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Does István Bibó's Concept of the „Misery of Small States" Carry a Message for the Western Balkans Today?

Abstract: *István Bibó (1911-1979), a lawyer and doctor of political science by profession, became a prominent Hungarian political theorist from the late 1930s. He joined the left-wing populist party and became an expert on constitutional affairs for the National Peasant Party. He obtained professorship at a young age and was elected corresponding member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1946. The hereby analyzed work – foregrounded by years of preliminary research – was published in large numbers shortly after the end of World War 2 (1946). Drawing on extensive international theoretical and historical knowledge, Bibó analyzed the long-term evolution of historical processes in Central-East Europe (addressing the two regions separately and together), concluding that disruptions in the neighbourhood context, internal conflicts and divisions have been the major factors behind the repeated failures, the „misery" of the small states of the region (Czechia/Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary). Despite not being a „Balkan scholar", Bibó was well acquainted with the advances of international and particularly Hungarian research, with an outlook to state-building processes in the Balkans and providing particular insights on the states in question. Bibó became notorious for his involvement, his ethical, principled stance demonstrated during the 1956 revolution but his scientific contributions were recognized only after his death with the publication of his works in foreign languages. Bibó's state and political theoretical approaches and his insights on ethical peace may have particular relevance for the Western Balkans today. A series of unresolved internal issues within the region can create legitimate grounds for external intervention even in present-day circumstances.*

Keywords: *Bibó; István; small states; federalism; nationalism; minorities; self-determination; Western Balkans.*

Introduction

István Bibó was raised as a member of the Hungarian Christian and genteel middle class, in an exceptional intellectual milieu, and graduated

from a (religious) secondary school, which laid the foundation for his university studies. He graduated from the University of Szeged Faculty of Law and Political Sciences (1929-1933), obtaining a doctorate with honours. Armed with international knowledge acquired during his scholarships in Vienna, Geneva and The Hague and an extensive social network, he became a public servant and a leading expert in the Hungarian judicial system.

It was during World War 2 that Bibó, with his in-depth knowledge of European affairs, began to investigate and formulate the concept of the „European problem". Although the manuscript[1] of the planned volume (On European Balance and Peace) remained unfinished during the turbulent period, several chapters were included in the 1946 volume titled „The Misery of Small Eastern-European States". (Later on, as his memory began to fail him, he would either refer to the title as „the misery of small nations" or „the misery of small peoples".)

The present paper, in addition to providing a brief summary of Bibó's concept of the three historical state failures in Central-East Europe, focuses on the specific context of the Balkans, as Bibó clearly recognized that the Balkans were not some backward, dark region, cut off from contemporary European processes. Nor could it be, given the century-long role of the Byzantine Empire as the upkeeper (albeit with peculiarities) of the values and traditions of the Greco-Roman world.

His comparative analysis of European processes, replete with allusions to the horrors of World War 2, presents a number of general values and results, and his summary of the complex issue of federacy is particularly thought-provoking. The final chapter of the volume titled „The Technique of Good Peace-Making", offers valuable insights for the Western Balkans today. During his study years in Geneva, Bibó took a great interest in the political and peace initiatives of the League of Nations. He offered his particular insights on the fundamentally unjust peace settlements that ended World War 1, and voiced his expectations concerning the nature of the forthcoming peace treaties concluding World War 2. Defying the historical principle of „Woe to the vanquished!", he regarded peace not as a mere demonstration of force by the victors, sidelining the fundamental interests of the vanquished. He believed that forced peace could not ease tensions or produce calm.

[1] The original manuscript, approved by his son, was published in edited form in 1986 in Volume I of his Selected Studies, pp. 295-635.

Due to their firm moral grounding, Bibó's approaches may have contributed to the resolution of the post-1991 Balkan and Yugoslav conflicts triggered by the externally imposed peace settlements. Even in the present, the smallest offences can trigger hysterical reactions of the „peoples" in the Western Balkans. Instead of imposing peace in a top-down manner, it should start from below, beginning within the nuclear family.

