Conference Report

Transnationalism in the Balkans: The Emergence, Nature and Impact of Cross-national Linkages on an Enlarged and Enlarging Europe, 26–27 November 2004

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In response to the pull of prospective membership of the European Union (EU), the states, societies and economies of the Balkan countries are undergoing unprecedented change. Their transformation has been shaped by a double legacy of communism and ethnic conflict, distinguishing their efforts from the transitional experience of their counterparts in east central Europe. How do these legacies interact with the goal of becoming a part of the EU? Is political and economic liberalisation a sufficient foundation for the Europeanisation of the Balkan states? How can the extent of their post-communist and post-conflict transformation and European integration be gauged? To tackle these questions, the Centre for the Study of Global Governance at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), London, and the Institute for East European Studies at the Free University, Berlin, organised a two-day conference to examine the nature of transnational relations in the Balkans. With the financial support of Volkswagen Stiftung, the conference, entitled 'Transnationalism in the Balkans: The Emergence, Nature and Impact of Cross-national Linkages on an Enarged and Enlarging Europe', took place at the LSE in November 2004.

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The organisers posited that the incorporation of post-communist newcomers from the Balkans into an enlarged Europe hinges not only on their successful political and economic transition, but also on transnational linkages, which drive and sustain the European integration process. But, to date, the study of the Europeanisation of the region has by and large focused on EU policies and their impact on the Balkan countries, as well as the latter's compliance with the accession criteria.[1] For this reason, the conference put transnational relations within the Balkans at the centre of its academic inquiry.[2] The very emergence of cross-border links has marked a break with the Balkans' exclusive nationalism, violence and isolation of the 1990s. An insight into their nature, the conference organisers contested, would enhance understanding of the region's future, including the challenges on the road to the EU membership.

While regular interactions across national boundaries are the essence of transnational relations, the organisers conceptualised transnationalism broadly so as to encompass trans-societal and trans-governmental relations.[3] The Balkans was defined as the region comprising the countries and territories created in the wake of former

1 Irina Bokova, 'Integrating Southeastern Europe into the European Mainstream', *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 2, 1 (2002), 23–41; Wim van Meurs, 'The Stability Pact and Economic Strategies for the Balkans', *South East Europe Review for Labour and Social Affairs*, 3, 4 (2000), 9–20; Will Bartlett and Visnja Samardzija, 'The Reconstruction of South East Europe, the Stability Pact and the Role of EU: An Overview', *Most-Moct*, 10, 2 (2000), 245–63; Dietrich Schlegel, 'Stability Pact for Southeast Europe – A German Initiative for the Postwar Period in the Balkans', *Südosteuropa-Studie*, 67 (2000), 135–43; Benn Steil and Susan L. Woodward, 'A European "New Deal"', *Foreign Affairs*, 78, 6 (1999), 95–105; David Phinnemore, 'Stabilisation and Association Agreements: Europe Agreements for the Western Balkans?', *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 8, 1 (2003), 77–103; Dimitris Papadimitriou, 'The EU's Strategy in the Post-Communist Balkans', *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 1, 3 (2001), 69–94; Bruno Sergi, 'Do the Balkans Look West or Simply to the EU? From a Distorted Economy to a Prospective Open Economy', *South East Europe Review for Labour and Social Affairs*, 4, 3 (2001), 89–112; Dimitrios Triantaphyllou, 'The Balkans between Stabilisation and Membership', in Judy Batt et al., *Partners and Neighbours: A CSFP for a Wider Europe*, Chaillot Papers 64 (September 2003), 60–76; Marie-Janine Calic, 'EU Policies towards the Balkans: Fostering Ownership of Reforms', *The International Spectator*, 3 (2003), 111–23; David Phinnemore and Peter Siani-Davies, 'Beyond Intervention? The Balkans, the Stability Pact and the European Union', in Peter Siani-Davies, ed., *International Intervention in the Balkans since 1995* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 172–93.

