

Danger Zone: Instability in the EU's Border Regions **Gefahr an den Rändern Europas? Ungelöste Konflikte in Ost- und Südosteuropa**

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Report by Tanja Tamminen, Regensburg

□ The Southeast Europe Association in cooperation with the Evangelische Akademie Tutzing organized an event titled "Gefahr an den Rändern Europas?" on 28 and 29 October 2016. Highly knowledgeable speakers discussed the instability and conflicts in the EU's border regions. The seminar could not have been more up-to-date as the European security situation seems much more precarious than a few years ago. The recent developments in Turkey and the repression of the opposition raise concerns of human rights violations in the EU candidate country. The war in eastern Ukraine and the illegal annexation of Crimea have changed the European security order profoundly. Russia's role in the European (in-)security constellation raises questions as well as concern. NATO is strengthening its presence in Europe while the Nordic countries discuss further military cooperation. Thus at the end of 2016 the German OSCE Chairmanship is coming to the end in a rather bleak security situation.

Dr h.c. *Gernot Erler*, Special Representative of the Federal Government of Germany for the OSCE Chairmanship and President of Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft, in his opening speech brought up many of the Chairmanship's challenges. As the EU is losing trust of its citizens, this downplays also EU's capabilities to solve conflicts in its border regions, Erler noted. Germany and France have therefore taken up a lead role in the Ukraine crisis for instance. To put pressure on Ankara, the EU is too dependent on Turkey as a partner in the migration question. In the Balkans, the EU perspective does not have the attractiveness anymore to push for reforms. As trust has been broken between many partners of the wider European area, Germany during its OSCE chairmanship has tried to push for the renaissance of European wide dialogue.

With its 57 member states, the OSCE is the biggest security organization in Europe and it has played an important role in the past 40 years providing for instance the conceptual framework within which human rights have been promoted through the OSCE area since 1975. It is a structure, which allows for continuous dialogue despite localized conflicts and crises. It is a tool for transparency and confidence building.

Today the conflict in Ukraine marks the low point of relations between the West and Russia. Erler highlighted in his speech however the lack of consensus among the EU member states, when it came to reacting to Russian aggression in Ukraine. In preparing the Minsk agreements, the mediation role of Chancellor Merkel and President Hollande has been crucial as well as the one of the OSCE on a more practical level. Erler did not say it aloud, but it was clear that once again the EU has remained incapable dealing with a violent conflict on European soil.

Erler also reminded of the OSCE responsibilities when it comes to so-called "frozen" or protracted conflicts in the post-Soviet area in Southern Caucasus (Abkhazia and South Ossetia as well as Nagorno-Karabakh) and the question of Transnistria. OSCE is involved in peace processes, which

unfortunately since a long time seem to be stalled. All in all, the violence may be absent but the conflicts can just suddenly escalate as shown by Nagorno-Karabakh in spring 2016. Erler reminded that also in the Balkans, peace is still only "negative" (understood as absence of violence) rather than "positive" (sustainable and just).

All in all the opening speech set the austere tone of the seminar. On one hand Europe is facing a number of security threats within its neighborhood, but on the other hand the two main players – the European Union and the OSCE – have only limited tools in their disposal to find political solutions for these conflicts. As Gernot Erler noted, one should not wait for miracles, but political tools need to be put in work. Some issues according to him needed to wait, however, such as the question of Crimea: "Now one needs to focus on the implementation of the Minsk agreements". This statement very much reflected the current approach of the whole Western world to the Crimean question, which is being silenced in the name of more "pressing" issues. It seems unclear when Crimea will ever come back on the international agenda.