1. On István Bibó

István Bibó was born in Budapest in 1911. In his autobiographical interview book, he emphasized „his descent from a Protestant intellectual family of small noblemen from a farming town from his paternal ancestry"... I come from a family of Latin-educated people from the fourth, fifth or sixth generations" (Huszár 1989:13). From his maternal lineage, he is the descendant of a family of German-speaking Roman Catholic officers. His father was a senior ministerial official, and the director of the university library in Szeged until 1935. In the social structure of the interwar years he was, according to his own words, „a member of the Christian, genteel middle class". His upbringing allowed him to acquire native-level German and French proficiency, finding intellectual pleasure in reading ancient Latin authors in his free time.

He pursued his elementary education in Budapest, and spent his secondary school years in Budapest and Szeged. The fact that he began „working with maps" at the age of six or seven (initially only studying them) was instrumental in shaping his vision, while his attraction to maps accompanied him throughout his life, becoming a „drawer and producer of maps", particularly those depicting the internal administration of states. His analyses were conducted not only in a temporal but a spatial perspective, as indicated by the frequent occurrence of the expression „when represented on a map". He accumulated an impressive collection of atlases and maps, and, importantly for our subject, he was familiar with and cited the political geographical works of András Rónai (1906-1991) on Central-East Europe, who was also his subordinate for a brief period. Max Weber, whose seminal work was handed to him by his father after graduation from secondary school, served as a major point of orientation in his spiritual development as a young man. The Protestant ethic not only provided him intellectual nourishment, but profoundly marked his intellectual and everyday activities throughout his life.

Between 1929 and 1933 he pursued his university studies at the Faculty of Law and Political Sciences of the University of Szeged. In 1933 he obtained a Doctorate in Law and in 1934 a Doctorate in Political

Science. During his university years, he developed a close friendship with his peer, Ferenc Erdei (1910-1971), who became a prominent member of the popular left as a politician and his several ministerial cycles. In the university library, the two would be reading Lenin's 'State and Revolution' in German, holding diverging viewpoints on a number of issues. They both contended that in the Eastern part of Europe the national and peasant question was a crucial neuralgic point in every respect (theoretical, political, practical).

As a recognition of his outstanding academic achievements, he received a grant from the Collegium Hungaricum in Vienna for the year 1933/34. In Autumn 1934 he was awarded a further scholarship to Geneva for the academic year 1934/35 to study international law at the *Institue des Hautes Etudes Internationales*. In 1936 he pursued his studies at the *Hague Academy of International Law* as a Carnegie Grantee.

After completing his high-level training, he settled in Budapest and joined the civil service. He began working at the Royal Court of Budapest and was quick to rise through the ranks of the court. His administrative career reached its summit with the post of Secretary of the Ministry of Justice. Bibó was thus active at the highest levels of the state apparatus as an expert, albeit with certain expectations limitations in terms of political engagement.

In 1940, he was appointed Private Professor at the Faculty of Law and Political Science of the University of Szeged, teaching „Philosophy of Law". His lectures required him to commute from Budapest to Szeged. After the relocation of the university to Cluj-Napoca, he continued giving lectures there besides his ministerial activities. Although he fulfilled no party political roles and attended no national left-wing meetings, he provided intellectual support for the movement of popular writers and left-wing peasant politicians, the March Front.

In 1944, after the German occupation of Budapest and the country, the Gestapo arrested him for issuing protective passports to Hungarian Jews. His father-in-law, László Ravasz, was liberated with the help of a Reformed bishop and went into exile. In early 1945, after the Soviet occupation of Budapest, the Provisional National Government – set up in Debrecen in December 1944 – sent a car to pick him up in Budapest, and he was appointed official in the Ministry of the Interior under Ferenc Erdei (from December 22, 1944 to November 15, 1945). By virtue of his position, he got acquainted with all prominent actors at the cradle of the newborn Hungarian democracy. (Bibó developed a special relationship with the communist leader Mátyás Rákosi, defined by mutual distance.)

In May 1945 he joined the left-wing National Peasant Party as party affiliation was mandatory for everyone under the coalition government. To paraphrase Bibó, he was regarded as a „gentleman friend of Ferenc Erdei both within and outside the party. The guiding principle of Bibó's political activity was that there was no distinct private and political morality. For him, correct behavior and transparent political activity were quintessential.

