



Comment

For a Pax Europeana

Can we fold the remains of the Ottoman empire into a new European empire?

Timothy Garton Ash
Thursday April 14, 2005
[The Guardian](#)

How many years does it take to dismantle an empire? And how many wars? In the case of the Ottoman empire, the answer would seem to be about 400 years and at least 20 wars, including the world war that began in Sarajevo. And we may not have seen the last of them. According to a recent survey, three out of every four Macedonians expect a new military conflict in their country. So who's for another little Balkan war?

It is remarkable how many of the most pressing problems for today's Europe can be traced back to the tangled web of ethnicities, polities and religions that the Ottomans left behind. Superimpose a map of today's flashpoints on the outline of the 16th-century empire of Suleiman the Magnificent: it's a pretty good fit. His realm embraced what we now call the Balkans - a term that has become a synonym for war and ethnic conflict - but also today's Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Israel. It ran down the edge of the Red Sea to Yemen, and along the coast of north Africa, from Egypt to Algeria. For the problems resulting from Israel's presence in the Near East we have only ourselves and Adolf Hitler to blame, but for the rest: thanks, Suleiman.

Now a new independent commission, chaired by the former Italian prime minister Giuliano Amato, has come up with an answer for at least part of Suleiman's legacy. Noting that violence broke out between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo only last spring, and that unemployment there runs at more than 60%, they insist that the present political limbo in the Balkans is unsustainable. We can't carry on with this patchwork of weak states and EU protectorates, with quasi-imperial viceroys like Paddy Ashdown in Bosnia and unresolved status issues, such as those around Kosovo.

According to the Amato commission, the EU's choice is simple: enlargement or empire. Either we in the EU accept that we will have virtual colonies in our Balkan backyard for decades to come, or we start preparing the conditions in which the Balkans can join the European Union. The commission comes out decisively for enlargement. At a meeting next year, the EU should commit itself to a plan to bring the Balkans in by 2014 - an event that could be celebrated in a summit in Sarajevo, on the centenary of the outbreak of the first world war. This would give a new and more positive meaning to a phrase popularised during the last war in Bosnia: "From Sarajevo to Sarajevo".

Bosnia can, the commission believes, be made to work as an effective state, provided that it has a clear perspective of EU membership. That, and that alone, will furnish a sufficiently large incentive for Bosnian Serbs, Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks (that is, more or less Muslim Bosnians) to cooperate. Instead of being an EU protectorate, it should prepare to be a member state. Meanwhile, Serbia and Montenegro should make up their minds whether they want to come in as one state or two.

Most ingenious is the proposed solution for Kosovo. This proceeds in four stages, from the current ambiguous status, defined by UN resolution 1244 at the end of the Kosovo war of 1999; through "independence without full sovereignty", allowing for powers to be reserved to the international community in respect of human rights and minority protection; to "guided sovereignty", as the EU engages in accession talks; and thence to the final nirvana of "shared sovereignty", as enjoyed (or not enjoyed) by current member states of the EU, such as Slovenia, Poland or Britain.

There is a narrative of Balkan history which sees the whole 20th century as a long struggle to create nation-states out of the ruins of empire. The Amato commission proposal finesses that narrative with a new variant. This is not the misnamed enterprise of "nation-building", by international organisations

and NGOs, nor simply the more appropriately named "state-building", but a very special European version: "member-state-building". If this plan is followed, as it should be, a place like Kosovo will never experience full, classic 19th-century style "national independence". Instead, it will be like a young adult passing by carefully supervised stages from the family home to a cosy marriage.

The authors of the report, in whose pithy style I detect the hand of its gifted Bulgarian executive director, Ivan Krastev, pose the alternative to the EU as "enlargement or empire". But seen from Kosovo, one could also say "from empire to empire". For the European Union is also a kind of empire, a modern - or, according to some, a postmodern - version not of the centralised Roman or British empires, but of the medieval Holy Roman empire, with most of the effective power held by its constituent parts. And what is proposed here is that Europe's postmodern or neo-medieval empire should now absorb the remains of Suleiman's empire. That becomes clear if you add the EU's confirmed intention to take in the heartland of the Ottoman empire, now called Turkey.

This is heady stuff. The European parliament yesterday gave the green light for Bulgaria and Romania to join the EU in 2007. With Croatia, Turkey and the rest of the Balkans, this would mean that in just 10 years' time the European Union would contain some 35 member states and perhaps 600 million people, of whom nearly one in six would be Muslim. And that's not counting east European aspirants, such as Ukraine after its orange revolution, and Belarus and Moldova after what we must hope will be their (yet to be colour-coded) velvet revolutions. Nor does it include any of the successor states of the Ottoman empire in the Near East or north Africa, although Morocco has in the past asked if it could apply. For them, the EU will have to develop a neighbourhood policy which does not depend on the promise of eventual membership.

The irony is this: at the same time as people all around the borders of this new-style empire are crying out "Take us in! Colonise us!" the member-states at its core are questioning its very *raison d'être*. The two things are causally connected. It's partly because the EU may take in Turkey that the French may vote "no" to the EU's constitutional treaty at the end of next month. Thus far, enlargement has strengthened not weakened the EU. But at some point, continuous extension must end up weakening the union. If Washington has to watch out for "imperial over stretch", so does Brussels. If the European Union were to include all the remains of the Ottoman empire, it might end up sharing the fate of the Ottoman empire. Europe itself could become the "sick man of Europe".

Yet the logic of the Amato commission is irresistible. In the Balkans, the choice is Europe or war. We talk a lot these days about a Pax Americana, as a successor to the Pax Romana. The United States played a vital role in bringing peace to the Balkans in the 1990s, and could help keep the peace there now by supporting Nato enlargement. But a Pax Americana is not on offer in Europe's backyard. This one is up to us. Isn't the prospect of a Pax Europeana, embracing the whole continent, worth the undoubted risk?

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,1459095,00.html>