Dr *Sergej Sumlenny*, Head of Heinrich-Böll-Foundation Kiev, presented interesting insights into the crisis in Ukraine, which according to him has caused 10,000 deaths by today and pushed two million refugees or IDPs out of their homes. Crimea is notorious for kidnappings and people getting missed since the first days of the annexation. Especially the Crimean Tatars are targeted. Sumlenny showed convincingly that the annexation of Crimea was not a spontaneous reaction to protect "the Russian language" or "nation", but rather a well prepared strategic move. He also deconstructed in a fascinating way the Russian propaganda regarding Ukraine and the Russian foreign policy goals. His very critical approach calling for stronger containment policies from the West and even harder sanctions raised a number of criticisms in the audience in Tutzing, some participants calling for more understanding for the Russian feelings of inferiority and rights to protect Russian speaking populations. Sumlenny's counter-argument was however convincing as he asked whether the EU indeed was a "union of values". If the EU pretended to share common values of human rights, including the freedom of press and the right to protest and the right of association, then the EU should be bold enough to defend these rights rather than let economic interests to overrule them. Ukraine is in the forefront of this fight and desperately in need of stronger EU support.

Cord Meier-Clodt, Special Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office for the Transnistrian, gave a short and rather frustrated briefing on the situation in Moldova, the poorest country in Europe with many political problems. The Transnistrian conflict, or rather the related peace process, has been frozen since years. This also affects the finding of sustainable solutions for the status of other minorities living in Moldova. Nobody seems ready for a bigger political solution – only small steps are taken forward (including agreements on car license plates and certification of diplomas). In a protracted conflict very little can be achieved during one year of OSCE Chairmanship.

If Ambassador Meier-Clodt did not give much signs of hope in solving the Transnistrian conflict, the longest serving Member of the European Parliament, *Elmar Brok*, did not give much signs of hope to any of the Eastern European countries knocking on the EU's door. In his recognizable way, he stressed the fact that the European citizens are not ready for further enlargement towards Eastern Europe for at least the next fifteen to twenty years. The necessary consensus cannot be found in the European Council. According to him enlargement is no more possible before decision making structures are changed. The EU should be capable of acting and its decisions also need to be democratically legitimate. As for the Western Balkans, EU membership is of course possible, but the implementation of reforms has to be first. The societies cannot remain in a situation where after elections the "winner takes it all" as in the Western Balkan

countries the majority seems to own even the constitutional courts and the rules of law. Brok repeated the well-known mantra: There will be no six-pack joining the EU in bulk but rather every Western Balkan country moves on according to its own merits.

Brok also took up the old quote of Romano Prodi's "anything but institutions": If the Western Balkans have a tangible EU perspective the other Eastern European countries such as Ukraine should be linked with the inner market and the EU foreign policy, drawing them ever closer to the EU, but not integrating them into the institutional decision making structures. A listener could not help wondering HOW the EU would be able to sell such a deal in the long run to the neighbors – pushing conditionality policy without any real carrot.

Dr *Uwe Halbach*, from the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, SWP), Berlin, talked about the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh – a conflict that should not be described as "frozen" as it escalated shortly again in spring 2016. A small OSCE Mission observes the ceasefire. The use and misuse of history interpretations and memory would be typical to the conflict on both sides. It is all about narratives over the disputed territory. The multiethnic character of Southern Caucasus is indeed forgotten. The past years have been characterized by militarization of both sides and thus a new violent conflict outburst would be much more devastating than the earlier ones. The fact that Russia has been selling arms to Azerbaijan is a difficult issue in Armenia, traditionally seen as a Russian ally. Ambassador Schmunk, the first German Ambassador to Baku in 1994, noted, nonetheless, that in a case of real conflict Russia would always back up Yerevan despite its arms deals with Baku. All in all, Nagorno-Karabakh is a show-case of a territorial and spatially contained conflict which however has a huge regional importance and dimension – Russia and Turkey both backing up conflict parties, even though Russia also playing a mediating role, religious questions remaining in the picture and diaspora lobbies being fully engaged. Despite being a relatively small conflict, it could escalate in a worst case scenario into a serious regional conflict.

PD Dr *Gülistan Gürbey*, lecturer at the Free University of Berlin, briefed on the Kurdish question in Turkey and the recent escalation of the conflict. Her brief on the situation of Kurds under the authoritarian Turkish state rule was heart breaking. After a promising peaceful period, the situation has deteriorated fast. All Kurdish political movements, not only PKK, are now targeted by the Turkish military offensive. Half a million Kurds have had to leave their homes.

