

Robert Kaplan
What Happens Next – 05.08.2022

Robert Kaplan:

I'm Robert D. Kaplan. I'll be talking about my book, *Adriatic: A Concert of Civilizations at the End of the Modern Age*.

The Adriatic is important for these reasons: One, the Adriatic is a fault zone between the east and west. On the Italian side on the west, you have Roman Catholicism. On the Baltic side on the east, you have Eastern Orthodox Christianity and in Albania, Islam. You have the Venetian Empire on the West and the Ottoman Turkish Empire on the East.

This is significant today in light of the Ukraine crisis. What is the Ukraine crisis about? Europe has always been determined by wars, cataclysms, events on its periphery. Ukraine is a periphery of Europe. Peter the Great and the Ottoman Turks came in from the East and changed Europe. Russia has always been a challenge for Europe.

The Adriatic is another periphery of Europe. In the 21st century, we're going to see more interaction between Europe and the Near East, North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa. and all this comes into play in my book about the Adriatic.

Larry Bernstein:

Robert your previous blockbuster book entitled *The Balkan Ghosts* was published over 30 years ago about the breakup of Yugoslavia. How much has the former Yugoslavia changed over the past 30 years.

Robert Kaplan:

Dramatically on one hand and not at all on the other. Take Croatia. Croatia is now a vacation destination. About 15 million tourists come to Croatia's Dalmatian Coast on the Adriatic Sea every summer. This is almost four times the population of Croatia. Croatia has changed from a hinterland Balkan country.

Since the war ended, there have been massive superhighways built, linking the interior of Croatia with points along the Adriatic Coast. Instead of suffering six hours on a train, you can go from the inland Croatia to the Mediterranean in 90 minutes. This changed its economy because of the explosion of tourism on the coast.

Why hasn't changed at all. You get to Zagreb, the capital of Croatia, and it's all ethnic politics. Arguments about the number of Jews or Serbs killed during World War II. The same arguments I heard 30 years ago, when I researched *Balkan Ghosts*. In the former Yugoslavia, ethnic conflicts continued without the shooting. There's no violence. Now it's played out over the internet between people screaming at each other over Twitter and Facebook.

I don't think there will be any shooting because the countries are still exhausted. Remember the shooting happened because the Yugoslav national army collapsed and all the weaponry got divided up among the various militias in the 1990s. I don't think the Balkans are gonna come back into the headlines in a bad way again.

Croatia and Slovenia have done the best of the former Yugoslavia.

Even there, development should be even higher than it is if you didn't have this nasty ethnic politics. They could be on the scale of Austria. Croatia and Slovenia have both not changed at all and changed dramatically.

Larry Bernstein:

My grandfather George Karp was born in the Austria Hungarian Empire in the small city of Sibiu. When he grew up there before World War 1, the city was evenly split among Germans, Jews, Slavs, and Hungarians. Today it is purely Romanian. This area in the Adriatic and Eastern Europe has had massive population transfers. Do you think we will see more or less population diversity in the Balkans?

Robert Kaplan:

I think they've become less pure because of the population exchanges. The Ukraine war has exacerbated that. This is a century of migration of refugee movements.

In this century, people will be on the move not just because of wars, but because of the revolutions of rising expectations. People will want to move to a place where it's better. This is a much more global Balkans than the one I saw when I researched *Balkan Ghosts* 30 years ago. Globalization is everywhere in Croatia and also seeping into Montenegro and Albania. Italy is less Italian. Globalization has diluted these fierce ethnic nationalisms.

Everyone's bubbling about populism. Even though Marine Le Pen lost the election, she got a better result than ever before, and Victor Orban has been reelected in Hungary, and look what Putin is doing in Ukraine.

In the long march of history, populism will be a phase passing through because this is not the 1930s. Globalization has diluted ethnic nationalisms and is continuing to do so on a daily basis, so gradual you don't even notice it. Even places like Hungary and France will pass out of this.

Larry Bernstein:

When I worked in Salomon Brothers emerging markets trading department, I partnered with Mark Franklin who taught me the shoe leather approach to market research. We would literally walk the emerging markets and meet with the most senior politicians, central bankers, local billionaires, and newspaper editors.

You use a shoe leather style to journalism. Describe your process.

Robert Kaplan:

The moment you cross into the former Yugoslavia, politics takes over and you have to talk to people to find out what's going on the ground, because it is different than you read in the newspapers.

And it's not different in the sense that the journalists get it wrong, it's that they're missing nuances, they're missing subtleties. For instance, the talk about Saudi Arabia is the killing of the Washington Post journalist, and that it's an autocracy. And you get to Saudi Arabia, and everybody is happy over the liberation of women. You see women sitting alone in cafes, working on their Apple computer, greeting a man, kissing him on the cheek. The society has changed dramatically over the last five years, and yet because it didn't happen all in one day, it's not a news story, it doesn't fit within the parameters of news.

I didn't expect the level of globalization in Croatia, nor did I expect the continuing arguments about ethnic politics, because you don't read about it, because it's nonviolent, it doesn't make a news story, so it doesn't travel outside local websites. I was surprised by the dramatic change in living standards.

I didn't expect the high level of urban development in Albania where Tirana has become a global city, despite the crime and the corruption. You don't read about this in the newspapers. To understand a country, you have to go to the place and talk to people. Because journalists miss nuances, because that's not what they do.

Larry Bernstein:

In your new book, you mention that travel offers the individual a chance for self-discovery. Why does leaving your local community encourage personal growth?

Robert Kaplan:

All travel is a work of self-discovery because you are alone encountering different landscapes, different art, different people. You're out of your daily groove, you're not among friends or relatives or even colleagues. You discover aspects of yourself that you didn't realize you had. And that's something I've dealt with my whole career as a travel writer.

