

PROJECT ON ETHNIC RELATIONS

The Project on Ethnic Relations (PER) was founded in 1991 in anticipation of the serious interethnic conflicts that were to erupt following the collapse of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. PER conducts programs of high-level intervention and dialogue and serves as a neutral mediator in several major disputes in the region. PER also conducts programs of training, education, and research at international, national, and community levels.

PER is supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, with additional funding from the Starr Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, The Pew Charitable Trusts, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the Philip D. Reed Foundation, and the Council of Europe.

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R e p o r t



INTERETHNIC RELATIONS
IN THE BALKANS:
NEW GENERATION,
NEW POLITICS

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SOFIA, BULGARIA
NOVEMBER 7-9, 1997

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PREFACE

The Project on Ethnic Relations, with support from the Council of Europe and the assistance of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria, brought together, in Sofia, Bulgaria, from November 7 to November 9, 1997, a select group of some thirty young political leaders from the Balkans to begin a series of informal discussions concerning the future of their region. This report is an account of the proceedings of that meeting.

The many serious conflicts that have erupted in the Balkans in recent years have underlined the urgency of finding new means of assuring the future well-being of the peoples of this culturally rich and complex region. Euro-Atlantic integration is moving ahead more rapidly than ever, and the Balkan region is in danger of being left out. If the peoples of the Balkans are to participate successfully in the larger world, their leaders will need to work together for the benefit of their common home. Unfortunately, the rising leaders of the Balkan countries have few opportunities to become acquainted with one another and to explore their problems, hopes, and plans with their counterparts in other countries of the region.

One of the greatest challenges to further development in the Balkans is interethnic conflict, and that was the main subject of this meeting. It addressed such questions as: Are there ways to avoid interethnic conflicts in the future? What mechanisms are required to accomplish that goal? Can the international community help? How do ethnic issues affect bilateral relations between neighbors, and what is their impact on domestic politics in each country? What are the responsibilities of governing and opposition parties and of the political organizations of ethnic minorities? PER believes that everyone in the Balkans benefits from an open discussion of these and related issues.

The participants in the meeting in Sofia represented a broad spectrum of Balkan political life, including both governing and opposition parties and leaders of large ethnic minorities. Perhaps the most noteworthy and hopeful aspect of the discussions was that, without exception, they were using a new vocabulary, one that stressed moderation, cooperation, and internationalism, in stark contrast to the conceptual world occupied by so many of their elders. It remains to be seen whether this new orientation can be translated into actual

political behavior, but it is an essential beginning if the region is to be successful in changing course.

One recurring theme during the discussions was the troubled relationship with the West, especially disappointment at being excluded from Euro-Atlantic institutions such as NATO and the European Union, and deep resentment toward what many participants saw as the double standard of the West in its approach to the Balkans. The participants stressed that the prospect of membership in Western institutions, however distant, was still a lodestar for them. For the present, however, they saw the Balkan countries as victims of discrimination based on Western ignorance and prejudice that could confine them indefinitely to a political and economic ghetto and exacerbate regional instability.

Western participants expressed some sympathy over this plight, but they also noted that some expectations simply were not realistic at this time, that in any case the countries of the Balkans had not done all they could to help themselves, and that too little had been done to translate aspirations into actions. While these contrasting views are not new, the conference discussions revealed the magnitude of the gap that separates the Balkans not only from the West but also from the more successful, or more favored, countries of Central Europe. All participants agreed that this unresolved division of post-Communist Europe constitutes one of the most difficult problems for the new generation of political leaders in Southeastern Europe.

During a break in the conference, participants visited the Office of the Presidency in Sofia and met with the vice-president of Bulgaria, Todor Kavalzhiev, and with members of the Presidential Council on Ethnic Problems and with the secretariat of the Council on Social and Demographic Problems of the Council of Ministers. In his remarks to the participants, the vice-president emphasized that these young politicians were the hope for the future of the Balkans. Peaceful coexistence, he said, is the key to stability in this part of Europe.

This report was prepared by Peter Priadka, PER's representative in Slovakia. It was edited by Alex N. Grigor'ev and Warren R. Haffar, PER program officers in Princeton, and Robert A. Feldmesser, PER's

senior editor. We would like to thank Ivan Ilchev, director of PER's Bulgaria office, for organizing the meeting. The participants have not had a chance to review the text, which is thus PER's responsibility alone.