2 The regional focus on the Balkans was to build on and refine a transnational approach to democratisation in eastern Europe in general, and European integration in particular. See Jan Zielonka and Alex Pravda, eds., *Democratic Consolidation in Eastern Europe*, vol. 2, *International and Transnational Factors*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Archie Brown, 'Transnational Influences in the Transition from Communism', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 16, 2 (2000), 177–200; Mary Kaldor, *Global Civil Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003); Geoffrey Pridham, 'EU Enlargement and Consolidating Democracy in Post-communist States – Formality and Reality', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40, 3 (2002), 953–73; Giorgia Delsoldato, 'Eastward Enlargement by the European Union and Transnational Parties', *International Political Science Review*, 23, 3 (2002), 269–89; Harald Baldersheim, 'Mayors Learning across Borders: The International Networks of Municipalities in East-Central Europe', *Regional and Federal Studies*, 12, 2 (2002), 126–37; Katherine Verdery, 'Transnationalism, Nationalism, Citizenship, and Property: Eastern Europe since 1989', *American Ethnologist*, 25, 2 (1998), 291–306.

3 See Thomas Risse-Kappen, 'Bringing transnational relations back in: introduction', in Thomas Risse-Kappen, ed., *Bringing Transnational Relations Back In: Non-state Actors, Domestic Structures, and International Institutions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 3–33.

Yugoslavia's disintegration, but excluding Slovenia and including Albania, Greece, Romania and Bulgaria. The conference gathered forty-five chairpersons, speakers and other participants who focused on the nature and impact of transnational political, cultural, economic and security links within and with the Balkans. These links are a sign of the ongoing process of the post-communist and post-conflict transformation of the Balkans, which also serve as a motor of its continued change. Transnational relations were discussed in thematic sessions focusing on civil society, grass-roots and sub-state cross-border links, diaspora–homeland relations, economic linkages, cultural transnationalism and transnational actors, and concluded with a debate on the Balkans and its European future.

Regional co-operation represents an integral part of the Stabilisation and Association process (SAp), which the European Union initiated in 1999 as a specially tailored mechanism for the European integration of the Balkan states. The prospect of a European future was envisaged as a powerful motivation for the emergence and expansion of cross-border linkages across the region. Yet, as a number of papers at the conference demonstrates, close scrutiny of the nature of transnational contacts revealed the fallacy of assuming automaticity between Europeanisation and the transnationalisation of the Balkans. The region's advance towards the EU has not necessarily been accompanied by an increase in cross-national linkages throughout the region. In fact, European integration has in some cases obstructed and, indeed, reversed existing transnational relations in the region, since the Balkan states were divided into EU candidates on one hand, and aspirants on the other. Originally the dividing line separated Romania and Bulgaria, countries that signed Europe Agreements like their post-communist counterparts in central and eastern Europe, from the former Yugoslav republics that embarked on the process of European integration after the end of the Balkan wars. However, a new division within the latter group is emerging after candidate status was granted to Croatia. The conference provided three key explanations for the current predicament of transnational relations in the Balkans. They concern state, society and institutionalisation, and account for the weakness of transnational linkages. A distinction was made between linkages such as those among governments, economies and civil societies with a potential to support and drive forward the democratisation and Europeanisation of the region, and the criminal transnational networks that undermine the region's stabilisation. In addition, transnational relations between the individual states in the Balkans and the European Union and its members have been more intense than those among the states and societies in the region.

The state in the Balkans has been a contradictory actor in forging transnational relations. It has played a crucial role in promoting transnational links with the EU, while at the same time diminishing the potency of emerging transnational links within the Balkans. The European integration process has privileged the state as the main actor in promoting political and economic cross-border ties. The EU applied an individual approach to the states in the Balkans, albeit insisting that they forge and pursue cross-border relations. As a consequence, states in the Balkans have prioritised the EU as a focus of transnational linkages rather than their neighbours in

the region. Silvana Mojsovska (Sts Cyril and Methodius University, Skopje) showed that transnational economic relations are most dense between the individual Balkan states and the EU rather than between the Balkan states themselves.

