

Central and Eastern Europe



RECONSTRUCTING SOUTH EAST EUROPE

Robert Hand, staff adviser, U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (Helsinki Commission), led the April 4 discussion on interethnic reconciliation in the Balkans.

War. Refugees. Destruction. The two Yugoslav crises of the past ten years serve as quintessential examples of how the questions of historical identity and legitimacy can be manipulated by nationalist leaders to gain or maintain power. Conflict often leaves behind devastating psychological obstacles, which can strain group relations for generations. At the fifth meeting of the series on South East European reconstruction, the vastly differing degrees to which interethnic reconciliation has occurred and human rights are respected in the Balkan region was discussed.

The most favorable conditions in the region exist in areas

where there has not been conflict sufficient enough to traumatize large percentages of the population. For example, neither Montenegro nor Macedonia has witnessed conflict to the degree of one group desiring to seek revenge on the other. In fact, in both territories interethnic government coalitions were formed to carry the current leaders to power. The coalition governments are convenient and perhaps even temporary, as a full range of ethnic issues must yet be managed. Nonetheless, the inclusion of minority parties in the ruling coalitions is a positive step toward improved ethnic relations.

In Croatia, the total political transformation that occurred in January of this year has positively contributed to a trend away from ethnic conflict. The new government has concentrated on removing ethnic issues from politics by focusing on democratization and economic transformation. It must be noted, however, that the current situation in Croatia is fragile. The victimized members of the majority and minority populations from the 1991–1995 wars in Bosnia and Croatia is an issue that must still be addressed. Approximately 60,000 Serb refugees have indicated a wish to return to their homes, and the new Croatian government appears prepared to facilitate such efforts. This step is critical for the reconciliation process, and tensions must be monitored during the repatriation of refugees to ensure its success.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, there have been few indications that any degree of interethnic reconciliation has occurred. In fact, it has been argued that the Dayton Agreement itself has perpetuated ethnic politics, thus preventing reconciliation from taking place at all. To illustrate, the percentage of Bosniaks and Croats that have returned to Republika Srpska is only 3 percent of the number from the same groups ethnically cleansed from the region between 1992 and 1995. The percentage of returned refugees is also disappointingly low in the Bosnian Federation. To aid in the reconciliation process, the arrest of camp guards and field commanders, and the indictment of senior political leaders, through the work of the International War Crimes Tribunal, will be an important development in the long and complicated process of reconciling groups in Bosnia.

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In Kosovo, ethnic hostility has existed for a long period of time. Since becoming an international protectorate, attacks on minority populations remaining in the province have been frequent. The international presence has not been able to prevent the destruction of homes, churches, and other property of these minorities. And Belgrade continues to contribute to the growing hostility through policies such as

the continued imprisonment of at least 1,100 Kosovar Albanians in Serbia and the backing of extremists in Mitrovica. Indeed, the situation remains precarious. Kosovo continues to be volatile and potentially dangerous, with ethnicity often a determining factor in calculating the risk of falling victim to crime. The prospects for genuine ethnic reconciliation in the province appear bleak.

In Serbia, the degree of human rights violations is severe. Minorities, such as the Hungarians, Croats, and Slovaks in Vojvodina, and Muslims in the Sandjak area, are especially vulnerable. The most notable forms of harassment include difficulties in maintaining minority-language education and efforts to conscript minorities into the military. The latter is viewed as an effort to force young men from minority communities out of Serbia. Until Milosevic and his forces are ousted from power, human rights and interethnic reconciliation efforts will remain neglected.

Perhaps the most important element for laying the foundation for reconciliation is the creation of an environment void of fear. Persons must be able to recognize that their national identities are not in danger. The repatriation of those persons previously forced out of the region is a priority for improving ethnic relations.

Small Western and indigenous NGO efforts in the region are working to promote ethnic understanding and reconciliation. Coupled with the Stability Pact, which de-emphasizes the ethnic question by giving higher priority to economic projects that are key to the region, human rights and ethnic reconciliation will be positively impacted.

CATCHING UP TO THE “VISEGRÁD FOUR”: SLOVAKIA AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

*The seventh meeting of the U.S.-Slovak Security and Foreign Policy Roundtable was held in Washington, D.C., on March 10. The distinguished guest speakers were **Pavol Hamzík**, deputy prime minister for European integration of the Slovak Republic, and **Jan Figel**, chief negotiator for the integration of the Slovak Republic into the European Union. The session was cosponsored by The Foundation for a Civil Society, New York, and CSIS.*

The high-level visits of Hillary Clinton and the U.S. secretary of state, Madeline Albright, to the Slovak Republic this past year, have placed the country in the international spotlight, and have served to recognize the significant strides that the country has made toward embracing democratic values and institutions. Since Mikulas Dzurinda became prime minister of Slovakia in September 1998, his government has placed the issues of economic reform, financial investment, national minorities, and membership in the Euro-Atlantic alliances at the top of its agenda.