Allen H. Kassof, *President*

Livia B. Plaks, *Executive Director*

Princeton, New Jersey

June 1998

NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

In order to encourage a frank discussion among the participants, it was agreed that no remarks would be attributed to individuals in this report.

The word “Serbian” here refers to the citizens of the Republic of Serbia and to their political organizations; “Serb” refers to ethnic Serbs, whether they live in Serbia or elsewhere. Similarly, “Croatian” refers to the citizens of the Republic of Croatia and to their political organizations; “Croat,” to ethnic Croats, whether they live in Croatia or elsewhere. “Muslim” refers to ethnic Muslims/Bosnians/Bosnjaks who live in Bosnia and Herzegovina. “Moslem” refers to those adhering to the Islamic faith.

For the sake of simplicity, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is referred to as simply “Macedonia”; and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which consists of Serbia and Montenegro, is referred to as “Yugoslavia.”

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

PER’s president opened the meeting by pointing to the tremendous potential of a peaceful, integrated, and prosperous Southeastern Europe. However, he noted, there are many violent and self-destructive conflicts in the region, and it remains to be seen whether new patterns of cooperation will emerge to replace old habits. PER’s executive director observed that the United States is particularly concerned about the fate of the region, not only because of its strategic importance to stability in Europe, but also because many Americans trace their roots to this part of the world. Moreover, it is in the interest of the United States to prevent conflicts from erupting so as not to be asked to intervene.

A representative of the Council of Europe stated that the Council was eager to help with efforts that contribute to democratic development, the rule of law, and a greater respect for human rights. These are the basic goals of the Confidence-Building Measures Programme of the Council, he said, which is supporting the Project on Ethnic Relations in this important and worthy meeting.

The Bulgarian deputy prime minister welcomed the participants, emphasizing that the new Bulgarian government represents a rising political generation that understands that dialogue must replace conflict. Meetings such as this, he said, represent significant progress toward that end. Although Bulgarians are proud of their history, they realize that the past cannot be a platform for modern political behavior. Bulgaria wants to have positive and constructive relations with all the peoples of the region.

PROBLEMS OF REGIONAL IDENTITY: IMAGES OF THE BALKANS

Many of the participants were troubled by the recurring questions about how the countries of the Balkans see themselves and their region and how they are perceived by the outside world. There was general agreement that the Balkans have increasingly become associated with strife, conflict, and internal division, particularly since the violent breakup of the former Yugoslavia. Indeed, it is because of this that many politicians and intellectuals from the region prefer that the Balkans be referred to by the more neutral term, “Southeastern Europe.”

A participant from Romania noted that his country suffers from constantly being identified by outsiders with Serbia, Albania, and Bosnia. These associations must be changed, because they are inaccurate and serve only to perpetuate negative stereotypes. As far as the West is concerned, he said, “we are all members of the ‘bad Balkans,’ as opposed to the ‘good Visegrad countries.”

A Bulgarian participant supported this opinion and added that the religious and ethnic conflicts that have afflicted the region in the past have perpetuated the negative image of the Balkans. It will take a very long time to change this image, he said.

A participant from Macedonia criticized Western European policies that create practical problems for citizens of Balkan countries who want to travel in or do business in Western Europe. Because of these policies, Western Europe is, in effect, off limits to the peoples of the Balkans, deepening their sense of cultural and political isolation and undermining their identity as Europeans.

A representative from the European Parliament observed that the Balkan countries bear some responsibility for this state of affairs. If they want to change these negative perceptions, they need to become more tolerant in their relations with one another and more pragmatic in their approach to politics, and they must learn to work together for regional cooperation and solidarity.

A Bulgarian participant asserted that the sensitivity of the West to ethnic strife in the Balkans was heightened by its own failures—as, for example, in the disputes in Northern Ireland, in the Basque region in Spain, and between the French and the Flemish in Belgium.

International institutions, he continued, should not have double standards that condemn the Balkans for the same problems they are willing to overlook in their own backyard. It is true that Balkan leaders need to learn to solve their problems at the negotiating table rather than on the battlefield, but the West should not create excuses to exclude the Balkans from European integration.