Bibó remained in office in the Ministry of the Interior until July 1946. On 22 August 1946, he was appointed Professor at the Faculty of Law and Political Science of the University of Szeged by the Minister of Religion and Public Education. In the same year, on the recommendation of the historian István Hajnal (1892-1956), he was elected Corresponding Member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. He reached a summit of his academic and professional career at the young age of 35.

In 1947 he was appointed Government Commissioner of the Pál Teleki Institute of Science (1941-1948). The Institute was a de facto „umbrella organisation", bringing together state-run institutes from various scientific disciplines, with the aim of investigating the existential questions of Hungarian nationality and laying the groundwork for the post-war peace negotiations. Bibó was aware that the name „Teleki" was a source of „embarassment" for left-wing historians, hence the informal and increasingly official use of the name „Danube Valley Institute" or „Carpatho-European Institute". Bibó proposed the renaming of the institute to „Institute of Eastern European Studies", which operated only for a short period of time (until 1949). Bibó was appointed Head of the Institute of Social Sciences as well as President of the Institute of Eastern European Studies.

The names of the contemporary institutions were charged – albeit in a tacit form – with a „political and orientational message". It was no longer possible to operate a scientific institute under the name of Pál Teleki. When Bibó arrived, the presumed connection of the institute's „informal name" to Habsburg restorationist efforts led him to propose the name „Institute of Eastern European Studies"[2]. To cite his memoir: „I professed the unity of the Eastern European nations - in particular that of the small peoples of Eastern Europe - not so much adhering to the communist position, but in the spirit of László Németh, and I considered any

[2] Bibó explained his abstention from political struggles by his 'ultimately moral motives'.

name that would disregard, for instance, the Poles, unacceptable" (Huszár 1989:102).

In 1949, the Council of Ministers dissolved the Institute of Eastern European Studies in tandem with the restructuring of the HAS and the universities, creating the Institute of Political Science and Law, the Institute of History, the Institute of Linguistics and the Geographical Library and Map Library under the aegis of the reformed HAS. Bibó remained in office until the wholesale reorganisation of the institutional network, at which point there was „there was no place for him" in the new structure. Bibó was adamant that „... our generation has no alternative but to choose between American-style capitalism and Stalinist-style communism..." (Huszár 1989: 104).

Bibó was shunned from political life after the communist turn in 1949, and in the same year the Hungarian Academy of Sciences downgraded him to the status of consulting member, the equivalent of exclusion at that time. In early 1950 he was forced to resign from his position as a university professor. In early 1950 he became a completely marginalized private man who had to rely on the help of his friends for employment in the Budapest University Library, where he worked as a librarian. The role of librarian „not only provided physical salvation", but also an opportunity for meticulous intellectual work.

Bibó reintegrated national political life during the Hungarian Revolution in October 1956 and was appointed Minister of State under the revolutionary government of Imre Nagy. When the Soviet troops invaded Budapest and occupied the Parliament, he did not resign from his post but addressed the international community with a declaration. He was arrested and sentenced to death in 1958. His sentence was reduced to life imprisonment at the intervention of the Indian government. In 1963, he was released from prison under a mass amnesty. He worked at the KSH Library after his liberation. He lived on the margins of academic life, with no publication opportunities. He retired in 1971, which provided him some degree of financial autonomy and space for intellectual work.

During the last years of his life he received publicity abroad, and then among the emerging domestic intellectual opposition in Hungary as well. After his death in 1979, his work on small states was published in dozens of foreign languages and in numerous editions. The international academic community, after becoming acquainted with his works, began to appreciate Bibó's scientific contributions, restoring him as an active and „living" contributor to international discourse.

2. On the volume and Bibó's Balkan „outlook"

Bibó finished his volume entitled „The Misery of Small Eastern-European States" at the turn of 1945-1946, which was published as a manifesto of the publishing house *Új Magyarország*.[3] The weekly newspaper of *Új Magyarország* was published between 1945 and 1948 as the self-proclaimed „weekly newspaper of world politics and Hungarian intellectual life". Its publisher represented bourgeois democratic values and was intent to steer Hungarian society toward this direction. Bibó's volume was meant as an explicit wake-up call to the Hungarian intelligentsia of the day. (Had it been written in French, its international impact would undoubtedly have been much greater.) From its very publication, the weekly *Új Magyarország* published long excerpts from the volume, reporting on its reception and the debates surrounding it. (In its 1946 issues, the weekly would frequently popularize the volume as „The Misery of Small States of the Danube Area".)