Larry Bernstein:

In your other books, you are a detached observer. But in your new book Adriatic you become a character in the plot. Why did you decide to make this book so personal?

Robert Kaplan:

Half of the book deals with the former Yugoslavia. And I became famous or infamous because of Balkan Ghosts. And I couldn't just write about the former Yugoslavia and not talk about Balkan Ghosts, and my regrets about it. I couldn't avoid it because my book was an issue in the Balkans. I had no choice but to put myself as a protagonist.

Larry Bernstein:

In your book, you beat yourself up over your naivete in *Balkan Ghosts*. You had read other historical travel writing but skipped academic research in your field. Why do you think that getting the academic perspective is necessary to understand what is happening now?

Robert Kaplan:

Before I went to the Balkans 30 years ago, I read a lot of its history, but I was ignorant of the academic history and research about the place. Now one can criticize that we have too much credentialism, too much specialties, and we're missing generalists like myself. But the intellectual honesty of it is that you can't just go to a place and be oblivious to the specialists. The best specialists are worth reading. And I've incorporated the best of the best into my discussions of the former Yugoslavia and Albania.

Larry Bernstein:

In your work, you highlight the importance of geography. National borders matter, mountains and water separate communities. Why is geography important in the Adriatic?

Robert Kaplan:

When we think of geography, nothing seems more logical than Italy. It's a long boot extending from Europe, and everyone speaks Italian. It geographically makes sense. But as I point out, that was not always the case. Northern and Southern Italy were almost different countries. Turin in the north to a village in Sicily in the south is to go from the most developed part of the world to the least. What changed geography in Italy was modern transportation.

Larry Bernstein:

As an example of the importance of water to geography, can you compare Albania with its close neighbor Corfu?

Robert Kaplan:

I went to a town in Albania that I knew from 30 years ago, Sarandë, which was then a beautiful little sleepy village, and now it's this overgrown morass of the worst architecture you ever saw. By bad architecture, I don't just mean an urban design that you disagree with, I mean buildings that look like the interior of lavatories. No zoning, no aesthetics. There's a chaotic violence in it. And Albania, despite all the progress it's made is still way, way behind. High levels of corruption, weak institutions, organized crime, etc.

Yet, you take a hydrofoil from Sarandë, and it was a calm day, and it glided over where the Adriatic meets the Ionian Sea, and literally 30 minutes later, you're entering the breakwater of Corfu to the Greek customs station where you go through passport control. And the moment you went to Corfu, it's like the Wizard of Oz, it goes technicolor from black and white. Everything changes. Aesthetics take over, every trellis has potted flowers. Every building is old, but well kept up. It's a perfect paradise without being touristy. 30 minutes of sea travel takes you from one realm to another. Comparison is the beginning of all serious scholarship.

"What is Albania like?" I'll say, "It's a lot worse off than Croatia." "What is Greece like?" "Well, it's a lot less institutionally developed and organized than France, Austria, or Germany. But compared to Albania, it's paradise, literally."

And this is only 30 minutes on a boat. You could swim it, if you're a good swimmer.

Larry Bernstein:

Why do so many Balkan states dream of joining the EU and NATO like Ukraine.

Robert Kaplan:

The Balkans are quite similar to Ukraine; They're Eastern Orthodox, quasi-European in various ways. Underdeveloped, on the periphery of Europe, with real historical legal issues vis a vis their neighbors.

Some of the Balkan countries are part of NATO, others are not. Only Croatia and Slovenia are part of the EU, the others want to join.

This Ukrainian crisis could unfold uniting the EU and NATO and giving it a new purpose. And with that new purpose, both the EU and NATO may in the future have the energy to incorporate the Balkans, that's the good news. The other way of looking at it is six months from now, Europe may be exhausted from dealing with Ukraine with less of an appetite to absorb these Balkan countries.

Larry Bernstein:

Will the Ukraine War lead to a radical restructuring of the periphery of Europe?

Robert Kaplan:

Vladimir Lenin said that, "Decades could go along, and nothing happens, and then days and weeks everything happens." Decades transpire in a matter of three or four weeks. And the next seven weeks in Ukraine could determine the next 15 years in Russia.

Larry Bernstein:

You wrote two books on the American military and its role in nation building. The US army operates differently from the Russians who are blowing up a nation.

Robert Kaplan:

The American military is a great institution provided it gets good direction. The American military had no solution to the problems of complex Muslim societies in Iraq and Afghanistan. But the American military knows how to fight. It's not corrupted and honest. Morale is very good. The quality of the individual troop is much higher than in Russia. And this devolves from a free and democratic versus an autocratic society. Remember militaries are metaphorical extensions of the strengths and weaknesses of the society at large.

Larry Bernstein:

50 years ago, you enlisted in the Israeli military. How did that experience impact your world view?

Robert Kaplan:

The Israeli military is the product of a very small tight knit uniethnic society that has real enemies on its borders. It's not just paranoia, it's real enemies. It's a tight society with near universal conscription, morale and quality is very high. With these Russian troops, morale is terrible.

The US military has a very highly developed noncommissioned officer corps that is corporals, sergeants, sergeants first class, master sergeants, et cetera. They're the real heart and soul of the US military. They're what makes the American military function so well. The Russians have almost no non commission officer corps, and that's why so many have been killed. They're near the front lines because they have no buffer of noncommissioned officers to essentially direct the troops.

Larry Bernstein:

Robert, I end each episode on a note of optimism. What are you optimistic about?

Robert Kaplan:

While democracy may not succeed everywhere in the world, the general spirit of more liberal societies will gain ground because even autocracies around the world are liberalizing their populations.