EU future

Europe’s peace dividend

Vernon Bogdanor

warns that the Balkans could erupt again if the EU implodes

I gained a new perspective on the European Union when, in 2006, I was asked to assist in the drafting of a constitution for Kosovo. Conferences were held, not in Kosovo itself, since those members of the Slav minority in Kosovo who were prepared to participate insisted on meeting on Slav territory. So we met in Skopje, the capital of Macedonia. I had never before seen such national hatreds on display. The conflict in Kosovo made the quarrel between Unionists and Nationalists in Northern Ireland appear easily manageable.

Europe had hardly covered itself with glory when Yugoslavia fell apart in 1991, and Jacques Poos, the foreign minister of Luxembourg, declared, with some hubris, that: ‘The hour of Europe has dawned.’ The EU did nothing to stop the vicious ethnic cleansing of Muslims in Bosnia, the worst crime that Europe has seen since the Holocaust; and it was left to Britain and the United States as leaders of NATO to put an end to ethnic cleansing in Kosovo.

Nevertheless the conflict in the former Yugoslavia offers a terrible warning of what could happen in a Europe that is once more broken up into nation states. Indeed, the prime factor preventing open warfare between Muslims and Slavs, between Kosovo and Serbia, was the desire of both countries to join the EU.

It was made clear to Serbia that its prospects of membership depended upon establishing a relationship with Kosovo. In 2013, agreements were reached on such matters as bilateral trade and the status of the Slav population in Kosovo. The Enlargement Strategy report of the European Commission said: ‘The historic agreement reached by Serbia and Kosovo in April is further proof of the power of the EU perspective and its role in healing history’s deep scars.’ The EU in the Balkans has become a roof over warring nationalities, as the Austro-Hungarian Empire tried to be in the years before 1914.

In 1945 Europe needed, in Churchill’s words, a ‘blessed act of oblivion’. The European movement sought to ensure, by locking the economies of France and Germany together, that the two countries could never go to war again. As Edward Heath told the House of Commons in April 1975, the European Communities were ‘founded for a political purpose, not a party purpose, not even a federal purpose, as some would argue ... the political purpose was to absorb the new Germany into the structure of the European family, and economic means were adopted for that very political purpose’.

Today this traditional narrative is no longer relevant. The European movement has done its work, and France and Germany would remain at peace even if the EU were to disintegrate. But the traditional narrative is desperately relevant in the Balkans. There, too, warring neighbours need a common home. There, too, membership of the EU seems the only way in which ancient conflicts can be overcome. Stability of the Balkans is, of course, as important to Britain as it is to the continent. It was, after all, in the Balkans that the great catastrophe of the 20th century began in 1914.

Twice in the 20th century, distant events on the continent — Sarajevo in 1914, Danzig in 1939 — quarrels between peoples in ‘far away countries between people of whom we know nothing’, to paraphrase Neville Chamberlain, dragged isolationist governments in Britain into war.
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However, the European movement’s founding fathers sought not only to create a European union but to recreate a European civilization shattered by two world wars. That purpose was shared by Churchill, the prophet of a united Europe, though ambivalent as to whether Britain should be part of it. In June 1950, in a Commons debate on the Schuman Plan for a European Coal and Steel Community, Churchill spoke of ‘the revival of a united Europe as a vast factor in the preserving of what is left of the civilization and culture of the free world’.

In a speech at the Albert Hall in 1947, Churchill declared that he had been taught during geography lessons as a child ‘that there is a continent called Europe’, and that, after living a long time, ‘I still believe it is true’. Geographers ‘now tell us that the Continent of Europe is really on ‘the peninsula of the Asian land mass’. I must tell you in all faith that I feel that would be an arid and uninspiring conclusion…’ For ‘the real demarcation between Europe and Asia’ was ‘no chain of mountains, no natural frontier, but a system of beliefs and ideas which we call Western civilization’.

During Churchill’s youth, people had frequently spoken of the unity of European civilization. Those were the days of the Concert of Europe, a diplomacy which proved able, despite the absence of supranational machinery, to resolve international conflicts. The Concert’s final achievement was the 1913 Treaty of London which ended the first Balkan war. The Concert failed, of course, after Sarajevo in 1914, just as Europe was to fail at Sarajevo in 1992.

It was because Churchill understood that Europe was not just a matter of political machinery that he was so strong a supporter of the European Convention of Human Rights. The Convention is a product of the Council of Europe, an organization separate from the EU. Nevertheless the 1993 Copenhagen criteria for admission to the EU prescribe that all member states must observe the rule of law, human rights and respect for minorities. Of course, the EU does not always live up to its grand principles. It must, in particular, do more to ensure that Hungary and Poland observe the rule of law. Nevertheless, the rule of law is likely to be better protected in a united Europe than in a Europe of nation states.

The EU today is far from Jean Monnet’s supranational vision. It operates more as an association of states, but an association that considers not only the interests of each of its members, but the European perspective as a whole. Had that perspective been considered in 1914, Europe could have avoided the catastrophe which followed.

But the Europe created by Jean Monnet, the Europe of the 1950s and 1960s, did enjoy a sense of legitimacy, derived from post-war idealism and the prestige of the supranational political movements prominent in the resistance — socialism and Christian democracy. That post-war idealism has been dissipated as Europe has struggled to deal with the problems of the eurozone, migration and terrorism. After the British referendum, the first task of the EU must be to re-create that post-war idealism so as to re-establish an emotional resonance with the people whom it seeks to represent.

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