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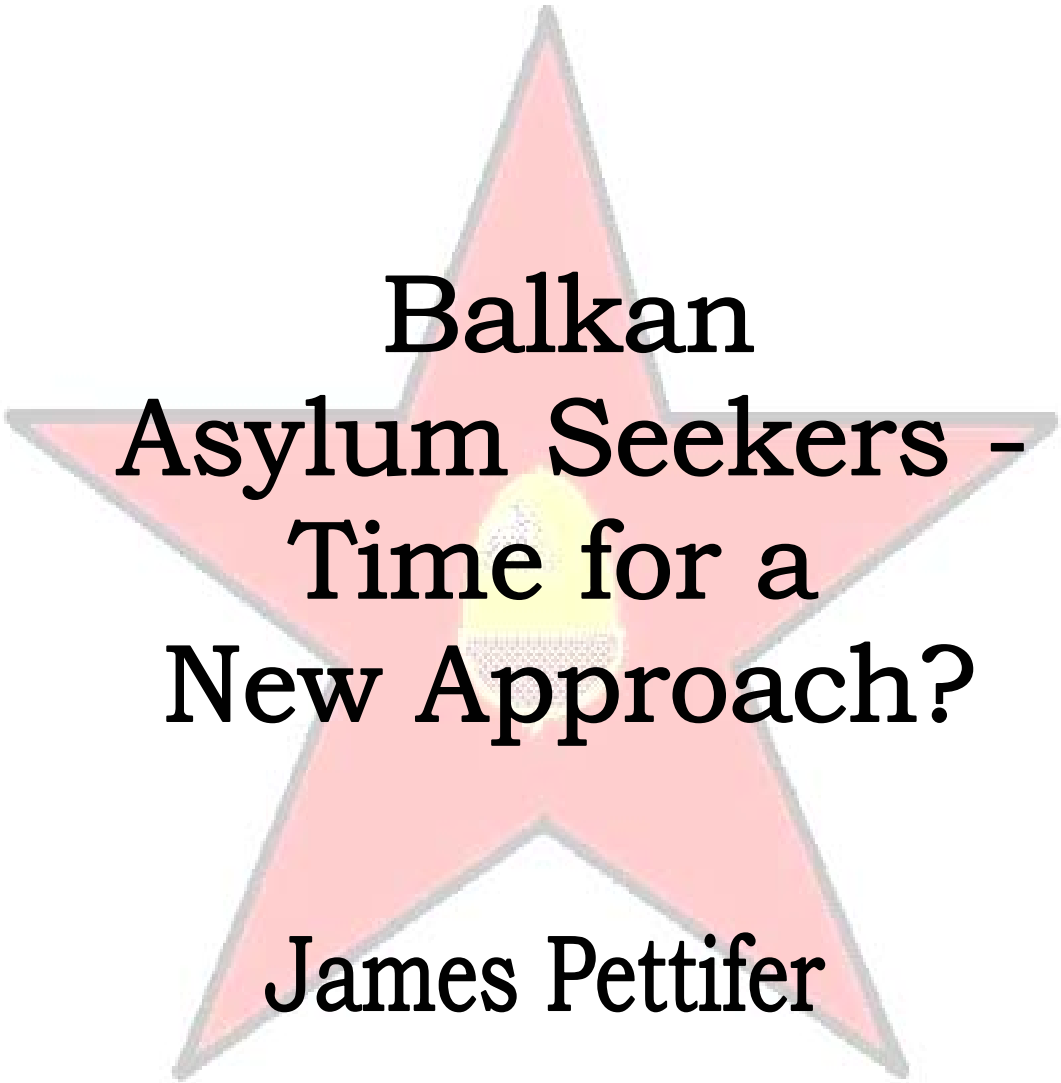

Balkan Asylum Seekers - Time for a New Approach?

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September 2004

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Key Points

* The Balkan region has suffered population movements throughout history. The sudden end of communism and the collapse of state industries has led to unemployment of 15-20% and to a severe weakening of central government. Meanwhile, the traditional Balkan extended family, the central unit of social organisation, is looked down upon by both the Right and the Left in Western Europe.

