

Armenian election focuses on economy, Nagorno-Karabakh



Armenians vote for a new president today amid fears that Kosovo's declaration of independence could increase tensions in breakaway regions across the former Soviet Union. The election could determine how far Armenia is willing to go to avoid renewed conflict with energy-rich Azerbaijan -- which has been beefing up its military in recent years with its oil wealth -- over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh.

The struggle over the breakaway region of Azerbaijan is one of several so-called "frozen conflicts" -- including the Trans-Dniester region of Moldova, and South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia -- that could heat up after the declaration of independence by Serbia's breakaway province of Kosovo, Nagorno-Karabakh and

several surrounding areas in Azerbaijan have been controlled by ethnic Armenian separatists since a 1994 cease-fire ended six years of full-scale war.

Some 30,000 people were killed and more than 1 million driven from their homes in the fighting. There are still sporadic clashes along Nagorno-Karabakh's borders. The Armenian government says Nagorno-Karabakh should be recognized as a sovereign state, while Azerbaijan says it will never cede its territory. The Feb. 19 election pits Armenia's powerful prime minister, Serge Sarkisyan, 53, against former President Levon Ter-Petrosian, 63, who led the country through the first painful years of independence from the Soviet Union and the devastating war over Nagorno-Karabakh.

The stern Sarkisyan, groomed by outgoing President Robert Kocharian as his preferred successor, is expected to win, benefiting from the country's relatively strong economy. Many voters here associate Ter-Petrosian with the economic collapse of the 1990s. The two candidates differ sharply in their approach to Nagorno-Karabakh.

Sarkisyan, a native of the region and a decorated war hero, appears less flexible than Ter-Petrosian, who was forced to resign in 1998 after advocating concessions and has hinted that he could seek a compromise.

"My position is to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as soon as possible -- having the political will to resolve this conflict as soon as possible," Ter-Petrosian told a news conference Sunday. **Yerevan AP**

The EU's Kosovo catalyst

OPINION
By Wolfgang Petritsch*
TODAY'S ZAMAN

Kosovo's declaration of independence has put stability in the Western Balkans back on Europe's agenda. Unless the European Union acts quickly, the whole region could slide backwards, with dire social, economic and security consequences. The EU needs a comprehensive regional approach, focusing on the remaining steps that would lead each country toward membership.

The Western Balkans -- a term used only since 1999 -- comprises Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia (FYROM), Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo, with a combined population of roughly 22 million. Economic developments in the region are promising, with almost all its economies posting high growth, fueled by increasing industrial output and exports. Inward investment is steadily rising, as business seems to believe that the remaining political and security challenges -- the possible negative effects of post-independence Kosovo and Bosnia's malaise -- will be overcome sooner rather than later.

Much work has already been done to re-establish and improve regional relations. The EU-led Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe has since 1999 successfully stimulated regional cross-border cooperation for the first time since the breakdown of Yugoslavia. Energy, transport infrastructure -- roads, railways and waterways -- and crime prevention have all benefited. The Stability Pact has now been transferred to local control, re-emerging as the Sarajevo-based Regional Cooperation Council, ready to develop regional and multilateral standards for its members.

The recently revived Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) is meant to be the main regional engine for trade and business generally, and will adhere both to World Trade Organization (WTO) rules and the parties' obligations towards the EU. Similarly, the South-East European Cooperation Process is one of the relatively new regional organizations that contribute to candidate and potential candidate countries' preparations for EU membership, providing the first genuine region-wide policy forum where both EU members and candidates participate.

But these bodies must not be seen as substitutes for the far more comprehensive accession process, which only the EU itself can initiate. And yet, despite the region's favorable prospects and relatively small size, the union has been slow in doing so.

Certainly, the pace of candidate countries' approach to the union depends on the speed of their reforms. And Europe, with the vital support of the United States, worked hard to stop the carnage of the 1990s and subsequently to help rebuild the Balkan countries. But the EU has so far failed to prepare the Western Balkans for accession, in line with its leaders' promise at their Thessaloniki summit in 2003 to admit the Western Balkan states when they have met the union's standards.

