

WHO NEEDS DYSFUNCTION IN THE BALKANS?

Zlatko Hadžidedić

(Assistant Professor at the Sarajevo School of Science and Technology, Bosnia-Herzegovina. He received his PhD from the University of Sarajevo, Faculty of Political Science, his MPhil from the London School of Economics and Political Science and MA from the Central European University, Budapest. He served as political adviser to several Bosnian ministers and political leaders. His book *Forced to be Free. The Paradoxes of Liberalism and Nationalism* was published in 2012 by Deutscher Wissenschafts-Verlag (DWV).

Copyright: Research Institute for European and American Studies (www.rieas.gr) **Publication date:** 24 April 2017.

Note: The article reflects the opinion of the author and not necessarily the views of the Research Institute for European and American Studies (RIEAS).

Foreign Affairs, a respected American foreign policy magazine, published in December 2016 an article under the title *Dysfunction in the Balkans*, written by **Timothy Less**. In this article the author offers his advice to the new American Administration, suggesting it to abandon the policy of support to the territorial integrity of the states created in the process of dissolution of the former Yugoslavia. Timothy Less advocates a total redesign of the existing state boundaries in the Balkans, on the basis of a dubious assumption that the multiethnic states in the Balkans (such as Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia) are to be regarded as inherently dysfunctional, whereas the ethnically homogenous states (such as Serbia, Albania and Croatia) are to be regarded as far more successful. Also, the author advances the claim that the peoples in the Balkans, having lost any enthusiasm for the multiethnic *status quo*, predominantly strive to finally accomplish the imagined monoethnic greater state projects – so-called Greater Serbia, Greater Croatia and Greater Albania. According to Less's design, the imagined Greater Serbia should embrace the existing Serb entity in Bosnia-Herzegovina (that is, 49% of the Bosnian territory), but also the entire internationally recognized Republic of Montenegro; the Greater Croatia should embrace a future Croatian entity in Bosnia-Herzegovina; the Greater Albania should embrace both Kosovo and the western part of Macedonia. All these territorial redesigns, claims Less, would eventually bring about a lasting peace and stability in the region.

Although Less pretends to act as a neutral observer who only promotes a rational, common-sense approach to the area portrayed as a source of irrationality, common sense first leads us to pose the question of his personal links to the Balkans whose geopolitical rearrangement he so zealously advocates. According to his official biographies, Timothy Less was the head of the British diplomatic office in Banja Luka, the capital of the Serb entity in Bosnia-Herzegovina. He was also the political secretary of the British Embassy in Skopje,

Macedonia. Thus he served as a diplomat precisely in those two states which are, according to his proposal, the most likely candidates for dismemberment. So the first question to ask is whether this diplomat, having served exactly in Banja Luka and Skopje, was directly involved in providing support to those very political forces, such as the Serbian and Albanian separatists, who are the most active participants in the projected dismemberment of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia and the realization of such greater state projects. Mr. Less now runs a consulting agency called *Nova Europa*, which claims on its [home page](#) that it is „helping investors and international organizations to understand the impact of politics on their interests in Central Europe, the Balkans and the Former Soviet Union“. So, let us take a look at what this agency offers as advice to potential clients interested in investing in Eastern Europe. Under the title „Political Risks in Eastern Europe“, *Nova Europa* provides the following list of risks:

1. The Collapse of the European Union: There is a growing risk that the process of European integration will unravel, with far-reaching implications for economic and political stability in Eastern Europe;
2. The New Cold War: Russia and the West are engaged in a multi-dimensional conflict over the boundary between them which is destabilising regional politics and causing significant economic damage;
3. The Migrant Crisis: A wave of immigration from Africa and Asia into Eastern Europe poses a significant risk to civil order, governmental stability and the integrity of supply lines;
4. Economic Patriotism: There is a growing trend for governments to reassert national control over strategic sectors to enforce conformity with their political objectives;
5. State Capture and Corruption: Eastern Europe has a serious problem with corruption and the capture of the state by oligarchical elites, posing risks to the viability of investments and to political stability;
6. Civil Unrest: There is an elevated risk of strikes and demonstrations leading to institutional paralysis, a slowdown in economic activity, and breaches in supply lines;
7. Terrorism: There is an increased danger of terrorist attack, especially in the Balkans, linked to the rise and fall of Islamic State;
8. State Disintegration: There is a growing risk that multi-ethnic states in the Western Balkans will disintegrate, reigniting conflict in the region;
9. State Failure in Ukraine: Eastern Europe's largest country is under severe political and economic stress, with negative consequences for much of the region;
10. The Arrival of China: China is becoming a major direct investor in Eastern Europe, diluting the political influence of the EU and US in the region, and exposing the region (to) a variety of long-term economic risks.

Such an exhaustive list of potential catastrophies was obviously written by a typical doomsday prophet intent not on encouraging but dissuading any possible investing, building up an atmosphere of overall paranoia around the region and within it. An artificially created shortage of investments may well result in destabilization. In this respect, Less's post-diplomatic efforts clearly serve the purpose of orchestrated angst induction, targeting specifically the area of Eastern Europe and multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies within it, just as his diplomatic activity is likely to have served a similar purpose in the multi-ethnic societies of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia.

