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Europe's New South Croatia Summit 2007

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Speaking on May 11 at the Zagreb Summit of the South East European Cooperation Process Conference the President of Croatia made two statements that I wish to use as the point of departure for my observations. The president said:

"Our citizens and in particular politicians have to be aware that a stable future can be built only on reconciliation, coexistence and tolerance among all ethnic groups." And then he added that "without stability in the surrounding area, there is no economic recovery and no progress" and he warned that "the stability of this area is still very questionable".

I agree, and I want to focus my remarks on the issue of the region's stability and then on the relationship of that stability to wider international context.

Today's Europe – once the cradle of nationalist passions – is pioneering in the institutionalization of voluntarily pooled sovereignty, and in that respect is an example to the world. It stands in sharp contrast to the former Soviet bloc, to the SU itself, and – if I may say so – to the former Yugoslavia.

And that is why the further expansion of the EU – and of its collective security alliance with the US through NATO – is historically desirable. Its expansion is a contribution to a more civilized world system. It enlarges the zone of peace and social progress. I realize that some say that Europe is suffering from a justifiable "expansion fatigue" but let us be careful that the notion of "fatigue" does not become an excuse for selfish and exclusive self-

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indulgence. It can also become a cause of instability that adversely affects even the EU.

To be sure, expansion has to involve the voluntary consent of new members to pool sovereignty but it also must be based on adherence to strict standards for membership. The recent surfacing of some serious problems with corruption and legal standards in lately admitted EU members underlines the point that expansion must be based on the very strict compliance of would-be members with all declared standards for membership. Otherwise both the integrity and the coherence of the EU will be in jeopardy.

And so I say: let us continue to expand the scope of the Euro-Atlantic Community but also enforce all its rules for membership. But let us not fear expansion: just think how insecure Europe today would be if the Baltic states had not been admitted both to NATO and to the EU.

It follows that Croatia should soon be welcomed to NATO and before long to the EU, and that Macedonia and Albania should subsequently follow suit. It also follows that in this region of Europe, often referred to as the Balkans, the people of Kosovo deserve self-determination and it should not be blocked by governments that have a historic record of denying self-determination to others than themselves. It also follows that eventually all the states of this region should be included in the Euro-Atlantic community.

This region of Europe thus faces a daunting but also a hopeful agenda. Its historic challenge is to transform the very notion of the Balkans from an internationally troubling region of conflict into a region admired both for its natural beauty and for its quality of life – much like Scandinavia has become. Scandinavia in the North, Balkania in the south will then be the truly appealing symbols of what Europe has to offer in very important dimension of human life, ranging from the esthetic to the material. With the EU expanding and NATO enlarging, that attractive vision of the future is neither elusive nor distant.

But as noted earlier, regional progress here cannot be insulated from problems originating from nearby. Three potential dangers loom on the outside, they tend to be inter-related, and they could impact adversely on this region:

1. In the long-run it is desirable that Russia becomes more closely engaged with the Euro-Atlantic community. That will also help Russia's eventual transformation into a genuinely democratic state, to the benefit of all concerned. But that will not happen if Ukraine does not in the meantime become a more integral part of both of NATO and of the EU. A Ukraine visibly moving into Europe is a Ukraine that accelerates and facilitates a similar process by Russia (and it has already done so in regards to the WTO) – and it diminishes the temptation for Russia to pressure both Ukraine and Georgia to again be subordinate to Moscow or to exploit in this region Serbia's nostalgia for the past.

2. It is also desirable that the gates of the EU remain open to Turkey if it satisfies the criteria for the membership. Turkey is connected to this region

by history, by geography, and by physical presence (including troops in Kosovo). A Turkey excluded from Europe could become a suddenly unpredictable Turkey, a potential transmission-belt to Europe of the sectarian violence currently escalating in the Middle East, perhaps reorienting its foreign policy vis a vis Russia or Iran. The Euro-Atlantic community should not turn its back on Turkey, for its own sake and for the sake of this region.

3. Last but not least, much depends also on how in the near future the US copes with the several challenges it now confronts near-by, in the Middle East. That region has become the test case of America's ability to act as the global leader. Failure to end the war in Iraq, to push forward a real peace between Israel and Palestine, to negotiate with Iran would again strain US-EU relations, to the detriment of the wellbeing of this region, and to the benefit of those who oppose the emergence of a still larger Euro-Atlantic community based on genuine reconciliation and the voluntary pooling of sovereignty.

These three dangers, alone or together, could damage the prospect for SEE Cooperation and even threaten international peace. This is why it is so essential that each of them be avoided. The key in each case is a more solid, more strategic, more systematic American-European cooperation. That has been lacking during the last five years. The trans-Atlantic divisions have become both geopolitical and personal. Fortunately, there is now a new European leadership – Merkel, Sarkozy, Brown – and before too long there will be a new US President. If Europe speaks clearly and with one voice, America will have to listen. And with America and Europe again working together, the mistakes of the recent past and the dangers lurking in the future can be avoided.

But make no mistake about it: the next 18 months will be critical both for the future of this region and for the character of international affairs more generally.