* Western policy is partly responsible for the current instability in the region and the Balkans have suffered severely from the secondary effects of several EU economic policies. The crisis in agriculture, the drift to towns and the lack of employment, these are the crucial factors behind the economic migration. EU aid is now essential to restore stability to the region. It should focus on rebuilding the traditional social structures by providing a sufficient transitional period for small scale agriculture and industry. Improvements in transport should favour this rather than be devoted to grandiose schemes. A government's success in controlling population movement should be a key factor in evaluating EU entry applications.

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Introduction

There is a growing recognition that the questions surrounding asylum and immigration in Western Europe can only be resolved if conditions in sending countries are also addressed. This paper outlines the historical and cultural background of emigration from the Balkans and suggests ways in which some of the resultant difficulties could be ameliorated.[1]

Historical Background

The Balkan region of south east Europe has been a centre of population movement throughout recorded history, and current controversies about the problems of Balkan asylum seekers are more easily understood in a historical perspective. The region lies on what one writer has called the 'fracture zone'[2] between East and West, Christianity and the Islamic World, and has always been a focus for international rivalries. The mountainous and poor nature of large parts of the terrain and the shortage of arable land in many communities has always led to social and political tension and population movement, and these natural factors have been augmented by the employment crisis in post-communist East European industrial societies after 1990. Population movement on a large scale has occurred many times in recent history, both after local conflicts and major wars. Under communism this mobility process was largely frozen, except in Titoist Yugoslavia, where gastarbeiter movement into Europe began to occur after about 1960.

With the end of communism in 1989-90 in the region, the opportunities for mobility have increased. The ability to move freely, at least in theory, has now become available to these populations after generations of communist-era restrictions. This has coincided with the decline or total collapse of many industries dating from the one-party state period, and most Balkan states have unemployment rates in excess of 15-20% of the working population, and in some states - and localities within states - the figure is much higher. Quite apart from emigration to Western Europe, there has also been substantial internal emigration from poor to developing areas, along the lines of the movements of people in Albania from the northern mountains to Tirana, the capital, and other lowland and coastal locations. This movement is usually seen as linked to the crisis in Balkan mountain agriculture, but this is not a complete explanation, as substantial depopulation in rural Bulgaria, for instance, is occurring despite the good quality of the lowland land and a relatively developed and satisfactory relationship to agricultural markets, including some European Union market access.

The incentive for Balkan population movement has also been accelerated in the 1990s by the ex-Yugoslav wars, where in some years as many as two million people

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were either totally or partly displaced from their homes, and became either refugees or internally displaced persons within their own countries. In other contexts, as in communist Romania, there was forced movement from the countryside to new urban zones, which produced highly unsatisfactory living conditions in Stalinoid ghettos that people wish to abandon. In communist Albania, people suffered under an internal migration control system directed at controlling dissent in traditionally anti-communist parts of the country such as the north east.

As a result of these and other factors, international attention has become focussed on Balkan asylum seekers as a particularly serious problem, in the new conditions of social freedom, within the general patterns of concern about asylum and refugee issues in all European countries. This has been linked to the wider issue of organised crime, where links between population groups in the new diasporas that are being formed in Western Europe have led to the development of a criminal underground with interests in drug and people trafficking and other serious and socially destabilising crimes. These have been characterised in the popular press and media as 'Mafias', along the lines of the Sicilian Mafia which has been replaced in the vocabulary of threat perception by the 'Serbian Mafia', the 'Albanian Mafia', the 'Greek Mafia', the 'Russian Mafia', the 'Bulgarian Mafia', and so on.