The successful enlargement of the EU has also emerged as an obstacle to transnationalisation. The process advantaged some and disadvantaged other Balkan states. The new EU members, such as Hungary, and the EU candidates, such as Romania, have imposed visas on Serbia and Montenegro, affecting cross-border movement and activity. The paper by Ciprian Alionescu (University of Bucharest) explored the creation of transnational linkages in the Danube–Kris–Mures–Tisa (DKMT) Euroregion, in the border regions of Romania, Hungary and Serbia. The establishment of the Euroregion had led to bustling social, cultural and economic cross-border exchanges between Hungary, Romania and Serbia. However, Hungary's accession to the EU and Romania's introduction of a visa requirement in preparation for EU membership have put a freeze on flourishing transnational relations in this area. The process of European integration has had a contradictory impact. While it initially spurred the re-creation of old pre-communist ties and the creation of new transnational connections, it has subsequently become a big obstacle to their pursuit in the region.

The defining feature of the Balkan state is its weakness, which also explains the relative lack of transnational linkages at a state and local level. The disintegration of former Yugoslavia in the 1990s was triggered by a quest for state-building because of the conceptualisation of states as nation-states. This definition of state-building took precedence over one which would have transformed a weak post-totalitarian and post-conflict state into strong and functional state, characterised by political elites, bound by democratic rules and dedicated to the pursuit of public good, a depoliticised and modernised administration, respect for the rule of law and the protection of human rights. Accordingly, by contrasting local trans-border co-operation between Germany and Poland, on one hand, and Greece and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), on the other, Johanness Busse (East–West Institute) argued that state endorsement is a necessary requirement for the emergence and flourishing of transnational links. However, looking in detail at the obstacles to transnationalism in the Prespa-Ohrid region, he demonstrated that a weak state, driven by a narrow range of vested interests, deliberately fails to promote cross-border co-operation. Weak local governments in the region are unable to provide an alternative drive for the process.

Some of the papers given at the conference moved the perspective away from the state and explored non-state actors as a conduit of cross-border linkages. Referring to post-conflict reconciliation, aid to refugees, democracy building and school textbook writing as the foci of his exploration of transnational activity in the Balkans, Dimitri Sotiropoulos (University of Athens) argued that a transnational civil society is emerging in the Balkans. This, according to him, is based on the pro-European stance of the elites but is also facilitated by outside funding, including that by the EU. Furthermore, Catherine Baker (School of Slavonic and East European Studies), who explored the role of folk music in the establishment and intensification of

transnational relations in the Balkans, showed that society beyond the sphere of the state represents the most vibrant transnational field. It stands in stark contrast to the lack and, at times, even the rejection of transnationalism at state level. Her paper suggests a contradiction: while the EU has been a force, albeit not the only one, that promotes societal transnationalism, it has proved unable to make Balkan states a driving force of trans-governmental transnationalism.

Nonetheless, the conference emphasised that the concept of the state provides an important explanatory avenue for the condition of transnational relations in the Balkans. Florian Bieber (ECMI/Central European University) summed it up: 'the strengthening of the state will not weaken transnationalism in the Balkans. By contrast, weak state capacity affects poor transnational links.' A discussion concluded that a strong democratic state could further both inter-governmental and societal transnational relations. In fact civil society, too, could play a more robust role in the transnationalisation of the Balkans if it were not engaged in permanent opposition to weak states marked by a shaky consensus on democratic values. The remark was aimed particularly at the case of post-Milosevic Serbia.

