

Security in Central Europe

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I

It is not surprising that the example of Central Europe is in the foreground when we are talking about the problem of European security as a whole. How can stability be secured in this region when one bears in mind that no regional international organisation which could act as the focal point for peace and security exists. Neither are there one or two larger regional powers which could secure this goal in cooperation with other, smaller states.

Moreover, the transition from communism, with its rigid economic system, to democracy and a free-market economy obviously increases the instability considerably. It is, therefore, only natural and legitimate that the countries of Central Europe, in order to escape this state of insecurity, try everything to quickly achieve membership of NATO. The aggression against Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina has reinforced that attitude among many citizens of those countries.

Recent remarks, by leading Russian statesmen suggest aspirations to Russian hegemony, thereby further increasing this sense of instability. Thus, Boris Yeltsin, in a press-conference held on 8 September 1995, claimed that "those who insist on the enlargement of NATO are making a big mistake. This could fan the flames of war in the whole of Europe". In a similar vein, Sergej Krylov, the Russian deputy foreign minister, warned, in an interview he gave to the Latvian daily *Diena* on 4 September 1995, that NATO membership of neighbouring countries would lead "not only to economic and political, but also to military measures" by Russia, in response to NATO air strikes in Bosnia the Russian defence minister Pavel Grachev has recently threatened to review his country's attitude towards international arms treaties, and the Russian Foreign Ministry has stated that the use of Tomahawk cruise missiles in Bosnia was "unacceptable".

II

A region's security is not exclusively the result of the military balance of power, it depends in equal measure on the vital factors of political, social and economic cohesion and stability.

The three important sources of instability mentioned above should be considered in more detail:

a) Legacies of the past

After the events of 1989 it seemed only too natural that the peoples who had, until then, been subjected to the oppressive and corrupt rule of communism, and had to ensure the abject poverty engendered by its disastrous and fundamentally misguided economic system, expected a swift transition to full democracy and a western standard of living. As we all know, this proved to be the delusion more sober minds had foreseen. On the contrary, instead of improving the situation of ordinary people, the transition initially had the opposite effect. Completely uncompetitive industries, largely unproductive sectors of the state-run economy, and the dismal state of public finances necessitated drastic economic and fiscal measures. These, in turn, led to a lowering of the already poor standard of living, which seems to be one of the more lasting achievements of the socialist experiment. To take just one example, the per capita income in Czechoslovakia in 1946 was twice as high as the relevant Austrian figure at the time, in 1990. After more than 40 years of communist rule, that ratio had been reversed. Improving this situation is, of course, an arduous and painful struggle requiring much patience. A rare quality in humans at the best of times, patience is psychologically almost impossible to achieve under the dire circumstances prevalent in most postcommunist societies. It is, therefore, hardly surprising when people start blaming the reforms for their plight. This loss of confidence leads to a decreasing attractiveness of the democratic process and the principles of a free-market economy. Under these circumstances it is only too easy to fall for the siren calls of new leaders, among them nationalists and only superficially reformed former communists, with their invocations of a supposedly better past, their false promises of an easy and painless cure for all present ills and their messianic claims of a future free from the "evils" of western-style capitalism and painful efforts.

Moreover, the difficulties involved in establishing a new democratic culture supported by the people and based on a new socio-economic order are aggravated by the fact that the responsibility of the system of real socialism (as communism was described in recent years) for the missed opportunities of millions of gifted people has never been adequately emphasized by centre and right-

of-centre parties. This has made it possible to blame the current state of affairs on the incumbent new democratic reformist governments, rather than on the true culprits.

The hard task of creating a stable market economy has encouraged representatives of the former communist regimes to become more confident and aggressive. There are many examples of this kind of assertiveness. The Czech communist party, for instance, lodged a complaint with the Council of Europe in connection with investigations into the accumulation of capital by the communist party during its reign. Another instructive example is the case of the former East German communist prime minister Modrow, who described his conviction by an independent court for election fraud as "Siegerjustiz" (victor's justice). Many of those actively involved in suppressing and betraying their own people and ordering shots to be fired at peaceful demonstrators, can now be found in positions of power again. How would one react if the convictions of representatives of the criminal Nazi regime, for instance at the Nürnberg trials, were to be dismissed as victor's justice?

The political and economic difficulties outlined above are bound to cause further instability in the future (although the degree may vary from country to country) and impede swift progress towards normalization.

b) The problem of Russia

Russia is still a great power, its stability is, therefore, still of critical importance to European stability as a whole. In view of the disappointing progress of transition, many Russians have started to look back nostalgically to the "great days" of the Soviet Union. The appeal of extreme right-wing and of extreme left-wing parties has grown considerably during the past few years. The rise of Zhirinovskiy is a case in point. That is why support for the democratic forces in Russia is more important than ever, although the inherent risk of failure should not be underestimated.

c) The Balkan war, and the EU as a model for stability

It would be wrong, however, to view the problem under discussion from a purely pessimistic perspective. The philosophy that found its expression in the founding of the European Union, and the principles enshrined in the Treaty of Rome, are also the key to lasting peace and stability in Central Europe. From the very beginning the most important aim of European Union has been to secure peace among the states involved in the process of European integration. In this respect the European Union has undoubtedly proved a spectacular success. Never before in the history has Europe witnessed such a

prolonged period of peace and stability comparable to the one now existing between the member states of the European Union. The European Union is the only realistic long-term hope for a Europe free from war.

The tragedy of the conflict in the Balkans has demonstrated that the United Nations and the OSCE cannot, at present, be viewed as viable alternatives for the preservation of peace. Where collective security falls, self-defence - a right enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations - is the only remaining option. The desire for an effective system of collective security, shared by all reasonable people, has led some to view national self-defence as morally questionable, even when the futility of all other attempts at solving the problem has become blatantly apparent. It is, however, even more morally questionable when not only the aggressor but also certain faint-hearted or ignorant politicians fail to distinguish between the perpetrator and the victim of aggression. When opinions such as "thank God the international community is not seeking a military solution in the Balkans", or the notion that every nation, given the choice, would under all circumstances object to participating in military action, are expressed, one is forced to question whether any lessons from the 1930s have been learned. How could such an attitude ever have replied Hitler's aggression? Given such a standard of values, how could Nazi Germany ever have been defeated? After having exhausted all political and diplomatic measures in a desperate, though ultimately futile effort to secure peace, the war-generation chose the military solution as the only remaining possibility of liberating Europe from the insanity and the horrors of National Socialism. It would be interesting to know, how the younger generation, so often critical of the war-generation, would have answered these vital questions.

III

Lasting peace and stability in Central Europe depend on a successful transition to democracy and a free-market economy. It is, therefore, vital that all possible support be given to this reform process, as well as to an efficient military defence against aggression according to Art. 51 of the United Nations Charter, which clearly underlines the right to self-defence of every sovereign state which is a member of the United Nations. The Balkan crisis shows, yet again, the need for an effective system of collective security in Europe, that takes into account not only military but also political, social and economic factors - a precondition for peace and stability as the successful example of the European Union so clearly demonstrates. We ignore this lesson at our peril. ■