A participant from Croatia commented on the resistance in his country to being identified as a “Balkan” country. Croatia’s ruling party, he said, insists that Croatia belongs to Central Europe or to the Mediterranean region, not to the Balkans. This is the reason that representatives from the ruling party did not accept the invitation to participate in the present meeting; it prefers that it not be associated with the countries represented here. Public opinion in Croatia blames the country’s problems on its Balkan neighbors, particularly the Serbs. He added that Croatia has 14 national minorities but only one of them, the Serbs, is looked upon as the cause of its problems. Croatian prejudices against its neighbors, continued this participant, will have to be overcome, because they stand in the way of essential regional cooperation. Croatia declares that it wants to cooperate with the European Union (EU) and with all neighboring countries, yet Croatian politicians are against any involvement in Balkan issues. The present international pressure on Croatia regarding the implementation of the Dayton peace agreements, the international tribunal for war crimes in the Hague, and human-rights issues has been effective, because it has forced the government to fulfill at least some of these requirements in order to avoid internal political disputes.

MANAGING ETHNIC CONFLICT

A Romanian participant agreed that there must be a manageable structure if military conflicts are to be avoided in the region. Romania has a tremendous advantage in this regard, because it does not have any problems with other Balkan countries. The Balkan countries are also affected by problems like drug-trafficking and religious fundamentalism. And finally, they have a communication problem. To remedy this, he proposed establishing a “Balkan Internet” to encourage communication among young politicians.

A Serbian participant added that, despite all of the positive changes in Romania, other countries in the region are still very weak. It is necessary to resolve the problems in the region before the Balkan countries can be fully integrated with Western structures. In the former Yugoslavia, he continued, the democratic alternative is much weaker than the nationalist one. The only way to escape

The only way to escape the threat of war is to establish democratic rules of governance.

access to and control over the media. Without freedom of the press, there can be no open and civil society.

According to a Turkish participant, many of the most urgent regional issues revolve around ethnic conflicts. These issues include the peace process in Bosnia, the situation of the Albanians in Kosovo, the Greek-Turkish dispute, and Greek hostility toward Macedonia. Stability is urgently needed throughout the region and must be the primary goal. It is a precondition for preventing further ethnic, political, and cultural conflicts.

A Romanian participant added that historical disputes are less important to the new generation of political leaders than to their elders. Of course, young political leaders are loyal to their countries, but they come with new attitudes and are more interested in negotiation and dialogue as a means of achieving political and economic reform. In the most recent parliamentary elections in Romania, many young people gained high positions, and they are pushing reform.

The historical Romanian-Hungarian dispute and steps taken recently to resolve it were the subject of remarks by another participant from Romania. The dispute between Romanians and the Hungarian minority

in Romania, he said, is really more a political than an ethnic problem. Evidence of this can be seen in the way the situation changed following the 1996 parliamentary elections in Romania, which brought ethnic Hungarians into the ruling coalition. Presently, the main problem in relations between Hungary and Romania is that the rapprochement between them was so swift that neither country was fully prepared. Meanwhile, a number of issues with Ukraine have become troublesome for Romania. Ukraine, he said, is still in the nation-building process and regards the establishment of its territorial integrity as particularly important. Romania's policy toward Ukraine must keep this in mind and be both pragmatic and sensitive. At the same time, Romania needs to have an area of security around its borders. Fortunately, he concluded, Romania does not have any fundamental problems with its neighbors, so its security concerns should be easily accommodated.

A Serbian participant raised the question of Kosovo. The problem, he said, has three key aspects: the protection of human rights, the status of the Albanian minority in Serbia, and the status of the Albanian minority in Macedonia and elsewhere in the region. The first step toward dealing with these problems, he said, is to form a group of representatives of the various governments in the region. This group should then devise concrete steps to be taken.

A representative of one of ruling parties in Serbia said that the main problem in the Balkans is the Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was time to stop talking about the past and to start thinking about the future. She considers her political party, New Democracy, to be a bridge between the government and the opposition. Serbia might become the next problem in the region, she warned. If extremist forces win the presidential elections in Serbia, there will be no moderate voices there to cooperate with, and this would destroy the Dayton peace agreements. We cannot run away from where we are, she stressed. The only resolution for Serbia's problems lies in its reintegration into Europe and, ultimately, with full membership in the EU.

