. But every summer thousands of young people come together at the Exit music festival in Novi Sad in Serbia, and big stars from across the region have no trouble packing in audiences

wherever they perform. Much to the irritation of Croatian music executives, the mobile phones of many young Croats hum with the latest Serbian tunes. Pan-Balkan opinion polls show a certain commonality of outlook: people have similar fears, worries and hopes. Gallup's Balkan Monitor, for example, released a survey in June that showed a drop in those wanting to emigrate in every state in the west Balkans.

Almost a third of Montenegro's trade is with Serbia. Bosnia is Serbia's largest export market and Croatia's second largest. Serbia is Macedonia's largest trading partner. In small economies, expansion generally means doing more business with the neighbours. Delta from Serbia, Mercator from Slovenia and Konzum from Croatia all run supermarkets and have been opening new shops in each other's backyards. Like more and more companies of the former Yugoslavia, they treat the region as one. Serbia's leading daily, *Politika*, has a domestic edition and a slightly different "ex-Yu" one. A typical recent Serbian headline announced the planned "conquest" of Croatia, not by armed force but by Cipiripi, a Serbian chocolate spread.

Some people always knew it would be thus. During the darkest days of the Yugoslav wars, criminals traded everything from guns to cigarettes across the front lines. What was known as "turbofolk" music was popular everywhere, even with its often nationalistic connotations. Now everyone else has caught up with the criminals and their turbofolk-singing molls. Serbs' biggest gripe about Croatia today has nothing to do with territory or refugees but the informal barriers which, they say, make it easier for Croatian companies to work in Serbia than vice versa.

Croats look stony-faced if you ask them about the Yugosphere. But not because they do not want it. They merely dislike the name, because it reminds them of the state they broke away from. No one else seems to mind, though. Even the former Yugoslavia's Albanians, who live mostly in Kosovo and Macedonia (and who are odd ones out in many ways), are not exempt from the Yugosphere's influence. An advertising executive from Albania says he could never market Italian milk successfully in Kosovo because, for Kosovars, Slovene milk is the gold standard.

In daily life, of course, many people live happily in more than one sphere. Kosovars watch television in Albanian but enter the Yugosphere when they trade with Serbia or go on holiday in Montenegro. Bosnians of all stripes eat the same things and do a lot of business together. But football brings out their differences, just as it does in many countries. Bosnian Serbs support Serbia's national football team, Bosnian Croats Croatia and only the Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) support Bosnia.

The trick over the next few years will be to consolidate what people have in common, keep their governments focused on that, and try to bring the region's politics and business more closely aligned both throughout the Yugosphere and, ideally, with the rest of Europe, too. The European Union was founded to cement peace on the continent and in the Yugosphere that job is not yet finished.

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