Bibó's work, - whose latest edition (Bibó 2023) we extensively rely on - is both a theoretical work and to some extent a political guidebook for the new actors of the new Hungarian democracy (communists returning from Moscow, new generations of worker-and peasant politicians), illuminating the historical processes at play in Europe and the burdens and conditions they are facing in their efforts to transform Hungarian society.

The volume consists of seven chapters:

- European nations and the making of modern nationalism,
- Disruption of the territorial status of Central-East Europe and the rise of linguistic nationalism,
- The collapse of the three historical states of Eastern Europe,
- The deformation of the political culture of Central-East Europe,
- The miseries of territorial disputes,
- Resolving territorial disputes and the consolidation of Eastern Europe,
- The techniques of concluding a good peace.

Bibó adopted a simultaneously global, European, intra-European, macro-regional approach (Western, Northern, Southern, Central-East Europe, the Balkans), but his focus was on Central-East Europe (always treating the two regions as separate entities), and within it, three countries

[3] Those who lived to see the regime change of 1989 (Kálmán Benda, Domokos Kosáry, András Rónai) had alternating views on his assumed role in the institutional reorganisations post-World War II.

in particular (Czech Republic/Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary). His approach progressed from an analytical historical review (drawing heavily on the work of István Hajnal), to the formulation and synthesis of common and comparative elements.

The decisive element for Bibó in the history of Europe was the making of nations as political communities: „a characteristic entity of Europe is the result of fifteen centuries of development (Bibó, István. 2023: 6). In the western parts of Europe, this process spanned a longer historical period, and the historical consolidation of modern nations involved only minor conflicts. In the making of modern nations, the role of modern nationalisms was paramount, transforming into *mass movements* and *mass emotions*.

Despite evidence of a time lag between Western and Eastern Europe, common trends are predominant. In Central Europe, the three Christianized kingdoms (Bohemia, Poland, Hungary) fell under the influence of the Kingdom of Germany, founded in the 9th century. Similar processes characterized the Balkan territories, albeit with Byzantine influences and specificities: „The Byzantine Empire continued the Greco-Roman tradition; in the Balkans, however, newer peoples - the Bulgarians, the Serbs, and the Croats - established kingdoms on Western models between the eighth and eleventh centuries,..." (Bibó 2023: 7).

For Bibó, the Council of Constance in 1414 marks the beginning of the „fateful deviation" of the development of Western and Central European nations. National boundaries were graspably present in the West, whereas in Central Europe (Germany and Italy) they were becoming more and more invisible and symbolic. (Central Europe in Bibó's interpretation was uniquely constituted by German and Italian territories.) In Western Europe, modern states emerged and consolidated during the 15th and 17th centuries. The decisive processes in Central and Eastern Europe took an altogether different course. The German-Roman Empire brought into being confusion of national frameworks in the Italian and German territories, while the advance and establishment of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans overturned the existing state frameworks. Bibó did not consider the Ottoman Empire capable of imposing a new national structure among the peoples of the Balkans given the military and conquering nature of its organisation and its cultural strangeness to the peoples concerned. The early Balkan states and their borders „melted away" under Ottoman rule, but each of the small peoples recalled the existence of a „big or greater" state at the dawn of modernisation.

Bibó held the German Roman Empire and the Ottoman Empire „accountable" for „the establishment of a disastrous state formation that terminally confounded national development in Central and Eastern Europe. This was the empire of the Habsburgs" (Bibó 2023:13). Bibó's approach to the Habsburg Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Empire post-1867 could sometimes appear irrational.

The revival of historical small nations began under the aegis of the Habsburg empire; however the revived popular-folkish sentiment within these reborn nations „proved to be a Pyrrhic victory for each one of them" (Bibó 2023: 17). They had to simultaneously dismantle the old and create the new national frameworks, including the substantive and functional elements of modern statehood. This could only be accomplished to some extent. The people became the distinctive and decisive carrier of national identity, and language the expression of popular nationalism.