The moderator raised the question of whether there was any defense against ethnic scapegoating by populist political leaders. Can we protect vulnerable populations from the influence of populists and extremists? A Romanian participant responded that elements of scapegoating and ethnic hatred had indeed appeared in the 1996 presidential campaign in his country, but fortunately they did not significantly influence the out-

come. Nevertheless, the issue of ethnic scapegoating needs to be taken very seriously, and every effort must be made to counteract hate speech. He added that Western treatment of the Balkans is a serious part of the problem. So long as the West portrays the Balkans as less than fully European, the resulting feelings of inferiority will play into the hands of demagogues. In fact, he concluded, the deliberate exclusion of the Balkans from serious consideration for EU membership may be even more dangerous to stability than the behavior of extreme nationalists.

Another Romanian participant added that extremists are found in all countries. At the moment, extremists in Romania are not strong enough

The international community needs to consider new collective mechanisms for coping with the challenge that ethnic conflict presents.

to influence the politics of the country, but it is essential to identify groups that support the extremists and to politically isolate extremist parties and groups.

Participants from Bosnia and Herzegovina spoke about the peace process in their country. One of

them said that peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina is important for stability in all of Europe, and it should be based on three main principles: war will not be tolerated by the international community; the territorial integrity of the country will be maintained; and no single ethnic group will be permitted to dominate others. The future stability of democracy and civil society in Bosnia will have to be guaranteed by an international presence in the country.

Admission to Western institutions such as the EU, the Council of Europe, and the Partnership for Peace program of NATO can also play a crucial role in preserving peace in Bosnia. One of the preconditions for lasting peace is the restoration of trust among the country's nationalities. This process is proceeding much faster among the ordinary people than among the political elites. Freedom of movement, trade, punishment of war criminals, the return of refugees, and economic recovery, together with the development of democratic principles and the protection of human rights, are other preconditions of peace. In order to build a vital society in Bosnia, it is necessary to achieve some degree of ethnic pluralism, but there are still powerful forces in Bosnia that seek ethnic domination. Every citizen of Bosnia and Herzegovina should enjoy institutional guarantees of freedom and human rights. Before the war, Bosnia and Herzegovina had been a multicultural society. Presently, Serbs,

Muslims, and Croats are taught distinct and partisan versions of history, so there is very little basis for common understanding. The country needs to undergo a process of intellectual reconstruction and the educational systems must be unified if multiculturalism is ever to be restored.

A Greek participant pointed out the need for prompt international action to stop violence at the beginning in cases of conflicts like the one in Bosnia and Herzegovina. International action was successful in 1997 in Albania, but it came too late for Bosnia and Herzegovina. PER's president said that the issue of coordinated international responses to ethnic conflict is extremely important, but the international community is still institutionally and politically unprepared to cope with such challenges. The international community needs to consider new collective mechanisms for coping with the challenge that ethnic conflict presents.

Another Greek participant agreed that the resolution of ethnic problems was crucial for regional stability. If governments do not understand that the rights of minorities and ethnic groups are very important elements of stability, they do not understand today's world. Unfortunately, that is precisely the case throughout the Balkan region, where the enemy of your enemy is your friend, an attitude that makes multilateral cooperation in the region very difficult. Respect for existing national borders and for minority rights is crucial to regional stability and the avoidance of future ethnic conflict in the

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Balkans. A conference of minorities in the region should be convened with the aim of producing a "charter of minorities," which would establish regional standards of minority rights. Minorities could then become bonds of friendship instead of explosive forces.

According to one Croatian participant, the central question of nationality is whether or not it should be based on ethnicity. This question remains unresolved in the Balkans. He reiterated that Bosnia and Herzegovina might still become a renewed source of ethnic conflict. The Muslims of Bosnia are of Slavic origin who converted to Islam under Ottoman rule. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the territory was annexed by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and it was the site of the incident that started World War I. It was recognized as a separate nation only during the Communist era. Many Croats think that Bosnia and

Herzegovina belongs to Croatia, because the independent state of Croatia that was established in 1941 incorporated the present-day territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina. He agreed with the earlier remarks that stability in the region can be achieved only if the principle of nonviolation of existing borders is adopted; otherwise the territorial claims will never end.