Identity emerged as another explanatory concept during two days of discussion. A key question raised was: to what extent do particular conceptualisations of identity hinder or promote transnational linkages in the region? This issue cuts to the core of what Luisa Chiodi (Istituto per l'Europa Centro-Orientale e Balcanica) has called the 'hybrid' nature of transnationalism as embodied by cross-ethnic and intra-ethnic ties. The successive wars in the 1990s in the Balkans were an ultimate expression of identity politics, while the notion of identity was informed by exclusion and particularism. As Ana Devic (Aarhus University) and Iavor Rangelov (LSE) argued, this particular interpretation of identity explains the relative paucity of transnational linkages in the Balkans. Devic demonstrated that the promotion of multi-ethnic coexistence and transnational relations by non-governmental organisations in Kosovo has been difficult because both Albanian and Serbian elites give priority to a political zero-sum game of sovereignty and ethnocentric citizenship. Focusing on the painful issue of dealing with the legacy of the recent conflicts and war crimes as an obstacle to cross-border linkages and co-operation in the Balkans, Rangelov argued that civil society is now opening up space for debate with the potential to lead to the renegotiation of differences and the reclaiming of shared values and interests, which, in turn, can facilitate transnational relations in the region. For example, in 2004 three non-governmental organisations from Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina signed 'The Protocol for Regional Co-operation in Researching and Documenting War Crimes in Post-Yugoslavian Countries', a document allowing for a cross-border co-operation and activites focused on the process of dealing with the past.

The role of the border and the politics of identity in the transnational context were also explored with reference to diaspora–homeland relations. The process of European integration has moulded both the politics and identity of these transnational communities. In her discussion of the Croatian diaspora in Canada, Daphne Winland (York University, Canada) argued that transnational politics was mobilised to further

the nationalist agenda of the post-communist leadership of Croatia in a quest for the creation of a nation-state. However, the establishment of Croatia as an independent state and, importantly, its subsequent policy of European integration has been paralleled by the marginalisation of the diaspora's input. The Croatian case further highlighted the contradictory position of diasporas, in relation to both homeland and host countries. The Croatian diaspora communities in Europe and North America appeared unable to build on their democratic experience in the host countries to put their stamp on the democratic politics of Europeanisation in the homeland.

The political links between Albanians living in the Balkans were also related to transnationalism from the identity perspective. Both Aldo Bumci (Albanian Institute for International Studies) and Veton Latifi (South-East European University, Tetovo) argued that the relations between Albanians divided by the borders of the Balkan states ought to be studied in the context of transnationalism rather than nationalism. The ending of communism in Albania and of Serbian rule in Kosovo provided political space for a new era of cross-border co-operation and connections between Albanians in Albania and Kosovo. According to Bumci, this has not taken place to the extent that might have been expected. He illustrated this assertion by noting that 'the news from Kosovo does not sell in Albania'. The media did not become an Albanian transnational sphere after the end of communism, thanks to a lack of interest in news about co-nationals across the border. Latifi provided a rather different insight into Albanian–Albanian relations across the border between Kosovo and FYROM. He demonstrated the intense consultation of Albanian parties in FYROM with their counterparts in Kosovo on all policy issues, tracing the onset of cross-border political party co-operation to the wartime links during the Kosovo and Macedonian wars in 1999 and 2001, respectively. According to him, the flourishing transnational links between Albanians across the Macedonia–Kosovo border, as opposed to the Macedonian–Albanian border, is due to a history and tradition of educational co-operation between Kosovo Albanians and Macedonian Albanians in the 1980s and family links, as well as a shared history of struggle for national emancipation in Kosovo and FYROM and practising the same religion, Islam.

As a potent explanatory paradigm for transnationalism in the Balkans, the concept of identity raised a theoretical challenge for understanding transnationalism and the role of border in it. Nicolas Moll (French-German Youth Office, Berlin) summed it up: when does transnationalism stop and nationalism begin? Is transnationalism simply a different name for an old nationalist game? The discussion highlighted the fact that the transnational links of the Balkan diasporas were strongest when used to further nationalist politics in the homeland. The Albanian case appears to suggest that a rethink of the role of border in the transnational context may be in order. Can the border that transnationalism overcomes through cross-border relations be an intra-national border? Furthermore, identity itself in the Balkans is a border to be crossed in the transnational context. The resistance to acknowledging one's past war crimes and a lack of conscious effort in post-war reconciliation presents a metaphorical border in the regional context and also within the multi ethnic states and territories of the Balkans, such as Kosovo.

