

Macedonian President Gligorov calls for Balkans reconstruction

by Mark Burdman

On June 8, Kiro Gligorov, the President of Macedonia, delivered a one-hour speech at the University of Bonn in Germany, at an event sponsored by the Bonn-based European Center for Integration Studies. His speech was delivered at a time when Macedonia is undergoing a giant crisis, because of the hundreds of thousands of Kosovar refugees now on its soil. He was in Bonn just before the June 10 meeting convened in Cologne to discuss an international aid and reconstruction effort for the Balkans, under the auspices of the European Union; Germany currently occupies the presidency of the EU.

Gligorov issued an appeal for Balkans reconstruction, to be implemented by what he called the “creation of a solid organization that can finance projects.” He affirmed that his country, and the Balkans more generally, require “development, an economic upswing, and infrastructure links,” as part of a “struggle for the future” in the region, to leave behind “the gruesome reality of war” that the Balkans region has seen. To those who consider the Balkans region to be a hopeless area of conflict and instability, Gligorov stressed that, more than 50 years ago, Europe as a whole was in a similar condition, but has progressed greatly since then, thanks to “the dreams and vision of the great European leaders,” Konrad Adenauer, Charles de Gaulle, Alcide de Gaspari, and Winston Churchill. Gligorov stressed: “We must create a Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals.”

The theme of his speech was “The Commitment of the Republic of Macedonia toward Membership in the European Union and NATO.” Gligorov made clear his desire for closer Macedonian relations with, and/or integration into both organizations. Early in his speech, he said that a key task was to “overcome the bureaucratic rules of the European Administration.” Several times, he welcomed the creation of a “Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe” by the European Union, the details of which are being thrashed out in Cologne and in other locations. But he also expressed reservations, because the Stability Pact lumps “the Western Balkans” together into one category. This includes Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Yugoslavia, Macedonia, and Albania—countries that, in various ways, have been in conflict with one another. He also stressed that there was considerable room for interpretation,

as the pact has “not been written down, and there are various versions of it.”

Gligorov repeatedly stressed Macedonia’s commitment to realizing “European standards,” including democratization, human rights, minority rights, open borders, free flow of peoples, and so on.

The Macedonian economy

The Macedonian President drew attention to the plight of the economy, which is 80% dependent on exports to even minimally survive. He criticized the approach of traditional “aid donors” to solving problems, noting that Macedonia had not had good experience with “donor conferences.” The country has been badly hit by United Nations sanctions against former Yugoslavia, by other embargoes in the Balkans, by factory closings in the country, and so forth. “Yet,” he noted, “we have not been compensated with one dollar. A United Nations team visited our country, and said there was \$3.8 billion in damage, but that the UN had no money. An international organization cannot think like that.”

Positively resolving the economic plight of Macedonia and the Balkans is all the more urgent, because the potential for further conflict and unrest is vast. Gligorov warned that there are various possible scenarios for conflict that would drag Macedonia in. He stressed that there are no defined borders between Yugoslavia and Macedonia. Yugoslavia still has border designs, and with the Kosovo Liberation Army existing now in Macedonia, the Yugoslav army could move into Macedonia to stop their activity.

He claimed that the presence of NATO was the main “deterrence” for this or other scenarios to unfold in Macedonia. He said that his country “doubtless wants to become a member of NATO.” There are still “designs” by certain countries on Macedonia, “all you have to do is read documents put out by the Serb, Bulgarian, and Albanian Academy of Sciences,” he said.

Using irony, Gligorov contrasted the attitudes of certain countries which are very committed to vast military action in the Balkans, but suddenly become uncooperative when it comes to taking in refugees from the war. He praised German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who agreed, after one discussion, that Germany would take in 20,000 refugees, and would organize a special meeting to rally Europe to take in 100,000 refugees in total. Five countries have followed Germany’s lead to some degree, but the others have “not helped,” he said, only agreeing to a “symbolic” haven for a few hundred refugees. While not naming names, certainly Britain and France are exemplary of that “paradoxical” (as he called it) attitude of putting forth considerable resources to fight a war and virtually no resources to help with refugees.

Gligorov stressed that Macedonia now had 330,000 refugees, 17% of its total population. If Germany were to take in a similar proportion of refugees compared to total population, that would add up to 16 million people.