

Not Ready for Prime Time

by Borut Grgic

In many respects, the Constitutional crisis that is currently buffeting the European Union (EU) is greatly overblown. Even if the vaunted Constitution championed by French President Jacques Chirac is in fact dead, the 2002 Treaty of Nice—formally codifying the idea of a “European community”—ensures that the EU can continue to function and even expand its ranks by an additional three countries. However, this crisis, like every other, opens the door for a bit of introspection.

At its core, Europe’s problem is mostly external. The formal rejection of the Constitution by French and Dutch voters this spring amounts to a serious setback for a common European security and defense policy, and probably for EU enlargement as well. Many rightly doubt that, in the wake of the crisis, Europe will find the stomach to overcome the inertia generated by skeptics of enlargement and by the weak governments of the three biggest “Euro Zone” economies—France, Germany, and Italy.

The foreign policy implications of this malaise are profound. The EU already has a rather spotty track record on international affairs and, without the new, solidified structures outlined by the Constitution, the cohesion and coherence of European foreign policy is not likely to improve.

Moreover, the first serious test of just how well a chastened EU will be able to handle its foreign policy portfolio in the future is right around the corner. As of this writing, the United States is pushing for final negotiations over the political status of the Balkan enclave of Kosovo to commence as early as the fall of 2005 (and ending sometime in 2006). This timeline is probably realistic; at this point, the only thing worse than doing something on Kosovo is to do nothing. Kosovars are growing restless about their ambiguous political status, and have begun to turn away from reforms toward rather unconstructive nationalist rhetoric. At the same time, it is becoming clear that prolonged inaction on Kosovo’s status is a boon to anti-reform elements in Belgrade, allowing them to retain their share of power.

Washington, meanwhile, has made clear that it is eager to transfer responsibility for the Balkans to the Europeans. Arguably, this strategy makes sense; fifteen years after the collapse of Yugoslavia, and ten years after the signing of the Dayton Accords, it is becoming increasingly difficult to justify why the U.S. is still enmeshed in the region. Moreover, with American resources increasingly stretched as a result of the War on Terror and Iraq, Washington’s Balkan engagement has become more and more costly.

As is becoming clear, however, this is a bad time to hand Europe the reins. Indeed, the promise of a brighter EU future is already becoming a tougher sell in the region. Without the ability to provide clear-cut guarantees on membership, it is increasingly difficult to envision how the EU can take the lead in the upcoming



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negotiations over Kosovo's future status, particularly when a great deal of heavy political lifting will be necessary in order to secure a durable deal. For reformers in Belgrade, the prospect of EU membership—once an incentive for making serious political concessions—has lost much of its luster. Kosovo's radicals, meanwhile, are eager to call Europe's bluff.

In light of these new realities, the Bush administration will find itself forced to remain at the center of the looming discussions over Kosovo's ultimate disposition. Current recommendations emanating from Washington—of a European negotiator and a strictly supporting role for the U.S. (and perhaps Russia)—neglect to account for the EU's declining political stock in the Balkans, not to mention regional desires for continued American engagement.

Ultimately, the only way out of the Balkans for the United States is to continue to provide both strategic vision and tactical pressure. President Bush would do well to appoint an official envoy to lead the Kosovo status talks and help keep the process on track, rather than following the lead of an increasingly fractured Europe.

Recent history tells us that success in the Balkans has always been directly linked to America's will to lead. When it comes to Kosovo's final status, the situation is no different. 