National and linguistic boundaries were crystallized during long historical and migratory processes, and modern linguistic nationalisms were quick to ignite conflicts between small peoples. „The newly reborn nations were thus soon embroiled in ferocious border disputes with most of their neighbors. ... This was the major source of the political hysterias of Central-East European nations." (Bibó 2023: 21). Political hysteria emerged as a major force shaping processes in the region.

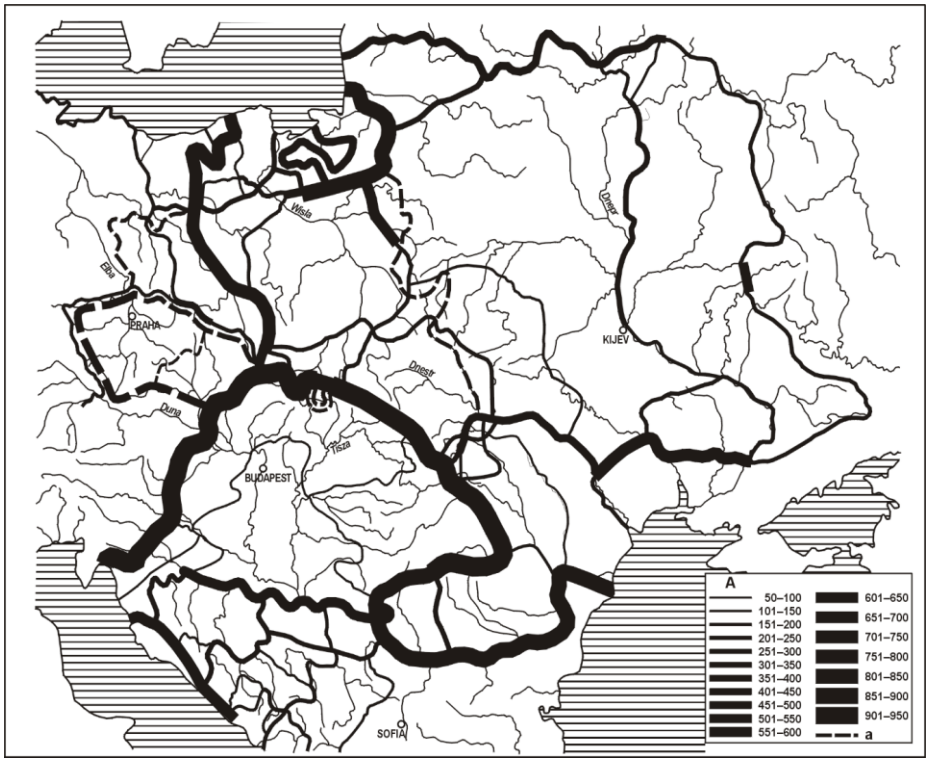
Bibó provided a detailed discussion of the historical transformation of states, the frequent changes and „porosity" of state borders. For him, this implied an understanding the historical-geographical representations of the given processes. Bibó held the work of the Institute of Political Science headed by András Rónai, the Atlas of Central Europe, and Rónai's border-theoretical-and historical studies in high regard (despite their diverging conceptualisations and views on the territorial expanse of Central Europe), valorizing their findings. Rónai's „border stabilization diagram" (Figure 1) drew his attention to the chaotic nature of the historical state territories and state borders of Central and Eastern Europe. He made specific mention of Rónai's ethnographic maps, which were praised as expert works by the international academic community as well.

Without aiming for an in-depth, analytical treatment of the social, political and state-building processes in the Balkans, in various sections Bibó drew an explicit link between the defining characteristics of the region and the prevailing Central and Eastern European trends.

The struggle against the Ottoman Empire dating from the beginning of the 19th century, with its historical, political, linguistic and religious repercussions, fundamentally marked the history of the small peo-

ples of the Balkans. This struggle reached its apex with the so-called Balkan War I (1912) preceding World War 1, when the coalition of small Balkan peoples effectively defeated the Ottoman Empire, overturning state territorial frameworks and border relations in the region. Bibó examined the transformation processes in the Balkans drawing on the results of Hungarian Balkan research (Figure 2).

