Reflections from the Balkans

By Andreas Theophanous

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This article is prompted by some of the issues, ideas and thoughts that were advanced and debated during a two day conference entitled Reconciliation and Human Security in the Balkans organized by the European Center for Peace and Development (of the UN-established University for Peace) in Montenegro on October 30-31.

A notable idea that very obviously stems from the fierce and violent collapse of the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia had to do with the redefinition of the concept of security. In addition to the traditional concept of security, the security of state borders against foreign intrusions, greater attention was given to human security: the right of individuals to have a normal life enjoying fundamental human rights and away from fear that has to do with the ethnic, religious and/or the linguistic background of people.

It would be an illusion to assume though that this observation only concerns the Balkans. Indeed many parts of the world suffer a substantial human security deficit with fundamental human rights including the basic right to a dignified life systematically violated.

Conflict between countries and within countries has always been a characteristic of international relations. Not surprisingly one of the topics in current international affairs is how to overcome ethnic conflicts within countries and to arrive at acceptable solutions which are conducive to a peaceful and prosperous future. A major step toward that outcome is reconciliation; in its turn this concept entails important steps. These include an acknowledgement of historical facts, a readiness to accept responsibility for wrongdoings in

general and to apologize for inflicting pain and by extension to ask for forgiveness; this of course is, or should be, a reciprocal process. Ideally, it will also entail accepting the sincere apologies of the adversary and thereby offering forgiveness.

But above all reconciliation entails a readiness to arrive at a common vision for the future. In this regard it is an illusion to assume that signing an agreement necessarily implies that reconciliation has been achieved and the "promised land" has been reached! It is indeed tempting here to raise the question of how close we really are to true of reconciliation in Cyprus.

Last but not least it is important to understand that although the Dayton Agreements contributed to ending a very bloody civil war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, they have not led to a political arrangement and to a constitutional structure which contributes to a normal political life. On the contrary, the constitutional structure which is based on ethno-nationalist pillars has not resulted, at least so far, in the emergence of common institutions. It is indeed notable that to the present day there has not been a population census because it has not yet been agreed how one should be conducted! And several diplomats as well as academics put forward the view that in the absence of an international peace force there would be renewed tensions.

From a theoretical perspective the idea that interethnic peaceful existence will have a better chance to be promoted and consolidated - if the political system revolves around a set of common values and objectives, has been put forward repeatedly and forcefully. This theoretical proposition as well as the overall record of Bosnia should be taken into consideration by states and/or societies which are trying to overcome ethnic conflict and pave the way for a better future. And Cyprus is no exception.