A significant amount of economic reform remains to be done. Some electoral support has been lost because of the pain associated with economic reforms, but economic progress has been achieved nonetheless.

Since the inception of the Dzurinda government, Slovakia has taken great strides to improve its policies. Many West European countries recognized such changes and voted unanimously to begin EU accession talks at the December 1999 summit in Helsinki. Currently, eight chapters of EU membership are under negotiation. Democratic reforms are taking place, and economic progress is visible. Economic development, as in the creation of a standard market economy, will determine when Slovakia will enter the EU.

A significant amount of economic reform remains to be done. Some electoral support has been lost because of the pain associated with economic reforms, but economic progress has been achieved nonetheless. For example, there has been a decrease in the current account deficit and in the general government deficit, and interest rates have fallen from 30 to 10 percent. There has also been a macroeconomic stabilization without causing a recession. This year three major banks will be privatized, as will the telecom and gas industries. The government will approve the privatization of the electricity industry later this year. Slovakia's economic readiness needs to be enhanced, as the country is not as yet considered to be a fully functioning market economy.

A series of government tasks need to be accomplished in order to ensure faster and smoother accession to the EU (including tax harmonization), and Bratislava seems determined to keep up with the schedule in terms of legislative and administrative reform. Slovakia is well advanced in this process, and a special legislative group has been established for this purpose. Slovakia, however, must catch up with its “Visegrad Four” neighbors—the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland—as it is only slated to negotiate 8 out of 31 chapters for EU accession. These include the passage of a number of important laws in telecommunications and education, and better coordination between governmental institutions. Bratislava's representation to the EU also needs to be improved.

Slovakia closely cooperates with its Visegrad Four neighbors, almost on a daily basis, and preparations are being made for a V4 summit. It is clear that support from and relations with Slovakia's immediate neighbors will be a part of the country's evaluation in meeting the political and economic criteria for membership. In addition, trade is the most creative way of dealing with politics in this region. It is important to develop common sector businesses to achieve stability and bring new jobs to the region. Slovakia supports cooperation with the Visegrad Four in order to build a Central Europe without borders. A Schengen border around the country would be expensive for all. Slovakia's leaders would like to see a strong Europe with Slovakia at the center.

ALBANIA FORUM

Christopher Hill, special assistant to the president and senior director of South East European Affairs, National Security Council, Elez Biberaj, chief of Albanian Service, Voice of America, Vebi Velija, president, VEVE Group, Tirana, Albania, Genc Ruli, president, Institute for Contemporary Studies, Tirana, Arian Starova, chairman, Albanian Institute of International Studies (AIIS), Tirana, and Remzi Lani, director of the Albania Media Institute, Tirana, were the guest speakers at the first meeting of the Albania Forum series on March 28.

This is a crucial year for Albania. Immediate political and economic challenges are facing the country. Politics remains polarized, and decisionmaking is largely paralyzed. There appeared to be political consensus during the Kosovo crisis, however, this evaporated as soon as the war ended. The current ruling party is therefore very vulnerable. If a new, effective leadership does not emerge, the country will face a very uncertain future.

On the economic front, there has been very little progress. Industries are stagnant, and there is minimal foreign investment. Although inflation has been controlled, the country still has a great deal to accomplish in this sector. Economic forecasts suggest a significant rise in inflation this year. Unemployment and poverty are widespread. The banking system is poor, privatization is at a standstill, corruption is prevalent, and infrastructure still requires a great deal of development.

Albania is a frail state in which all these negative factors have seriously undermined the country's overall progress. Albania has not been able to sustain growth in either its political institutions or in its economy. As a result, the country has witnessed an erosion of the public's faith in both democracy and in economic reform.

In solving Albania's political problems, the international community cannot be a central actor. Albanians themselves have to solve their country's problems. The relevant domestic

institutions must be built to promote reform and create stability in the country. International institutions can assist by partnering with local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to build grassroots structures. International institutions can also work with other organizations to create an alternative to the heavily polarized political parties to ensure that free and fair elections occur at every level, beginning with the local elections later this year. If the forthcoming elections are not considered to be legitimate—internationally, domestically, or both—the public may lose its belief in democracy, encouraging authoritarianism and criminality in its stead.