Figure 1: The stability of state borders in Central Europe

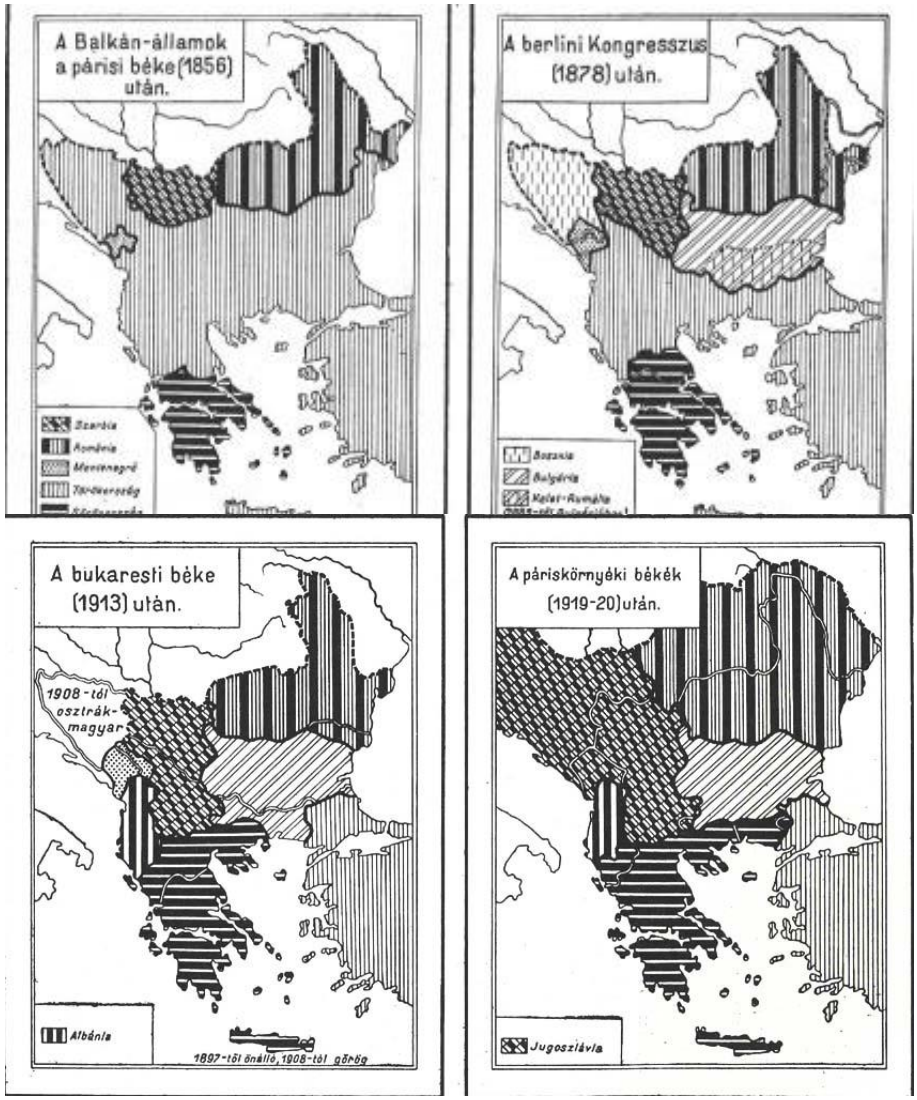


Source: Rónai A. (ed.), 1945
Key: A) duration of the functioning of the state border; a) Historical borders of Czechia and Moravia

Bibó saw the victory of the small nations in 1912 as a potential enabler of territorial consolidation, but this opportunity was missed. Instead, with the advent of the Second Balkan War (1913) they turned against each other, seeking to realise their ambitions at each other's expense. They failed to consolidate the Balkan peninsula's territorial relations. Bibó is sympathetic to the Balkan peoples: „Since then immeasur-

able difficulties, suffering, and barbarism have swamped the region, yet it is still only thirty years ago that there *was* anything to be consolidated (Bibó 2023: 81).

Figure 2: The processes of statehood formation in the Balkan Peninsula according to Hungarian Balkan research during the Interwar Years[4]



Source: Hóman et al. (1942) Annex IV

[4] In the Interwar Years, the Balkan Peninsula played a prominent role in Hungarian historical, geographical, economic, etc. research.