When it comes to protracted conflicts in the Balkans, Dr *Franz-Lothar Altmann*, Associate professor at the University of Bucharest and Member of the Board of the Southeast Europe Association, explained the complicated Dayton Peace Agreement that ended the violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina but was not able to bring in sustainable positive peace to the multi-ethnic country. BiH remains an international protectorate under the Office of the High Representative and the guidance of the Peace Implementation Council (PIC). The complicated multi-faceted state structure just endorses nationalism and ethnic divisions. The Dayton Agreement even breaches human rights (as noted by the European Human Rights Court). The ethnic maps show clearly how post-conflict BiH has become a country of ethnically rather homogeneous regions instead of pre-war multi-ethnic Bosnia. Croats would actually want to leave the Federation and create their own entity. The Republica Srpska on the other hand dreams of independence. Among traditionally tolerant Bosniak Islam the more radical Wahhabism is gaining ground. Bosnia and Herzegovina thus remains under continues danger of further ethnic clashes.

In Kosovo on the other hand, according to Altmann, some positive steps have been taken since the independence declaration in 2008. 109 states have recognized Kosovo and it has become a

member of IMF and World Bank for instance. The EU facilitated dialogue has led to a number of agreements between Pristina and Belgrade.

Ambassador (a.D.) *Gudrun Steinacker* briefed on the case of Macedonia, or the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, a territory which has been an object of many geopolitical battles over the past 100 years. Nowadays however, the neighboring states do not have territorial claims over Macedonia even though for the Bulgarians for instance Macedonian language does not exist. The conflict over the name with Greece continues nevertheless and blocks Macedonian aspirations both into NATO as well as towards the EU. The conflict has reached ridiculous dimensions as the Macedonian capital Skopje is filled with historical statues and memorials many referring to a glorious past including the times of Alexander the Great. The internal ethnic conflict between Slavo-Macedonians and Albanians seems to be fading as for the Albanians in general in the Southern Balkans EU accession is the ultimate goal as within the EU the border controls would disappear and the Albanians would feel united after years of waiting. The worse conflict in Macedonia is currently the internal political conflict between the government and the opposition. The political leadership (without any genuine pressure nor clear carrots from the EU) has fallen into a system characterized by clientelism, nepotism, kleptocracy, corruption and state-capture.

The findings of the two-day event were drawn together by a panel discussion composed of the Project Director/ Senior Researcher at the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF), Dr *Thorsten Gromes*, Ambassador (a.D.) *Michael Schmunk* and the Project Leader at the Center for International Peace Operations (ZIF), Dr *Andreas Wittkowsky*, moderated by Dr *Hilde Stadler*, Correspondent of BR/ARD. One of the problems highlighted was the prevailing corruption in all the conflict affected societies. As Dr Altmann noted the door is open to corruption when the state is weak. Dr Wittkowsky noted that many researches show that conflict zones often slide back to conflicts even after peace agreements. At least this has not happened in the Balkans, which is a good indicator that peace might be sustainable. The international interventions, their pros and cons, were also discussed and Ambassador Schmunk, rightly so, underlined that "one size does not fit all". Conflicts are always *sui generis*.

The EU apparently does not always use its soft power tools in strengthening civil society actors or young leaders. Ambassador Schmunk pointed out for instance the American efforts in giving out scholarships for studying at US universities, such as Harvard, as a way of changing societies. Rule of law, freedom of the press, these are all issues many of the conflict affected societies still have major reforms to implement on and to learn. One interesting debate focused on the transformation of societies and the role of international actors facing corrupted local elites. Many speakers expressed a wish on finding ways to prevent corrupt politicians in running in elections in their home countries. Chancellor Merkel was seen in a key role of putting pressure on certain politicians who should not candidate themselves in elections. Such an interpretation of the German role in international relations poses serious questions, however, on the legitimacy of such an approach. All citizens of democratic and sovereign states should be allowed to freely choose their political representatives. The role of civil society was not mentioned in this debate even though it is precisely a stronger civil society (which would not be in the leach of the local political parties) that could serve as a watch dog and ensure more transparent electoral processes in all mentioned countries – rather than foreign intervention and political pressure. The financial and political support of the EU (not to mention the OSCE) to non-governmental organizations in the conflict affected societies is often indeed mentioned in fancy speeches but rarely translated into such numbers that would actually have an effect.