



CSIS STATESMAN'S FORUM

Bulgaria's Role in the Balkans: Key Factor for Peace, Stability and Regional Development

Featuring:

H.E. Georgi Parvanov, President of the Republic of Bulgaria

Bulgarian President Georgi Parvanov outlined his country's role as a generator of stability and democratic values in the Balkans at a CSIS *Statesmen's Forum* held at CSIS on October 18, 2005. In his introductory remarks, CSIS President John Hamre hailed the quality of Bulgaria's leadership and he thanked Bulgaria for providing much needed support to the United States in the global war against terrorism.

President Parvanov focused his remarks on the importance of European integration for the Balkans. He pointed out that the region is at a crossroad facing either disintegration or EU integration. Parvanov first presented what he sees as the worst-case scenario, whereby destabilizing forces in Kosova, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, or even Macedonia could lead to conflictive fragmentation and isolation of the states in the region. This could also obstruct EU integration for Bulgaria and Romania, and in turn would encourage radical forces in both countries. He reminded the audience that an extremist party had already entered parliament in Bulgaria. Problems in the Balkans would also encourage countries like Greece and Slovenia to become isolated from the region.

President Parvanov stressed that he did not believe in such a negative prognosis and presented an alternative - the successful EU integration of the whole region over the next ten years. In this way, borders between the Balkan countries, a cause for continuous conflicts, would not matter anymore and thus radicalism and separatism would become obsolete. The Balkan region with 130 million people, strategic geographic location, and seven out of the ten Trans-European transport corridors, makes it a very strategic area, and a key transit point for petrol, natural gas and other energy sources. The president added that the rich history and beautiful countryside of the Balkan states make it an attractive tourist destination. All of that makes the region a valuable asset to the European family.

Although Bulgaria is close to achieving its European future, Parvanov said that he did not come to Washington to talk solely about his country but also about the wider region. NATO membership and the prospect of EU entry have been stabilizing factors for Bulgaria. In ten years, Bulgaria has been able to build a functioning market economy and to adopt a legal system, which corresponds to European standards. The president suggested that a common strategy for EU and NATO integration would be the best option for the Balkans.

President Parvanov stated that he has shared these thoughts with heads of state from the Balkan countries. However, as change in the Balkans often occurs slowly, Parvanov offered a smaller starting step - the development of cultural tourism in the region. For the first time, heads of state

who have been historically embroiled over territorial disputes would be able to come together and decide how to “market” their rich historical heritage. However, in Parvanov’s view, poor infrastructure stands in the way of Balkan EU integration. Hence, the best investment for regional security and international integration would be in infrastructure. The president hopes that support for such an initiative would also be found in the United States. Projects such as Burgas-Andropolis pipeline would not only benefit the Balkans, but they would be beneficial to EU partners and for the U.S. Such projects would have a deep political significance, because whoever invests in them would be investing in the peace in the region.

When asked to comment about Kosova and its independence aspirations, Parvanov said that he advocates a careful, consistent approach in the spirit of the UN politics. He said he supported a policy that would take into account independence, but also the impact that independence may have on democratic processes in Serbia and other neighboring states.

Concerning the imprisoned Bulgarian nurses in Libya, President Parvanov said that Bulgarians sympathize with the pain of the families in Benghazi and Bulgarian authorities are trying to help. Sofia has established a special NGO to deal with humanitarian assistance to families of the HIV infected children. However, Parvanov stressed that Bulgaria insists that the nurses are innocent and is relying on the support of the EU and the U.S. in resolving this issue. Parvanov thanked Washington for its support in trying to settle the case.

When asked about the official position on Turkey’s EU candidacy, the president said that relations between Bulgaria and Turkey were more active now than in past decades. He pointed out that there were no unsolvable political issues between the two countries and there is growing economic cooperation, as Turkey is one of the biggest investors in Bulgaria. Parvanov underscored that Bulgaria supports Turkey’s EU aspirations. It would be better for Bulgaria to have a large neighbor such as Turkey in the EU and this would help Turkey in consolidating its democratization process. According to President Parvanov, the EU cannot remain a closed Christian club and in order to be strengthened, it had to find new and non-traditional approaches.