The conference highlighted a contrast between the intention behind the European integration process to institutionalise cross-border linkages and transnational relations in the Balkans and the opposite effect this process creates on the ground. It is in the non-state and non-institutional sphere where informal and, in particular, illegal and criminal relations abound. As Aida Hozic (University of Florida) pointed out by looking at transnational merchant routes in the Balkans, the process of European integration has introduced new borders in the region. These have not just provided a stimulus for underground economic transnational exchange, but have also made it profitable. Vesna Bojicic-Dzelilovic (LSE) summed up the conceptual and political challenge: how can these illicit transnational networks be brought in from the margins and transformed into legal enterprises, properly recognised as transborder flows?

Ultimately, the conference examined the role of institutions able to support transnational relations. A lack of domestic institutional structures, be they state, local or non-state, emerged as a missing supporting mechanism for more extensive transnationalisation. Apart from the issue of capacity, the lack of institutionalisation has resulted in segmented levels at which transnational relations have been established in the Balkans without channels for the trickle-down or trickle-up effect of the region's transformation. The extent of the institutionalisation of transnational relations thus affected the potential for multiplying the positive effect of transnationalism that European integration was hoped to set in motion in the region.

Lastly, the dimension of institutionalisation led to a discussion of benign versus malign transnationalism. In her discussion of civil society, Armine Ishkanian (LSE) criticised an overly celebratory approach to civil society, arguing that a more critical approach is necessary. Referring to work by Mary Kaldor and Diego Muro on religious and nationalist militant groups, and their argument about the existence of a dark side of the civil society,[4] she said that transnational networks in the civil society may be used to promote democracy but may also act as a means to exclude. While this argument reflects a methodological shift away from viewing transnational relations as exclusively beneficial in the Balkan case, it calls for further empirical research into cross-border linkages of a malignant nature outside the state sphere and the impact of these malign transnational links not just on the Balkans' European integration but also on the EU itself.

The removal of the top-down omnipresent communist state and the cessation of hostilities in the Balkans have allowed the emergence of a multitude of interests, and the politics based thereon, to shape the domestic political sphere of the states in the region in the new millennium. The creation of transnational relations has been one of its defining features. Considering the aspiration of the countries in the Balkans to attain full membership of the EU, the nature of transnational relations is a telling indication of the region's advance towards it. With its focus on transnational relations and transnational actors in the Balkans, the LSE–Free University conference has

4 Mary Kaldor and Diego Muro, 'Religious and Nationalist Militant Groups', in Mary Kaldor, Helmut Anheier and Marlies Glasius, eds., *Global Civil Society 2003* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 151–84.

initiated a new research agenda for the Balkans. It showed that European integration has had a limited and contradictory impact on the creation of the transnational relations which ultimately will drive forward the integration processes within the region and the region's integration with the EU. By and large, the conference concluded, the concept of transnationalism for the Balkan states implies relations with the EU and its members rather than its neighbours, while the nascent transnationalism of non-state actors in civil society furthering the goal of European integration is undermined by a parallel transnationalism of non-state actors in the criminal underground.

The focus on the impact of Europeanisation on forging transnational links in the Balkans has highlighted the importance of the supportive role that a strong nation-state plays in this undertaking. In fact, the European integration project is aimed at reforming and modernising weak Balkan states. However, a pitfall in the EU's approach has been that the approach itself did not sufficiently incorporate a transnational dimension. Rewarding successful applicants with candidacy has not been accompanied by policies and instruments that could counter malign transnational forces in the Balkans. By contrast, the malign trasnational actors have sought to exploit the creation of new lines of division in the region, on which they thrive. At the same time, they have reinforced their alliance with the political elites prone to corruption in their joint profit-making projects. As a result, malign transnationalism has continued to undermine state-building efforts in the European integration context, and, by extension, intra-regional transnationalism. This leaves to academics and practitioners the task of rethinking the European Union policy kit towards the Balkans as well as directing efforts at building on 'good' and limiting 'dark' transnationalism in the Balkans.