In each case, the facts of geography and crime are rarely conveyed clearly to the readers of popular newspapers, as all drug trafficking and the vast majority of people trafficking is trans-national in nature, and involves long chains of activity that start in producer countries like Afghanistan (drugs), Moldova (prostitutes) and carry on through Iran, Bulgaria, Russia, Romania, Turkey and elsewhere, before passing through numerous other places then reach the western Balkans where drugs/people enter Western Europe. The problem for the Balkan countries, particularly Albania, Montenegro and Croatia with their coastal status is that they are on the end of these chains, on the interface between the EU and the East, and as in the past, are characterised as harbouring uniquely criminal threats to society as a result. In the 19th century, the common term was 'Balkan brigandage', as applied, for instance, in the Dilessi murders period in Greece, where the kidnapping and murder of English aristocratic travellers was seen as a threat to the whole social order in the country.[3]

There are many structural resemblances between 19th and early 20th century Greece, and the current problems of the contemporary central and northern Balkans, where weak states with doubtful local legitimacy are unable to enforce even the most minimal law and order on vast swathes of the countryside and mountains, leading to endemic criminality and entrenched conflict between the local populations of these poor rural areas and a capital city (embodying the state) with a substantial foreign (in modern terminology) 'international community' input into the processes of government (insofar as there are any government activities in many spheres). The capital city is also the centre of the globalisation processes. In this governmental incapacity the new states were and are only carrying on traditions of poor or totally absent government embodied in recently disappeared empires (Ottoman, with 19th century Greece, communist, with post-1989 Bulgaria, Albania, Romania, Yugoslavia and neighbouring states.) In popular eyes, the family is the only refuge from the crisis with the state.

The Balkan 'Mafia' Factor & The family

All Mafias are, of course, built upon the family unit, with the novels of Mario Puzo (The Godfather) the most well known reflection in popular literature. In Balkan society, in all historical periods, strong local family units have flourished as a popular self-defence mechanism against the inadequacy of the state and recurrent enmities with neighbouring communities. This natural tendency has been strengthened in countries like Albania, Serbia and Croatia which have been through serious disorder and war in the 1990s, so that, for instance, in Albania there has been a considerable revival of interest in the 'Kanun', the medieval code of customary law used to regulate disputes between families.[4]

At the heart of the West European dilemma about Balkan asylum is the contradictory Western notion of the family, where what in Balkan society is seen as necessary and a vital practical virtue - family strength, cohesion and solidarity - becomes a 'Mafia threat' when transposed to a European Union country. In turn this is intimately linked to the processes of 'progressive' legislation in the European Union countries in the last generation, which have tended to undermine traditional nuclear or extended family life based on blood ties in favour of individual and collective rights for particular social groups. This is seen within the liberal consensus - at least until recently - as 'progress' and something to which immigrants coming to western Europe should aspire. The Balkan notion of the extended family as a unit for economic production and social protection is seen as reactionary and backward by the liberal-left consensus, particularly in the employment and social standing of women. Thus, from a psychological point of view, Balkan immigrants to countries such as the UK are under cultural attack from both Right and Left, from the populist Right over issues of 'criminality'; from the elitist Left over 'reactionary' social codes and patriarchal family structures. This applies to legal migrants, students, and non-criminal groups just as much as to criminals or the socially marginal or bogus asylum seekers. It is not surprising, in these circumstances, if many immigrants do form inward-looking associations with fellow national migrants, dedicated to the preservation of national cultural norms which do also provide a basis for criminal association and activity in some circumstances. The processes of cultural discrimination and semi-racist stereotyping drive the honest and hardworking into the company of the criminal and deviant.

Mainstream British "liberal' culture appears judgemental and unfriendly, carrying on many of the assumptions of the Cold War and colonialism in new historic guises. As an example, it is worth noting the total absence of Balkan studies from British universities, and the very marginal and uncertain status of study of the modern spoken languages of the Balkans. Massive resources are by comparison placed at the disposal of those improving the educational profile of ethnic minority groups favoured by the liberal Establishment. The problems of cultural assimilation of Balkan migrants are a classic example of 'Poor White' disadvantage. This was also until recently reflected in the orientation of the law enforcement community, with widespread racial stereotyping of Balkan groups in the press, despite the fact that much more drug and gun related crime primarily involves black people, particularly Jamaicans, in many cities.

