

A Crisis of Democracy in Southeast Europe

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For those who are counting, 2007 marks the third successive “year of decision” in Southeast Europe. The previous two did bring breakthroughs on some key issues. Separation for Serbia and Montenegro, admission of both as well as Bosnia-Herzegovina to the Partnership for Peace, clear support for early NATO membership for Albania, Croatia, and Macedonia, and approval of full EU membership for Romania and Bulgaria all come to mind.

However, a broadly perceived “crisis of democracy” threatens realization of the promise of those steps as well as resolution of still-outstanding issues. Prominent analysts and officials warn of political “danger” in and around the region.² Reversing these trends as quickly as possible is vital.

Two countervailing points should be conceded upfront. First, regional specialists have an innate bias toward bad news. The worse things are in a given set of countries, the more interesting and important work on them becomes. More attention, resources, and employment prospects follow. Second, the very nature of democracy makes problems or even crises difficult to distinguish from normal, healthy operation. Free-wheeling competition among groups and ideas can appear hopeless and chaotic even within so-called “mature” democracies. This is even more the case for “transition” states further burdened with fundamental issues of state-building.

These factors offer some comfort against the most dire predictions but are no grounds for complacency. The pervasive pessimism concerning

¹ The views expressed are solely those of the author.

² Larrabee, F. Stephen. “Danger and Opportunity in Eastern Europe.” *Foreign Affairs* 85:6, Nov./Dec. 2006, pp.117-132.

the state of democracy reflects the current controversies' unusual intensity. Going far beyond simple policy differences, by word and deed central actors such as heads of state, heads of government, and leaders of top political parties challenge the very legitimacy of their opponents and the constitutional order itself. The unusual coincidence of such "extraordinary politics" in so many countries at once presents a second source of worry. Where many stable democracies surround one or two states in turmoil, they serve as buffers against the escalation and spread of instability. Where parallel crises afflict an entire region, the problems of separate countries exacerbate one another.

A brief survey illustrates these points. Starting to the north, developments in each of the Visegrad countries have compromised their roles as models and promoters for democratic progress further east and south. In Poland, prominent former dissident Adam Michnik charges twins President Lech and Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski and as "a systematic effort ... to undermine ... democratic institutions" through such action as bribing individual MPs in fall 2006 to retain their Truth and Justice Party's hold on power after its prior coalition collapsed and by subsequently enacting a dramatic expansion (later ruled unconstitutional) of the country's lustration laws to hundreds of thousands professional posts.³ Slovakia's May 2006 elections produced a governing coalition with both the chauvinistic Slovak National Party, whose leader Jan Slota speaks of driving tanks into Budapest, and the party of former Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar, whose authoritarian rule in the 1990s included kidnapping of the President's son by the secret police. Meanwhile, the perfect 50-50 split for right and left parties after its June 2006 vote deprived the Czech Republic of government with parliamentary mandate for over seven months. In Hungary that fall, Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsany's admission his Socialist Party had lied "morning, noon, and night" about the state of the economy in its own spring reelection campaign sparked the largest mass demonstrations since 1989. Violent clashes erupted between protesters and police as the Fidesz opposition demanded the government's resignation.

³ Michnik, Adam. "The Polish Witch-Hunt," *New York Review of Books*, 28 June 2007, p.25.

Elsewhere in the broader neighborhood, the renewed standoff this spring between Ukrainian President Viktor Yukaschenko and Prime Minister Yanukovich over the former's decree dissolving parliament left the country's democracy "gasping for air."⁴ The two leaders' clash included disputed control over Interior Ministry forces and dismissals of members of the Constitutional Court on charges of corruption. Romania has witnessed analogous efforts by Prime Minister Tariceanu and the opposition Socialist party in parliament to suspend President Basescu on grounds of political misuse of the secret services. A constitutional court ruling had held such a step technically permissible but lacking sufficient substantive justification, and Basescu himself accused his opponents of seeking to derail his anti-corruption initiatives. In neighboring Bulgaria, corruption scandals have forced the resignation of both the Justice and Economics Ministers. In Turkey, the governing Islamist Welfare Party has called for switching to direct presidential election after public warnings by military leaders, absenteeism by secular parties, and constitutional court pronouncements forced the withdrawal from parliament of the successive candidacies of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul.

Within the Western Balkans, developments in each of the NATO Membership Action Plan (or "Adriatic Three") countries have also raised concerns. Perhaps least seriously, one observer viewed the death of former Croatian Prime Minister and Social Democratic Party leader Ivica Račan in May 2007 as removing a key restraint against other politicians' "instincts to radicalize."⁵ Regarding Macedonia, in February 2007 NATO Secretary General Jaap Hoop de Scheffer noted the "lack of dialogue" exemplified by the largest ethnic Albanian party's extended boycott of parliament in protest for its exclusion from the new governing coalition "diminished" the country's role in Euroatlantic integration.⁶ Meanwhile in Albania, opposition accusations of planned government fraud forced the delay of local elections into February 2007 and have

⁴ Myers, Steven Lee. "Memo from Kiev; Stalled by Conflict, Ukraine's Democracy Gasps for Air," *New York Times*, 1 June 2007.