Participants from Romania, Macedonia, and Bulgaria discussed the Bulgarian-Macedonian dispute over language. A Bulgarian participant explained that the most recent dispute had started three years ago. An agreement on cultural cooperation between the two countries had been prepared for signature, but when the Bulgarian minister of education arrived in Skopje to sign the agreement, a different version of the agreement was presented, causing the dispute. The dispute was due to language differences and was intensified by media manipulation.

The moderator said that unquestioning acceptance of the primacy of ethnic issues was very troubling for outsiders, especially for Americans, who tend to place issues of citizenship and human rights above collective rights or group rights. Perhaps what is needed is a pragmatic, step-by-step approach similar to the one followed in Romania after the 1996 parliamentary elections. Solutions will differ from one country to another, but Romania can serve as a model for other countries in the region of how to achieve positive results. One contribution would be a strong statement from Turkey, Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria to the Serbs that they would not tolerate a disruption in their region over Kosovo. In the absence of this, the United States might become the most important actor in resolving the Kosovo dispute, which would not be a comfortable situation for the Americans.

A Serbian participant noted that the situation in Kosovo is a legal problem for Serbia. The status of the Albanians there is unclear. But, he added, Kosovo is also a regional problem, because Albanians live in other countries of the region as well. Regarding the conflict in Bosnia, he repeated that the only solution is for all parties involved to implement and respect the Dayton peace agreements.

In the view of a participant from the European Parliament, regional disputes could be resolved if the parties in conflict followed the Romanian-Hungarian model of accommodation. He said that the proposed mediation by the German minister of foreign affairs, Klaus Kinkel, might be successful. Regarding the multinational military operation to provide security in the midst of serious civic disturbances and fighting in Albania

(Operation ALBA), he said that the EU could have acted together with Albania for the first time, but it missed this important opportunity for cooperation. The EU has difficulties in acting, because of a lack of shared political will and different historical attitudes on the part of its fifteen member states.

A Greek participant made reference to the post-World War I exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey. Carried out in conformity with the Lausanne Agreements, it did not solve anything. Nevertheless, he said, international organizations and economic cooperation should play important roles. Economic ties between the Balkan countries and Greece have helped to improve the standard of living in these countries. He also mentioned a dispute between Greece and Turkey over a small uninhabited island and said that such disputes could happen anywhere.

A Romanian participant argued that in order to avoid armed conflict a system needs to be put in place that guarantees coordination among international organizations. That such a need exists became evident after Operation ALBA. This international action in Albania was a limited success, he said. It was unclear who was against whom; organized crime, drug traffickers, and arms dealers were fighting one another. In fact, it was the first conflict of this type. Only NATO is capable of acting in such circumstances.

REGIONAL ASPIRATIONS AND COOPERATION

The moderator invited a participant from Turkey to share his impressions of the regional picture from a Turkish perspective. The participant said that his country was simultaneously a European country, an Asian country, and a Balkan country. Turkey might therefore serve as a bridge between countries, continents, and cultures. He stressed that maintenance of peace and regional stability are the main goals of Turkish foreign policy; Turkey does not seek to reestablish the Ottoman Empire.

A participant from Romania said that, in the final analysis, stability in the Balkans will depend on the region's becoming prosperous. At present,

Increasing interdependence and communication would be the best way to overcome disputes among the Balkan countries.

even the richest countries in the region cannot be considered rich by Western standards. The underdevelopment of the region is due to the fact that the countries went directly from World War II to Communism and the cold war. Full integration into the EU is the only way to achieve prosperity. But, he pointed

out, according to EU's Agenda 2000, the process of EU enlargement will last much longer than anyone expected.

Another participant from Romania agreed that stability was dependent on prosperity, and he cited the example of Switzerland, a very stable, prosperous country with good minority relations and four official languages. In order to achieve stability in the Balkans, the West must promote investment and trade in and with the region.

A Serbian participant asserted that the establishment of open societies through democratization is the only way to achieve long-term peace in the Balkans. To achieve this goal, the common interests of all countries in the region must be taken into account. The Balkan countries must learn democratic and civic values.