An often overlooked aspect of the migration crisis is the effect of the departure of qualified people on local armed forces, police and security organisations. As in many other countries, the military offers a route to an education and advancement for many people from poor backgrounds, and in turn this offers a career. The acute

financial crisis affecting the region of south east Europe has meant that army pay is very poor and there are significant proportions of army and ex-security personel among migrants. The West is continually calling for a 'stronger state' within most Balkan countries and this has been a particular policy feature of the Bush administration, but the migration policies followed which encourage uncontrolled population movement drastically reduce local state capacity in the departure regions. The police in south east Europe (as elsewhere) are often affected by rampant corruption, and in some EU countries prominent figures in the criminal underworld come from this background.

Euroid Orthodoxies & New Balkan Nations

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the British and other international media can rely on a degree of recent amnesia over recent Balkan history. After the intractable conflicts of the 1991-1999 period, and the small war in Republic of Macedonia/FYROM in 2001, the general relative regional calm and lack of current news coverage does not encourage exact analysis of recent events. Yet the history of the European Union in the region in these years is a history of unmitigated political disaster, only rescued by the military commitment of the United States and NATO, first against the Bosnian Serbs in the 1994-1995 period, then with the Dayton negotiations and finally with the Kosova war which laid the foundations for the final overthrow of the Milosevic regime. In a very real sense, the mass migration to EU countries such as Germany resulted from the failures of EU peace initiatives. As a magnet for economic migrants fleeing from ruined economies, Britain has become a destination for movement caused by this political failure.

In these circumstances, it is very hard to make a fair appraisal of what constitutes a just political asylum case. Many people in Balkan societies live in acute tension with their neighbours and always have done. It would be perfectly arguable that large parts of the population of Bosnia or Kosova could claim asylum in Western Europe on the grounds of persecution.

When an individual is granted asylum in Britain more could be done to try to see links with the family in the origin country are maintained, and financial incentives for return and micro-credits and similar business development incentives should be much more family linked. In Switzerland, there are successful examples of this kind. Equally, much more could be done to discourage false claimants in western Europe, with well publicised deportations back to the country of origin.

A New Approach

The key to stabilising and reducing the asylum and migrant flow into western Europe is obviously social stabilisation and economic development in the Balkans, particularly the reduction of unemployment to tolerable levels. But the type of development must fit the social context. The current antithesis between rightist emphasis on 'criminality' and liberal/leftist emphasis on 'development' is unhelpful, as both rest on concepts of a respected and functional state that have long been absent in most of the region. Instead there needs to be renewed emphasis on preserving and energising traditional extended family structures which in most Balkan societies rest on small scale agricultural production. The EU seems to have no policy whatsoever for this issue. The central factor about Balkan population movement in the last fifteen years, apart from the wartime period, has been the

slow crisis in agriculture and the abandonment of the land by large numbers of people who move to towns only to find lack of opportunity and unemployment, and then become economic migrants into Western Europe.

The Balkans have suffered severely from the secondary effects of several EU policies. It is difficult and may soon become impossible to produce lamb, in the Republic of Macedonia for instance, by traditional methods to compete with cheap imported frozen lamb from EU surplus. The vast flow of EU subsidy into Greece has distorted local Balkan labour markets so that many basic industrial and agricultural skills are increasingly absent in nearby countries, with those possessing them moving to Greece. In south east Europe as a whole, many practical problems could be solved without difficulty and social stabilisation advanced if even a small proportion of the agricultural and structural funds going to Greece were diverted elsewhere. The end of communism and the planned economies and the onset of globalisation have opened up local markets so rapidly as to destroy the economic basis for life in many Balkan rural communities. In the long run adjustment to world markets is inevitable but there is an overwhelming case for the reintroduction of transitional local subsidies on key cash products.
The associated problem of access to EU markets has, to be fair, been recognised by the European Union for some time, and as long as thirty years ago a nation like Bulgaria was given some market access for wine sales. But far more could be done to move resources away from overproduction of basic commodities such as Greek olive oil and towards programmes for the alleviation of rural poverty and underdevelopment in east European candidate member states, and above all to strengthen the small family farm rather than large scale agricultural intensity. There is enormous scope for the development of existing organic agriculture in the Balkans, where there are major market new openings in western Europe, but apart from some projects in Croatia, and the Sar Mountain ecocheese projects in Macedonia, little is being done. Agriculture policy in Balkan countries is all too often dominated by ex-communist bureaucrats with obsolete notions about mass market, low-cost agribusiness development imitating the worst aspects of current EU policy. The cereal industry in Serbia is an example.