⁵ Croatia: Fueling or Dampening the Rising Balkan Conflict? *Stratfor*, 30 Apr. 2007.

⁶ *RFE/RL Newsline* 15 Feb. 2007.

been followed by deadlock over parliament's selection of a successor to President Moisiu.

A perceived crisis in democratic state-building has also afflicted the PFP "New 3" countries. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, one prominent Western ambassador regrets the "deterioration" of political life over the past year. Parliamentary elections last September yielded an alignment of forces unable to produce a central government for over four months. The same parties remain deeply divided over a revival of efforts to amend the Dayton constitutional structures. Police reform, a precondition for further progress toward a Stabilization and Association Agreement with the European Union, is similarly stalled. The leading ethnic Serb politician, Milorad Dodik, threatens a referendum for independence in the Republika Srpska. The leading Bosniak, Haris Silajdžić, calls for abolishing the RS as an illegitimate, "genocidal entity." Contrary to prior hopes that the Office of High Representative and its associated "Bonn powers" could be wound down this year, they have instead been entrusted to a new, more activist occupant. Regarding Montenegro, a recent report criticizes irregularities and exclusiveness in the country's constitution drafting process for generating "new divisions" in society.⁷ An earlier study had condemned Serbia's October 2006 referendum on its new constitution; suppression of critical viewpoints in the media, a suspicious vote count, and ineffective mechanisms of checks and balances were collectively deemed to have pushed democracy "backwards." Follow-up analysis judged the five month delay in formation of a government after the December 2006 elections as well as Radical party leader Tomislav Nikolić's talk of declaring a state of emergency during his brief stint as speaker of parliament as further evidence of weaknesses.⁸

Meanwhile definitive UN Security Council action on former Finnish President Ahtisaari's proposals for "supervised independence" for Kos-

⁷ Djurkovic, Misa. "Montenegro: Headed for New Divisions?". Conflict Studies Research Center, Balkans Series 07/11, March 2007.

⁸ "Serbia's New Constitution: Democracy Going Backwards," International Crisis Group Report, October 2006; and "Serbia's New Government: Turning from Europe," International Crisis Group Report, May 2007.

ovo has slipped past a series of projected deadlines. Tension and uncertainty surrounding this issue also hold back progress elsewhere.

Given all these challenges, it is tempting simply to wait for more favorable “decisive” years in the future. However, important reasons argue for action to reverse the tide of pessimism before the end of 2007. First, NATO’s upcoming “enlargement” summit, scheduled for April 2008 in Bucharest, presents one key deadline for judging the progress of the “A-3” and “New-3” states since Riga. Second, the European Union will be making “safeguard” assessments of its newest two members, Bulgaria and Romania, as well as revisiting the controversial issues of institutional reform needed for enlargement beyond the Nice Treaty cap of 27 members. Third, the United States, whose recently reenergized engagement in Southeast Europe remains a necessary complement to EU activities,⁹ is quickly entering a period of both escalating debate over its strategy in Iraq and of an extended presidential campaign and transition that may again divert its attention from the region.

At a minimum, continued negative trends mean further lost time in achieving stability, prosperity, and full integration. In terms of NATO and EU membership, this could mean another three to five years before the alignment of regional conditions and external interest provides another opportunity to advance toward admission. Slovakia’s exclusion from NATO’s 1999 Višegrad enlargement but subsequent inclusion in the 2004 “Big Bang” presents a kind of precedent. However, delays could certainly extend much longer and reach fifteen, twenty, or even more years.

A much worse case would see indefinite delay accompanied by a broader crisis of the Euroatlantic project. A combination of factors such as a reemergence of armed violence, a perceived failure of the pull of integration and international engagement, and concentrated efforts by a

⁹ Rhodes, Matthew. “The U.S. Role in Southeast Europe: In and After the Peace Plans,” in *International Peace Plans for the Balkans – A Success?*, Study Group on Regional Stability in Southeast Europe of the Partnership for Peace Consortium, 2006, pp.113-124.

hostile Russia to play a countervailing role in the region, and simultaneous reversals for democratic state-building elsewhere could generate turmoil and divisions within NATO and the EU over how best to proceed. At the extreme, a loss of trust, confidence, and prestige could trigger those institutions' dissolution or decline as pillars of stability in the region and beyond.

Despite the mounting bad news, such dramatic scenarios remain neither predestined nor even most likely. Unfortunately, they appear more plausible now than a year or two ago. Preventing further erosion of the region's outlook will require rapid, principled moves that simultaneously resolve crises today and bolster the foundations for democracy in the future. If dire warnings supply the necessary sense of urgency and focus, they will have rendered a valuable service far beyond advancing their authors' careers.