A participant from Bulgaria highlighted the need for a common written history of the Balkans. He admitted that this was still very difficult to imagine. Another regional problem is that Russian policy treats the Balkans as though they were insignificant. Increasing interdependence and communication would be the best way to overcome disputes among the Balkan countries.

The topic of regional cooperation was touched on by a participant from Macedonia. She said that it was hardly desirable to have an island of stability surrounded by unstable countries; regional cooperation was essential. The relationship between the governments of Greece and Macedonia provides a good example of such cooperation. They recently decided to cooperate on those "small" issues where resolution was possible. The relations between the two countries cannot yet be considered excellent, but they are better than they had been. Economic and cultural cooperation has helped in resolving outstanding issues between the two countries.

According to a Romanian participant, regional cooperation has both economic and political dimensions. The economic dimension is particularly concerned with rebuilding the economic ties in the region that were broken after the collapse of Communism. The economic development that has occurred since then has been uneven. One problem that hinders economic cooperation is that the regional infrastructure is in very bad shape, making the movement of goods and services difficult.

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Regarding the political dimension, only a few countries have been able to identify common interests to date. There is still no regional security cooperation. Some bilateral and trilateral arrangements do exist, but they are exceptions rather than the rule.

Another Romanian participant observed that there were dozens of institutions of regional cooperation in Europe; the EU, the Council of Europe, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe were just a few of them. The structures to support regional cooperation do exist, but they are not being used to their full potential. After decades of cooperation under Communism, the countries in the region have become strangers to one another. A participant from Greece raised the question of what the Balkan countries had in common. A lot of ethnic and religious issues have the potential to divide the people of the Balkans, but the economy is an area where there are common interests.

A Turkish participant said that the most developed countries in the region, Greece and Turkey, should be the ones to launch economic initiatives. The EU started as an economic union after World War II, and

the Marshall Plan brought stability to Western Europe. Economic cooperation in the Balkans at the end of the twentieth century should bring stability as well. He also noted that Turkey was not a member of the EU. It is important to seek to improve cooperation with the EU and at the same time to look for alternatives to it.

A participant from Greece argued that the political dimension of regional cooperation was more important than the economic one. He said he did not know of a single problem that has been solved through economic cooperation. On the contrary, only issues that have been resolved politically could bring about economic cooperation that was free of political interference.

A Bulgarian participant asserted that Bulgaria has developed strong cooperation with neighboring countries and with European and Euro-Atlantic organizations. He mentioned several examples of regional cooperation, such as combating organized crime in the Balkans. The Bulgarian government initiated a meeting of regional political leaders in Varna, Bulgaria, and more recently attended a similar meeting in Crete. Bulgaria is also trying to improve its relations with Turkey; the Turkish prime minister, Mesut Yilmaz, was scheduled to visit Bulgaria in December 1997.

This participant went on to say that the region's interethnic problems could be resolved only if the relevant EU legislation was adopted. There is a danger of growing instability in countries that, like Bulgaria, have so far been excluded from EU membership negotiations. The young political leaders in the Balkans, he suggested, should decide whether their countries will become members of the EU together or whether there will be yet another source of division in the region.

Regional cooperation is threatened, said a participant from Yugoslavia, by biased media coverage. The media are constantly making neighboring countries into enemies, as was seen in the way the media in all the countries involved covered the Dayton peace agreements.

A participant representing the European Parliament summarized this part of the discussion. Regional cooperation, he said, has four dimensions: economic, technological, political, and military. The economic dimension centers on enhancing economic cooperation through regional integration into the EU. The technological dimension concerns the development of regional infrastructure and communications. In the

political dimension, partner political parties in the region should coordinate their programs. The military dimension means above all the implementation of confidence- and security-building measures and bilateral and multilateral military cooperation, as in northern Europe among Germany, Poland, and Denmark. The Balkan countries should utilize the opportunities offered by the NATO Partnership for Peace program. In this and other ways, they should take advantage of existing international organizations rather than expending energy on creating new ones.

