

A portal to Balkan diversity

Martin Woker Neue Zürcher Zeitung
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The Balkans are better than their reputation. In its eight years of operation the independent expert organization *European Stability Initiative* has evolved into a vibrant centre of excellence and has successfully rebutted some of the most persistent clichés.

Think tank, centre of excellence, research group, brain trust, non-governmental organization or just NGO? Founded in 1999 in Sarajevo, the European Stability Initiative (ESI) doesn't fit any straight-jacket - which is if anything one of the reasons for its remarkable success. ESI styles itself "*a non-profit research and policy institute, created in recognition of the need for independent, in-depth analysis of the complex issues involved in promoting stability and prosperity in Europe.*" These are high aspirations. All the more as ESI confronts a predominant phalanx of professional doom-mongers in the Balkans whose defeatism derives from pure self-interest. Recently the organization presented some of its central themes in Vienna.

Dependant on bad news

There is a host of foreign experts on democracy, security advisors, policemen, officers, retired politicians and soldiers stationed in the Balkans who are dependent on bad news to justify their own presence. As the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina shows, this is no malicious allegation. As the last country in the Western Balkans, only recently could Bosnia initial the so-called Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA), thus taking the first formal step towards the EU. Bosnia's politicians, who are usually chronically at odds with each other, had become wondrously reconciled - or so it seemed, which was understood as decisive step towards Brussels. Curiously, initialing the SAA was no longer linked to police reform as had been demanded by the internationals for many years. This comes even more as a surprise, as unifying Bosnia's police at the national level had long been considered a pre-condition for integration into the EU. What had happened?

In the beginning of November (2007), ESI had published a widely noticed report that flatly contested the necessity of police reform in Bosnia. Using figures to illustrate the contrary position, it rebutted the oft-asserted international charges that branded Bosnia as a hub of trafficking in people, weapons, narcotics and religious terror. According to ESI, there's just as little reason to claim that Bosnia is caught in the fangs of organized crime. This grim picture is being perpetuated, says Gerald Knaus, founding member and Chairman of ESI, to justify the continued presence of an international mission in Bosnia. In 2003, Knaus made his mark as co-author of a widely noticed report on the role of the High Representative. This report portrayed Bosnia as neo-colonial entity where the barely controlled powers of a governor-like acting High Representative hamper democratization if they do not even frustrate it.

A joyous example

Obvious improvements in the development of the country are being firmly ignored, says Knaus; "although at least on the regional level enormous progress had been noted." Take the case of Doboj, situated in the Bosnian Serb Republic, which is barely known abroad. This town and its surroundings are the subject-matter of a detailed case-study recently published by ESI. It strips down the clichés about Bosnia step by step, and describes the permanent return of expelled Bosniaks (Muslims) to their former places of residence, in and around Doboj, as well as the perspectives of economic growth. According to the study, the successful resuming of coal mining is of central importance to this process and could soon result in Bosnian energy exports on a larger scale. The conclusion of the well-written report is clear: overcoming the consequences of war and economic revival are inseparably linked. Prosperity in Doboj depends on an increase in prosperity in the whole country. This in turn is the lynchpin of Bosnia's integration into the European market. But this process can only work if Bosnia is perceived positively abroad, a pre-condition for foreign investors' confidence, says the report.

Rich website

While Bosnia is certainly in need of an image-correction, ESI has already described the disastrous condition of Serbia's textile industry, using the example of the once flourishing industrial town of Leskovac. When compared to its neighboring countries, Bulgaria and Macedonia, the price of Serbia's isolated position in Europe becomes immediately obvious. The consequences of isolation for Kosovo are also shown in another ESI report. The detailed case-study of two villages explains in detail the consequences of emigration. We learn about the effects of the émigrés' remittances. And even more important, how disastrous the situation has become since remittances have dried up, and unemployed graduates from Kosovo no longer have access to the European labour market.

Besides publishing reports periodically, and unlike other expert groups such as the International Crisis Group, ESI offers a wealth of attractively presented information on the Balkans on its website (www.esiweb.org). For example, there are picture portraits of various regions, with one by *The Economist* correspondent Tim Judah, on Kosovo standing out in particular. There's also an interactive map with lots of background information on many places in the Balkans that are worth discovering. And who nowadays knows about the "Manchester of Mace-

donia,” as the textile town to the south-east of Skopje was once called? Apparently, there’s a growing interest in accessing the deep ravines of the Balkans. According to ESI, its website has more than 2,000 visitors per day, and numbers are rising.

Operating on a minimal budget, the organization has shown a good hand in recruiting new staff. While its case-studies are partly conducted by local partner organizations, every now and then new and interesting people are joining ESI’s multinational team that has also been active in Turkey for the past three years. Recently, ESI was joined by Erion Veliq, who shook up Albania’s old-fogyish political structures with spectacular campaigns as the figure-head of the student movement Mjaft! (Enough!). Veliq and the Austrian Balkans expert Kristof

Bender are currently conducting research on the causes of the phenomenal economic boom of Romania’s industrial town of Timisoara. The question is; why do the state sector and the private economy work in unison in this place, while this relationship does not work in other parts of the region?

“In its eight years of operation, ESI has had a substantial impact on international policy to-wards South Eastern Europe”, ESI writes about itself. True, says an insider who strongly praises the partly-deliberately provocative approach of ESI’s work; “It was high time the assessment of the situation should not be left to those diplomats who experience their duty tours in the Balkans as a “disciplinary transfer.”