On the specific subject of the interwar years, he succintly observed that: „It is common today to hold that the political culture of Central and East Europe - that is, the area east of France, between the Rhine and Russia - suffers from an original backwardness (Bibó 2023: 43). The backwardness of political culture did not favor the emergence of democratic, multi-party political systems in any of the states.

He spoke of Yugoslavia of the World War 2 in a sympathetic and appreciative tone: „Yugoslavia felt its fearful power in 1941–1944, and this experience is going to have a fundamental role in forging a nation out of Serbs and Croats, both originally sharply opposed to each other. The Yugoslavs want much because they feel they are powerful enough (Bibó 2023: 37) Ultimately, Bibó misjudged the situation, he only „saw" the partisan war waged against the Germans, whilst overlooking the unfolding of the country's internal civil war. The later history of Yugoslavia took a different course than the one envisioned by Bibó. The unified Serb-Croat (Yugoslav) nation failed to materialise.

Bibó has devoted considerable thought to the question of confederacy. Post-World War 2, the issue re-emerged on the agenda once more in the region. His awareness of the successful and failed examples of historical confederations prompted a self-critical and critical stance on the issue. The title of the sub-chapter devoted to the question (pp. 92-94): „Confederacy is not a magical solution" testifies of this. He states the fundamental objective of confederacy as follows: „Like a marriage, confederacy must not be entered into with unresolved problems because it is essentially meant to open up new perspectives (and so creates scores of new problems) and not to avoid having to resolve pending issues. Any future confederacy will be viable only if borders acquire a minimal stability, which is the mental condition of joining the confederacy. Nations join a confederacy only if they all have something to lose that the confederacy can protect" (Bibó 2023: 92).

Bibó developed an overly positive attitude toward the Soviet Union in the wake of the World War I. He believed that the Soviet victory „ ... the Great Patriotic War completely blended it into a single nation" (Bibó 2023: 93). In effect, neither the unified Soviet, nor the Yugoslav, nor the Czechoslovak nation came into existence. Bibó's cautious view on federacy proved well-founded, given the dissolution of the great Socialist Federations between 1991 and 1993 despite their apparently successful functioning in the post-World War 2 period (Figure 3).

Figure 3. The collapse of the Socialist federations.

Source: Own edition of Hajdú, Z.

A most intriguing question concerning the break-up of the Slavic-majority Socialist Federations is why the Slavic nations (Czechs - Slovaks, Belarusians - Russians - Ukrainians, Serbs - Croats - Slovenes - Macedonians) were unable to co-exist in a single state. The decisive factor in their case was not linguistic nationalism but much more intricate interests and the lobbying of leading politicians, „national elites". In most cases, referendums were utilized as a tool a legitimation in the dissolution process. Against the backdrop of economic, social and political crises, societies were searching for new opportunities.

3. Does Bibó's concept carry a message for the Western Balkans today?

The genesis of Bibó's concept dates back to the horrors of the Second World War, whereas the history of statehood in the Balkans and Yugoslavia during the Cold War and the decades that followed evolved under radically different circumstances. It appeared for a while as if a major issue of concern for Bibó in the Balkans had finally been resolved with the much-anticipated territorial and border consolidation. However, this was not the case. Soon enough, the global and European conflicts of the bipolar world (NATO vs. Warsaw Pact, EEC vs. Comecon) spread to the Balkan peninsula, „nuanced" by Yugoslavia's independent Socialist path. This was compounded by the resurgence of previously resolved conflicts between countries but also within alliances (Greek - Turkish, Albanian - Serbian, Hungarian - Romanian, etc.). Lastly, internal tensions began to shake the individual countries (the eruption of an open crisis in Yugoslavia after Tito's death, and eventually, the internally driven but externally supported dissolution of the confederation).

The blood-soaked dissolution of Yugoslavia between 1991-1995 was fundamentally an internal civil war, followed by the intervention of external forces against the native Serbs during the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, sanctioned by the international community. Eventually, the Dayton Agreement (temporarily) concluded the essentially „circular" conflict between Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks, creating one of the most complex state and territorial configurations in the world.