ROLES OF THE EU AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

A participant from Greece observed that each country wanted to resolve its own problems, but that many could not do so by themselves. A common, multilateral approach is needed if progress is to be made in improving human and minority rights in the Balkans, but economic assistance from the EU is also necessary to strengthen and develop democratic institutions and respect for international borders and international law. Only when these institutions are firmly established can the other problems in the

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Balkans be resolved. The Balkan leaders of the young generation speak many Western languages, he said, but only a few are able to speak and understand other Balkan languages. Thus, they do not know one another. This is partly due to the difficulty of traveling through the Balkans.

Moreover, nationalism, fanned by the media, still prevails as a favored solution in many of these countries. The new Balkan leaders must resist the tendency to turn to such simplistic solutions.

A Bulgarian participant criticized some EU members for using religion to divide Central and East European countries, and he stressed the importance of regional cooperation among the Balkan countries to resist this.

A Romanian participant remarked that after the collapse of Communism many countries turned to the West on an individual basis. This turned out to be a big mistake, because so many of their problems are regional and must be solved within the region. Fortunately, many of the Balkan countries are now taking steps in the direction of regional solidarity and cooperation.

Several participants proposed Western assistance in the form of a new "Marshall Plan" as a way of resolving economic problems and achieving stability in the countries of the region. However, the participant from NATO said that full integration in the EU and NATO was the best way to resolve economic and political problems, although some issues could be resolved on a bilateral basis, without the involvement of those organizations. A Romanian participant, while agreeing that trade and investment in the region had to grow, he did not believe in any kind of new "Marshall Plan." The moderator asserted that there would be no new Marshall Plan and, indeed, there was no quick fix for the region's economic problems.

The representative of the Council of Europe agreed with other participants that economic development and prosperity were necessary to the resolution of the problems in the Balkans. Romania, he added, had made tremendous progress since last year's parliamentary elections. Every citizen must be a participant in the democratization of the Balkans and in acquiring the values of a civil society.

According to a participant representing the European Parliament, the EU wants to extend membership to the Balkan countries. It recognizes that the Balkans are one region but that they are also a group of individual countries that require different approaches from the EU. Each applicant country to the EU must fulfill the requirements

set forth in the Copenhagen statement of 1993 as well as additional economic criteria. Invitations to EU membership negotiations do not mean that these countries must have already met these criteria. A

Interethnic conflict in many of the Balkan countries is a major obstacle to EU membership.

Romanian participant added that it was important to include the Balkan countries in the decision-making processes of the new Europe.

The participant from the European Parliament went on to say that interethnic conflict in many of the Balkan countries is a major obstacle to EU membership. The EU wants to contribute to the resolution of these conflicts. Toward that end, the EU development program, PHARE, should be modified to bring together political leaders from these countries to discuss regional cooperation.

A Romanian participant urged that ordinary people, not just politicians, have a chance to meet one another and build more normal relationships. The people in the Balkans know that their countries must meet certain criteria before they can become EU or NATO members. However, it is difficult to get people to be patient. The Madrid decision on NATO enlargement, he said, was very bitter for Romania. However, when U.S. President Bill Clinton visited Romania after the Madrid summit, he demonstrated that the United States is still committed to Romania and to its eventual membership in the EU and NATO. The meeting of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council in Romania was further evidence of this commitment.

A Bulgarian participant said that the decision not to extend an invitation to Bulgaria caused great disappointment in his country, too, and that it would strengthen anti-European forces there.

A U.S. participant said that the United States strongly supported the aspirations of the Balkan countries to join the EU. The United States has a strategic partnership with Romania and recognizes the Romanian determination to join NATO. It is working closely with the Balkan countries to secure the economic reforms that are required for membership. The recent visit to Bulgaria by two high-ranking officials from Washington was an important political signal.

The participant from the Council of Europe declared that the EU should reexamine the economic criteria for admission. The criteria should be more flexible, so that the economies of the states are not damaged during the transition.

A Bulgarian participant said that Bulgaria ought to have a series of bilateral negotiations with EU member states. Meanwhile, the negative policies of some countries in the region inevitably reflect badly on all the Balkan countries, and this should be changed. At the same time, there

The United States strongly supports the aspirations of the Balkan countries to join the EU.

is also a problem in the Western perception of differences among the countries of the region.