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In solving the country's economic problems, Albania must concentrate on building infrastructure, such as a proper banking system and a legal system. The development of economic infrastructure is essential if Albania expects to receive financial assistance from international donors. Direct contacts between the United States and Albania's struggling entrepreneurs must be developed by building investment bridges between the U.S. and Albanian private sectors. International corporations should negotiate directly with private companies to contract work. Albania also needs to create a stable environment that encourages foreign investment through the implementation of new legislation. This will take time, and this is something the West must recognize. Economic development is of particular importance, as some quarters of the international community are growing tired with Albania's lack of progress.

International policy toward Albania in the past decade has not been very effective due to a general lack of knowledge about the country, as well as an inability to devise appropriate reform-oriented assistance. Although Albania received international recognition for its generosity and willingness to house refugees from the Kosovo crisis, a certain Albania "fatigue" exists in the West. It must, however, not be forgotten that the current Albanian government opened the country to NATO—the Allies stationed troops in the country, and private Albanian citizens also welcomed Kosovar refugees into their own homes. Albania helped considerably to alleviate the refugee burden for the European Union and the United Nations. Such positive developments in Albania's past must not be forgotten, as they are illustrative of Albanians' desire to facilitate positive change.

SLOVAKIA, THE UNITED STATES, AND EUROPE

Grigorij Meseznikov, president of the Slovak Institute for

Public Affairs (SIPA), Olga Gyarfasova, senior research fellow at SIPA, and Martin Bruncko, research fellow at SIPA, were the guest speakers at the sixth U.S.-Slovak Security and Foreign Policy Roundtable, chaired by Theodore Russell, former U.S. ambassador to Slovakia, on February 15.

Since Vladimir Meciar was ousted from power in September 1998, the government of Mikulas Dzurinda has implemented some tough measures with regard to the economy. Due to the government's reform measures, Slovakia has seen economic growth, and the process of democratization has stabilized. There is popular support for the reforms, necessary because of the legacy left by Meciar. However, decisions made by the government, and those yet to be made, have led to an increase in unemployment and a drop in the standard of living, and will not make the ruling coalition any more popular. Equally difficult decisions have not been taken with regard to the Hungarian minority, but tension with this minority has largely been eliminated due to the Dzurinda government's inclusion of the Hungarian Coalition party into the government coalition. The trend of hostility toward this segment of Slovak society, so clearly expressed under Meciar, has been turned around.

The positive achievements of the Dzurinda government have vastly improved Slovakia's reputation. In spite of the positive accolades from the international community, there are still clear divisions in Slovak politics—the democratic and pro-integration camp versus the authoritarian and anti-integration camp. The government still has a majority in parliament, but popular support for Meciar's HZDS (Movement for a Democratic Slovakia) still amounts to around 30 percent. Even support for the SNS (Slovak National Party), a more extreme nationalist and authoritarian party, is relatively high. The dangers here are clear. If the Dzurinda government fails in its objectives of joining NATO and reducing the unemployment rate, the forces representing isolationist policies, violations of the rule of law, and a nontolerant attitude toward other nationalities in Slovakia, could return to power.

The Dzurinda government's foreign policy is clear in its aims of joining NATO, the EU, and the OECD. While OECD membership looks like it will become Bratislava's first foreign policy success, joining NATO and the EU will be real challenges. Slovakia is back among the "fast-track" EU hopefuls, but everyone in Slovakia has not seen this as a success. Furthermore, adoption of the *aquis communautaire*, in which Slovakia already lags behind, will not be an easy task. Before the last elections, the Slovak public was not prepared for the difficult measures that had to be taken. It is likely, therefore, that public opinion will waiver further as the EU integration and reform process continues. Failure to show clear results with regard to this process, coupled with high unemployment, may result in the failure by the current ruling coalition to hold on to power after the next general election in 2002.

Public support for EU membership has been stable at 60 percent, while only some 40 percent of the population favors

NATO membership. Public support for NATO membership plummeted during the Kosovo crisis. At the moment there is a need to educate the public on the burdens of both NATO and EU membership and develop consensus. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the media could both play important roles in educating citizens on the burdens and the benefits of joining the Euro-Atlantic alliances. Now, they need arguments to present to the Slovak electorate about the benefits and obligations of EU accession. More comprehensive and concerted public education is needed on the EU question.

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The election of the Freedom Party to the Austrian government poses a further dilemma for Slovakia. Despite Haider's stepping down as party leader, Slovakia, as well as other Central and East European states hoping to join the EU, has been placed in a difficult position. The Slovak government's response to the situation in Austria was ambiguous, recognizing Austria's power to block accession. The press on the other hand, was openly critical of the EU's actions. This further emphasizes the fact that there is a need to educate the Slovak public about the realities of EU membership. At the moment many do not realize that EU membership will mean that other member countries, in effect, can interfere in the domestic politics of any member state. Currently, the Dzurinda government is asking for more time to prepare the country to join NATO and the EU; however, time may not be on the government's side.

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