Transport is also a key problem issue in many Balkan rural and mountain areas, and there is an urgent need to divert investment capacity away from grandiose projects like 'Corridor 10' running as a new motorway north-south through the region towards small scale road improvements that help make poorer farmers' holdings viable. Young people who are of the class likely to become migrants are much more likely to be willing to stay in villages if the village has reasonable road access to a town or city. More micro-credits for agricultural machinery and modern agricultural credit banks would also be very valuable.

At the heart of many problems is the question of market regulation. Balkan ex-communist societies have had to adjust to the almost overnight overthrow of the planned economy to a totally unregulated environment.

Markets require some regulation, and subsidy should be used as a key tool for rural stabilisation. The very small sums required from the EU would be very good investments if they resulted in a reduction in the number of rural migrants entering EU countries.

A New Policy Approach

At a broader level, EU funds for Balkan governments should be directly linked to their success in reducing external migration and re-invigorating local employment, especially in agriculture. Governments who strive actively to keep their populations in place should receive generous rewards from the EU if they are successful; those who fail should be penalised. EU funding should be transferred on a major scale from Greece to its northern neighbours, something that would actually benefit Greece in the medium term through social stabilisation and migration reduction. For applicant countries, success in discouraging population movement should be a key factor in EU membership application assessment.

Countries on the EU 'waiting list', such as Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria who appear to have a large number of people waiting to move into Western Europe should be required to demonstrate how this movement will be controlled before their applications can progress further. Population movement should be a factor into the assessment procedures of lending and donor agencies such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

A new policy approach combining 'the carrot and the stick' is required in the Balkans. Much more needs to be done to help poor people who are still working hard and to give rural and mountain communities a sense that their cultural and social identities are valued. This is particularly important in agriculture and in associated industries such as sustainable forestry. Britain should withdraw from talking shops such as the South East Europe Stability Pact, and redirect any funds so released to the type of locally-based community stabilisation projects that the Department for International Development, Oxfam and US Aid have successfully pioneered (but on a very small scale) in Albania. The EU veto should be used against further funding for Greek and Italian agribusiness where their activities are often both financially corrupt and regionally damaging. EU road programmes in the Balkans need urgent reassessment. Direct financial rewards need to be put in place by the international financial institutions for countries with successful programmes to discourage migration.

Those objecting to this approach and these arguments should consider what the alternatives are: in some places, if present trends continue, as in central northern Albania, the Hemus hills in Bulgaria, and parts of Transylvania and the west of the Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), depopulation will be almost total within ten years or so, leaving a Wild West wasteland where only criminals will flourish. What is sometimes presented as a "liberal" approach actually conceals a real neglect and indifference towards these traditional societies and their values.

ENDNOTES

[1] I would like to thank my colleagues Miranda Vickers and William Donaldson who were kind enough to read and comment on the draft text. An earlier draft of this paper first appeared on the Migration Watch website www.migrationwatchuk.org. I am grateful to Sir Andrew Green of that organisation for permission to use it as a basis for this analysis.

[2] 'The Fracture Zone', Simon Winchester, Harper Collins, London, 2002.

[3] See 'The Dilessi Murder' by Romilly Jenkins, Longmans, London, 1961.

[4] See 'The Kanun of Lek Dukagjini', Gjonlekai Publishing, New York City, 1989.

This paper is based on a paper written for Migration Watch, available at http://www.migrationwatchuk.org. Migration Watch publications are intended to provoke discussion.

Want to Know More ...?

See: Migration Watch website: http://www.migrationwatchuk.org

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