The Albanian-Serbian conflict, present in Yugoslavia – albeit in a latent form – for a long time, escalated with the dissolution of the confederation and reached its climax in a bloody military conflict. In the spring of 1999, NATO intervened in the conflict unilaterally without internationbal authorization, seeking to protect the Kosovar Albanians. Kosovo declared its secession from Serbia, which was recognized by the majority of NATO members. NATO declared that its unilateral resolution of the Kosovo crisis „should not be seen as a precedent". (Naturally, it came to serve as a precedent, in particular, for Russia in 2014 and on February 22, 2022). On the other hand, fears concerning the „method of resolution" have prompted a large part of the international community, including major powers and EU and NATO member states, to refrain from recognizing Kosovo's independence, with an eye on the territorial integrity of their respective countries.

The above processes have generated a peculiar situation in the Balkan Peninsula, one that, in a somewhat pejorative way, can be described

as „Balkanized", mirroring long-term historical processes. The two cardinal nodes are the situation in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, affecting the entire region:

- the formation of two Albanian states, with the partial recognition of Kosovo,
- Within the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, subject to international oversight, police and military presence, two distinct entities (Republika Srpska, Croatian-Bosnian Federation) were formed within a single State, which can be likened to the existence of a „Serbian state and a half". The majority of the leadership of Republika Srpska is threatening with secession (not unification with Serbia), inevitably with serious repercussions for the Federation.

The enlargement of NATO and the European Union has raised new questions that are still on the agenda today. The modern political and spatial concept of the „Western Balkans" was developed under the Austrian EU Presidency in 1998 according to the following formula: „Former Yugoslavia minus Slovenia plus Albania". Thus, the conceptualization of EU enlargement gave rise to a very different ethnic, social and economic „complex", in a highly volatile domestic and international context.

By accomodating voluntary enlargement aspirations, the EU and NATO have de facto „enclosed" the remaining territory of the Western Balkans. The currently „non-allied" area of the Western Balkans has thus become a „landlocked island" within the vast territory of the EU and NATO.

It is no coincidence that the idea of „anonymous non-paper" emerged under the Slovenian EU Presidency in 2021. Despite the absence of „officially" claimed authorship, the concept of partitioning and its cartographic representation (Figure 4) sought to resolve a crucial and historically recurring issue in the region: whether the territory and borders of the respective states could be adjusted to areas dominated by the ethnic majority. The authors of the non-paper considered it feasible. The result was essentially the formation of Greater Albania, Greater Croatia, Greater Serbia and the marginal Muslim Bosnia. Despite having reached various EU fora, the political leadership of the countries and great powers concerned, the non-paper was met with unanimous (albeit sometimes hesitant) rejection.

Figure 4. The 2021 non-paper

Source:
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/2f/2021_Balkan_non-paper.png

Russia's aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has permanently swept it from the table of „high politics" as a viable alternative.

Summary

The „European problem" presented itself to each generation in historically complex ways. Bibó grew up in the truncated Hungary of post-World War 1, hearing and reading in school textbooks condemning

statements on the injustice of borders on a daily basis. His international studies allowed him to encounter the issue of the „plasticity and misery of borders" in multiple approaches and perspectives.

The trauma, inhumanity and cruelties of World War 2 shook him personally and despite not getting involved in the battles himself, he did his share in rescuing the persecuted. After the war, his reflections on the new peace treaties and quest to uncover the „Technique of Good Peace-Making", led to the insight that nationalisms gave birth to undemocratic, even dictatorial regimes after World War 1. His major preoccupation was to find a „balanced" solution between the victors and the vanquished. He had strong reservations about the population replacement and referendum initiatives of 1946. The general „unprincipledness" of the turbulent period confined all decisions to the sphere of power.

In 1946 he could only see the launching of peace preparations, not the results of the new „peace works", but under the prevailing circumstances he was wary of the outcome of the processes. He regarded internal territorial and border consolidation within Central and Eastern Europe as a key prerequisite for world peace.

For the present-day Western Balkans, Bibó's concept does not concern so much the down-to-earth issues of daily political life but has a more universal message: without internal (country-to-country) and (almost) all-encompassing consolidation, the region will remain vulnerable to the changing power ambitions and structures. Peace can only be lasting to the extent that it is legitimized by society from below.

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