That promise was not a matter of charity; the Balkans would add value to the EU. To be sure, the EU's lengthy internal crisis over the proposed constitution was a major distraction and damaged the union's reputation in the Balkans. Let us hope that the new Reform Treaty will help to reassure the critics and pave the way for a new -- and more robust -- phase of integration.

If not, one would have to ask what happened to the European spirit of the 1970s and 1980s, when countries such as Greece, Portugal and Spain, which had just emerged from dictatorship and civil unrest, were welcomed into the European community of democratic states. Political decisions taken then were far more risky than those at hand in the Balkans, and the Greek and Iberian success stories demonstrate the wisdom of the courageous decisions taken at that time.

What about today? The most recent EU members, Bulgaria and Romania, are both in the Balkans and both are examples of countries with special needs. While the EU at first took their accession negotiations a bit too casually, it subsequently decided to continue monitoring the two countries even after accession in order to ensure that they develop the effective administrative and judicial systems that are an obligation of membership.

The EU must learn from this experience to develop an accession strategy for the Western Balkans, whose development has been delayed by a complex post-conflict transition process. Their special needs should be taken into account in any new EU approach, giving them hope while mitigating the fallout from Kosovo.

It is in Europe's interest as much as it is in the interest of the region to accelerate the integration process. A reinvented accession process would contribute to the EU's consolidation, both territorially and politically, while strengthening its role in its wider neighborhood -- the Mediterranean, the Middle East and around the Black Sea.

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Clinton pitches economic plan while Obama courts Edwards

Hillary Rodham Clinton, struggling for the renewed momentum a win in today's Wisconsin primary would provide, reached out to working class families with a detailed economic plan while rival Barack Obama courted John Edwards in a bid to widen his lead in a tight Democratic presidential nominating race.

In the Republican race, presumptive nominee John McCain on Monday secured the endorsement of former President George H.W. Bush, another step in the veteran senator's fight to unite the party in the face of wary conservatives who have viewed his candidacy with skepticism. Bush, speaking with McCain at his side in Texas on Monday, said the former Vietnam prisoner-of-war has "character forged in the crucible of war," and was best prepared to lead the nation in the future. The former president, the patriarch of the Bush family, said the US does not have "the luxury of taking a pass" on its responsibilities in an increasingly complex world.

Clinton has been battling to halt Obama's streak of eight wins, particularly if she hopes for any traction going into the bigger state contests in Texas and Ohio on March 4 that are key to her push to be the US's first female president. Obama is trying to become the country's first black president.

The 13-page blueprint for fixing the economy, released by her campaign on Monday, details the former first lady's plans to achieve universal health care, address the home foreclosure crisis and develop jobs for the middle class. These are core issues now for a majority of Americans amid fears of a recession, and are likely to resonate well in states like Wisconsin and Ohio with agricultural or industrial economies hit hard by job losses and the subprime mortgage and credit crunch.

Polls show a tight race in Wisconsin, even as Clinton's advisers have publicly downplayed their expectation for the state. Wisconsin offer the winner a hefty 92 delegates while Obama's native Hawaii, which holds its caucuses also today, offers 20. Although reporters normally travel everywhere with Obama, he left them behind Sunday to fly to North Carolina in secret from his hometown of Chicago to meet with Edwards. His campaign confirmed the meeting, but would not comment on the possibility of an endorsement.

Obama told Milwaukee television channel WITI-TV on Sunday the meeting was "to talk about how we can move the party in a direction that focuses on middle-class issues -- relieving poverty, reducing the influence of special interests in Washington." Edwards dropped out of the Democratic race after failing to win any of the earlier state races. Both Democratic candidates are actively seeking his support because of his appeal to working-class Democrats who are heavily represented in Ohio's primary and Pennsylvania's April 22 contest.