A Romanian participant agreed that this differentiated attitude to the region was troublesome. The

problems of the Balkans, he said, are caused mainly by their underdeveloped economies. Greece and Hungary were underdeveloped countries before World War II. Being Moslem should be considered no less European than being Christian. There is also a Moslem Europe, after all, and the West has to respect that reality.

A Greek participant observed that the EU and NATO had already played a tremendous role in developing economic ties between the Balkan countries and the West. Bulgaria and Romania are candidates for EU membership. Turkey has not been handled very well by the EU, although this is partly due to human-rights violations in the country. On the other hand, Germany did welcome the customs union with Turkey.

A participant from Turkey spoke about the double standard in the EU attitude toward applicant countries. His country, he said, has not been fairly treated by the EU. Turkey is a member of many international organizations, including NATO, the Council of Europe, and the Western European Union. It is a part of Europe and has been since 1923. Turkey has had a multiparty system and a democratic tradition since the end of World War

II. How, then, can the EU trust Polish democracy, for example, and not Turkish? He admitted, however, that Turkey has had some problems with the violation of human rights. But other states, such as Greece, have had problems as well.

A Romanian participant said that not only the EU but also the Council of Europe and NATO have a double standard regarding expansion. The process made it extremely difficult for Romania to become a member of the Council of Europe, whereas Russia was admitted while it was carrying on a war in Chechnya. Even Estonia, which does not extend the right to vote to a large part of its population, was admitted before Romania. At present, Romania is very satisfied with its relations with the United States, and this relationship may soon result in NATO membership for Romania. Romania's relations with the EU are not as good. The process of EU membership negotiations will be very long, and it is unlikely that Romania will be invited in the first round.

A participant from Macedonia said that the EU was unable to cope with unresolved ethnic issues in its own member states. Countries with ethnic problems have not been accepted into the EU, but that could be a vicious circle, because ethnic tensions might actually increase in those countries that are left out of the EU. One solution is to strengthen the political and economic presence of the EU and NATO member states in these countries. At the same time, the governments of countries aspiring to membership should try to improve their relations with the EU and with EU members.

A participant representing the European Parliament said that the misperceptions in the West regarding the Balkan region are due to ignorance. The visa requirements for the citizens of Balkan countries are scandalous and must be changed. These policies are mainly caused by the negative image of the Romani (Gypsy) population and by fears of an invasion of illegal immigrants. Admittedly, illegal immigrants are coming, but others are unable to travel because of visa obligations. A Serbian participant pointed out that a citizen of Yugoslavia is required to have six different visas to get into Great Britain by car.

A Greek participant said that the EU is based on principles that might be very useful for the resolution of problems mentioned during this conference. Negotiations for EU membership, he added, should start simultaneously with all applicant countries, because these negotiations will take a long time. He expressed reservations about NATO enlargement generally. Energies should be devoted to strengthening the OSCE, rather than being diverted to NATO expansion.

CONCLUSION

The moderator suggested that the most serious issue in the Balkans identified by the participants was the negative perception of the region by the West, especially because of the conflict in Bosnia, the problem of Kosovo, and the disputes between Turkey and Greece and between Bulgaria and Macedonia. It was clear that the countries in the region do not have the capacity to resolve these issues by themselves and that this places an unwelcome burden on the West. Yet the region cannot be seen as normal until these problems are resolved, and they will complicate relations with the West for many years to come.

The discussion, the moderator continued, also demonstrated that the rising political generation is using a less nationalistic and more moderate vocabulary than its elders did. This is a basis for hope that a significant generational change is under way. Nevertheless, this hope must be tempered by the reality of unresolved issues among the states of the region and especially by serious interethnic conflicts.

During the discussion, a number of participants suggested practical possibilities for cooperation, such as an electronic network for young political leaders of the region. They asked PER to continue its effort to organize meetings such as this one, and they recommended that the next meeting should focus on a detailed discussion of a limited number of issues.



From left to right: Alfredo Miccio, Council of Europe; Livia Plaks, PER; Allen Kassof, PER; Veselin Metodiev, Deputy Prime Minister, Bulgaria; Ivan Ilchev, PER Bulgaria; Thomas Grunert, European Parliament and Najl Alkan, Ankara University.

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