Of course, it is easy to claim that Timothy Less is now only a freelancer whose activity has nothing to do with his former employers' policies. However, the problem is that certain radical

circles within the British foreign policy establishment, in their numerous initiatives from 1990s onwards, have repeatedly advocated the very same ideas that can be found in his article, such as the creation of the imagined monoethnic greater states – Greater Serbia, Greater Croatia and Greater Albania – as an alleged path towards lasting stability in the Balkans, with Bosnia's and Macedonia's disappearance as a collateral damage. Also, history books are full of references that these circles, ever since the appearance of their fundamental geopolitical doctrine, *The Geographical Pivot of History* by Halford Mackinder, perceive destabilization of the territorial belt between Germany and Russia as one of their primary geopolitical goals, which is exactly the territory (including the Balkans) whose destabilization *Nova Europa* seeks to induce. Therefore, it seems that Mr. Less has never interrupted his diplomatic career, having permanently served the very same radical diplomatic circles, either as an operative or as a spokesperson.

Just as the previous greater-state initiatives, his initiative relies on the assumption that the multiethnic states are the main impediments to stability in the Balkans. Such a claim is rooted in the presupposition that, as long as the existing nationalist greater-state projects remain unaccomplished, the nationalist resentment will always generate ever-increasing instability. However, the history has clearly demonstrated, both in the Balkans and other parts of the world, that such a presupposition is nothing but a simple fallacy. For, the very concept of completed ethnonational states is a concept that has always led towards perpetual instability wherever applied, because such ethnonational territories cannot be created without projection of extreme coercion and violence over particular 'inappropriate' populations, including the activities which have become known as ethnic cleansing. The logic of 'solving national issues' through creation of ethnically cleansed greater states has always led towards permanent instability, never towards long-term stability.

What is particularly interesting when it comes to 'solving national issues' in the Balkans is the flexibility (i.e. arbitrariness) of the proposed and realized 'solutions'. The winners in the World War I, among whom the aforementioned radical circles within the British foreign policy establishment played a major role, first advocated the creation of the common national state of the Southern Slavs (subsequently named Yugoslavia) at the Peace Conference in Versailles. Then, more than seventy years later, a prominent member of these circles, Lord Carrington, chaired another international conference in The Hague where he oversaw the partition of that very state in the name of 'solving national issues' between ethnonational states which constituted it (since all of them, with the exception of Bosnia-Herzegovina, had already been defined as ethnonational states within the multinational federation). Together with the Portuguese diplomat, Jose Cutileiro, Lord Carrington then also introduced the first, pre-war plan for ethnic partition of Bosnia-Herzegovina (the Carrington-Cutileiro Plan), again in the name of 'solving national issues' between the ethnic groups living in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which was eventually sealed, with some minor changes, at the international conference in Dayton. And now, here is yet another plan to make the Balkan states even more fragmented and powerless, again in order to 'solve national issues'. What is needed in addition is yet another international conference to implement and verify such a plan, and thus turn the Balkans upside-down one more time.

Therefore it comes as no surprise that such a conference on the Western Balkans, according to diplomatic sources in the region, has already been scheduled for 2018 in London. Given its timing and content, the geopolitical manifesto published in *Foreign Affairs* looks like an announcement of the conference's agenda. Yet, how the proposed dismemberment of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia, as well as the absorption of Montenegro into Greater Serbia, can be made politically acceptable to the population of the Balkans and the entire international community?

What is required to accomplish such a task is a scenario that would make an alternative to dismemberment and absorption of sovereign states even less acceptable. It is not difficult to imagine that only a war, or a threat of war, would be such an alternative. However, its feasibility is limited by the fact that no state in the Balkans has the capacities and resources – military, financial, or demographic – to wage a full-scale war, and their leaders are too aware of this to even try to actually launch it. The alternative is to create an atmosphere that would simulate an immediate threat of war, by constantly raising nationalist tensions between, and within, the states in the region. Of course, such tensions do exist since 1990, but it would be necessary to accumulate them in a long-term campaign so as to create an illusion of imminence of regional war. Significantly, simultaneously with the appearance of Less's article, the tensions – first between Serbia and Kosovo, then between Serbia and Croatia, then within Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia – have begun to rise. This growth of tensions can hardly be disregarded as accidental, given the fact that the Balkan leaders can easily be played one against another whenever they receive signals, no matter whether fake or true, that a new geopolitical reshuffle of the region is being reconsidered by major global players. Since they are already well-accustomed to raising inter-state and intra-state tensions as a means of their own political survival, it is very likely that they will be able to accumulate such tensions to such a level as to gradually generate a mirage of imminent regional war. A part of that campaign is also the systematic spread of rumours, all over Europe, that a war in the Balkans is inevitable and will certainly take place during 2017.

Under such circumstances, a radical geopolitical reconfiguration of the entire Balkans, including dismemberment of the existing states proclaimed as dysfunctional and their eventual absorption into the imagined greater states, may well become politically acceptable in all corners of the world. All that is needed is to juxtapose this 'peaceful' option and the fabricated projection of imminent war as the only available alternatives, and offer to implement the former at a particular conference, such as the one scheduled for 2018 in London. It does not matter that the option of real full-scale war is not available at all, due to the Balkan states' incapacity to actually wage it; what is required for implementation of the proposed geopolitical rearrangement of the Balkans is to spread the perception that the permanent rise of political conflicts in the region inevitably leads to a renewed armed conflict. In that context, all the fallacies proposed in the article *Dysfunction in the Balkans* may easily acquire a degree of legitimacy, so as to be finally implemented and verified at the 2018 London conference on the Western Balkans. Of course, if that happens, it can only lead to further resentment and lasting instability in the region and Eastern Europe, and that can only lead to growing instability in the entire Europe. One can only wonder, is that a desired

ultimate outcome for those who promote greater state projects in the Balkans as an alleged path towards its stability?