Obama, who usurped Clinton as the leader by a slender margin last week, was campaigning Monday in Wisconsin, where he has been for most of the week. Clinton arrived in Wisconsin on Saturday after spending most of the week campaigning in Ohio and Texas.

The former first lady had scaled back plans to campaign in Wisconsin, but will now try to squeeze in some stops on Monday that she was forced to cancel over the weekend because of a snowstorm. **Milwaukee AP**



Democratic presidential hopefuls, Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, right, and Sen. Barack Obama.



KOSOVO TAKES A BIG LEAP OF FAITH

TRACY WILKINSON PRISTINA

In a move that inflamed tensions in this volatile region, the ethnic Albanian government of Kosovo on Sunday proclaimed the province independent from Serbia, forming a new and troubled country in Europe. The United States, biggest sponsor of independence for Kosovo, is expected to recognize the new state quickly, as will some European nations. But Russia is adamantly opposed, along with Serbia, and the United Nations is unlikely to voice support for Kosovo's unilateral action, setting up a thorny dispute reminiscent of the Cold War.

The declaration of independence was met by wild celebrations in Kosovo, violent protests in Serbia and a hastily called meeting of the

UN Security Council, which failed to take any action. The secession of Kosovo marks the latest and presumably final chapter in the blood-soaked dissolution of what was once Yugoslavia. Kosovo joins five former republics that, beginning in 1991 with Slovenia, have withdrawn from Belgrade's reign and become sovereign states, often through devastating warfare. Here in the frigid, snow-dusted streets of Pristina, Kosovo's capital, jubilant ethnic Albanians celebrated what for them was the fulfillment of a lifelong dream. All day long and into the night, they marched shoulder to shoulder down Mother Teresa Boulevard, many wrapped in the red-and-black flag of neighboring Albania as fireworks exploded across the sky. "This is a great day, the best day in our lives," gushed Elmi Berisha, 37, a real estate

broker. "Happy independence!" friends and acquaintances called out to one another amid hugs and kisses. Cars, their horns blaring, choked downtown Pristina; families danced; nationalist songs filled the air; and people dined endlessly in bars and restaurants offering free Independence Day food and drink. US flags were a common sight, and a few revelers fired guns in celebration. Others chanted the name of the guerrilla army that fought Serbs in the last decade to gain independence for the province, which is 90 percent ethnic Albanian. In the Serbian capital, Belgrade, small but determined gangs attacked the US Embassy with chunks of concrete, torched garbage dumpsters, trashed cars and fought with police in frustrated anger over Kosovo's declaration. **Los Angeles Times 2008**

World lines up to recognize independence of Kosovo

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"The Kosovars are now independent. It's something I've advocated along with my government," Bush said in a live interview aired on NBC television from Arusha, Tanzania. The smooth response Thaci had expected from the EU and the United States was tripped up earlier, when EU member Spain broke ranks to say "no." But the first word from Brussels had been a disappointment for Kosovo, though a ray of relief for Serbia. "The government of Spain will not recognize the unilateral act proclaimed yesterday by the assembly of Kosovo," Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos told reporters. "We will not recognize because we consider ... this does not respect international

law," said the minister, whose country is grappling with separatist movements of its own. Greek Cyprus, Greece, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania have indicated they

too are not keen to recognize Kosovo. Afghanistan officially greeted the new Balkan state, but Vietnam and Azerbaijan said they would not recognize it. **Pristina Reuters**

Turkey recognizes Kosovo

Turkey has decided to recognize Kosovo as an independent state, Foreign Minister Ali Babacan said on Monday, a day after the breakaway majority Albanian province declared its independence from Serbia. Turkey's recognition is symbolically important because Ottoman Turks ruled the Balkans, including Serbia and Kosovo, for centuries. "The Republic of Turkey ... has decided to recognize the independence of the Republic of Kosovo," Babacan said. Turkey seeks lasting peace and stability in the Balkan region, he said, adding that Ankara hopes to continue improving its relations with Serbia. **Ankara Today's Zaman**

PHOTO: SELAHATTIN SEVI