

EPP BACKS BALKAN PEACEMAKERS + EUROPE AS ITS OWN WORST ENEMY

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EPP leaders are to hold an **extraordinary summit in Sofia** on April 5 to support Bulgaria's efforts to prevent another murderous Balkan war, and to show solidarity with the reformist government led by the EPP party the Union of Democratic Forces; Bulgaria is to hold parliamentary elections on June 17 + The situation in the neighbouring Former Yugoslav Republic of **Macedonia (FYROM)** as seen from Sofia + **EU Summit in Stockholm**: the 15 took a clear position on FYROM, but France played a key part in blocking progress on liberalising EU economic system + In **Vienna**, the People's Party (OeVP) vote held up, but support for the Freedom Party (FPOe) fell in the third successive poll + The **German CDU** recovered its standing with a strong showing in *Landtag* elections.

ON THE BALKAN FRONT-LINE

In their first regular summit to be held outside the EU, EPP leaders meet in the Bulgarian capital on April 5. On the agenda will be how to ensure that Bulgaria is not left out in the cold after the next round of EU enlargement.

The ominous ethnic Albanian uprising in neighbouring FYROM has added weight to Bulgaria's role as a bulwark of peace and democracy in the Balkans - a factor acknowledged by Enlargement Commissioner Günther VERHEUGEN when he visited Sofia last week.



He paid tribute to the remarkable progress Bulgaria had made, and suggested membership negotiations could be completed by the end of 2004 - giving a starting date some time in 2006.



The EPP meeting too will inevitably be overshadowed by events in FYROM, the 2m-strong former Yugoslav republic which until now seemed immune to the ethnic hatreds which engulfed Bosnia and Kosovo. There are fears that a fifth Balkan war may be in the making, a war which could wreck all the progress made in the region since the collapse of Yugoslavia.

Ivan KOSTOV's UDF-led government, facing elections in June, is determined to do everything to prevent the unrest from spreading not just to the c. 30% of Macedonians who are ethnic Albanians, but across the region. "It is above all vital that there is solid support for the multi-ethnic government in FYROM," Assen AGOV, chairman of the Bulgarian parliament's foreign and integration policy committee, said this week.

Macedonian President Boris TRAJKOVSKI (*below left*) has also been invited to the Sofia summit. The government coalition of Christian Democrats, liberals, and the Democratic Party of the Albanians (DPA) has until now seemed a model of peaceful ethnic co-operation. But suppression of the uprising in and around Tetovo - FYROM's second city, and a centre of Albanian population - has led to frictions with, and within, the DPA.



All parties in the Macedonian parliament voted on March 17 to support the fight against extremists, but there is mounting pressure on moderate Albanians to take sides. "Nobody is negotiating or will negotiate with the terrorists," Prime Minister Ljubcho GEORGIEVSKI declared.

But his coalition partner, DPA leader Arben XHAFFERI, 52, (*right*), publicly rejected the idea that the fighters were anything but "normal citizens of FYROM" who had had enough of the oppression of ethnic Albanians. "Our reality is multi-ethnic, but the concept of the state now is ethno-centric," he says. "We can only change the reality by ethnic cleansing, so we must change the concept of the state."



EPP President Martens said Bulgaria's careful diplomacy with its neighbours - including constant contact with the Greek and Turkish governments - was crucial to defusing an extremely dangerous situation. It was one of many good reasons for ensuring the UDF won a second term. Martens also urged the 10 UDF deputies who have broken with the party to avoid splitting the vote.

Their move leaves the UDF and its partners with a narrow majority of only 124 seats in the 240-seat chamber. The newly-formed Parliamentary Group for Dialogue and Partnership (PGDP) was set up last week with the aim of leading a new election coalition "under the auspices" of the exiled King SIMEON II, who lives in Madrid. He was banished in 1946 at the age of nine, but has had all his property, and citizenship, restored to him by the Kostov government. It is still unclear what, if any, political ambitions he has.

THE VIEW FROM SOFIA

Bulgarian Prime Minister Kostov (*right*) regards political destabilisation as a more potent danger for FYROM than large-scale conflict. But fighting could escalate if former soldiers of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) entering western FYROM sent Albanian women and children out of the country "which is the KLA's normal practice," and started to seize territory. Kostov said the government had several interpretations of what was going on:



the conflict was "an ethnic veil" over Albanian organised crime

or it could be a matter of "importing" a conflict from Kosovo to reinforce the case for an independent Kosovo

or - as some statements from both Pristina and Tirana implied - it was an attempt to redraw the borders in the western Balkans

Sofia supported proposals by ethnic Albanian parties for a political solution: "This will isolate the terrorists and reassure ethnic Albanians that Macedonia is their country, too." The country should be left to cope with its internal conflict on its own. External help should be restricted to stopping guerillas and war materiel from crossing the border.

NATO and the European Union should provide information and technological support. But

it was "unacceptable to send tanks and other heavy armament against lightly armed detachments," he said. This could only make things worse. Bulgaria sharply rejected Russian leader Vladimir PUTIN's comparison - at last week's EU Summit in Stockholm - of FYROM with Chechnya, and offers of Russian intervention.

MISSING A GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY

If the EU Summit in Stockholm sent out the right signals on the Balkans, it failed dismally on almost every other score. "Our methods are disastrous, our ambitions are limited," French President Jacques CHIRAC (*right*) said tongue-in-cheek at Stockholm. "But we move ahead anyway." Is this true? A year ago, EU leaders decided to create the "most competitive and dynamic" knowledge-based economy on the planet within a decade.



Instead, at Stockholm:

France blocked Europe-wide electricity and gas deregulation.

Despite chronic and worsening delays at airports, the Gibraltar issue prevented agreement on a single air-traffic-control system.

No agreement on building the proposed Galileo satellite network: the EU remains dependent on US military technology.

No agreement on a common EU patent system.

In the middle of the worst agricultural epidemics in living memory, no agreement on where to base an EU food agency.

President Martens: "The EU is still expected to grow by almost 3% this year - well ahead of the 1.7 % forecast for the US and 1% for Japan. But the euro continues to slide. The reason is a banal failure of political will, and not something to joke about. We have a golden opportunity to pull ahead. It is being thrown away. To be European-minded is not to be romantic. It's practical politics."

IN BRIEF:



The Austrian People's Party (OeVP) increased its share of the vote in the Vienna elections to 16.4%. Big losers were the Freedom Party (FPÖ), whose election posters featured the candidate Helene PARTIK-PABLE, and such slogans as: "Foreigners - I understand the concerns of the Viennese!" She blamed the loss of 8% of the vote on an "unbelievably malicious campaign" against her party. It was the third successive election in which FPÖ support has fallen.

In the German *Landtag* elections, the CDU appeared to recover its standing after last year's party-finance scandal, and also benefited from the fall in support for the extreme right (a collapse paralleled in the collapse of the Front National in the recent French regional elections). In Baden-Württemberg, Christian Democratic for half a century, Prime Minister Erwin TEUFEL (*right*) added nearly 4% to his votes in 1996. "It's been a good evening for me," said party leader Angela MERKEL

