

A Journalist in Post-Communist Europe

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Sylvia Poggioli

Sylvia Poggioli was born in Providence, Rhode Island, the daughter of Italian anti-fascists who fled Italy in the Mussolini era. She grew up in Cambridge, Massachusetts and has a B.A. degree in Romance languages and literatures from Harvard. She studied at Rome University on a Fulbright Scholarship.

She was actively involved with women's film and theater groups, and worked at the Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto, Italy.

She began her journalism career in Rome with the English language service of the Ansa news agency in Italy, where she was an editor from 1971 to 1986.

Poggioli in 1982 began reporting for National Public Radio, where she has gained fame and an enthusiastic listening audience as a result of her reports from many European countries, and for her courageous and insightful coverage of the war in Bosnia.

In early 1991, she helped supplement

NPR's Gulf War coverage, reporting from London on the European reaction to events surrounding the war. That NPR team won the Dupont-Columbia Award.

In 1993, she was awarded the Edward Weintal Prize for diplomatic reporting and the George Foster Peabody Award, both for her coverage of the war in Bosnia.

In 1994, Ms. Poggioli received the National Women's Political Caucus/Radcliffe College Award for her broadcast entitled "War in Bosnia: Women's Bodies Used as Battlefields," and the Excellence in Media Silver Angel Award for the piece entitled "Religious Tour of Sarajevo." She was also elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

She spent the 1990 academic year as a research fellow at Harvard University's Center for Press, Politics, and Public Policy at the Kennedy School of Government.

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A Journalist in Post-Communist Europe

By Sylvia Poggioli

The reason I chose as the title of my talk tonight, "A Journalist in Post-Communist Europe," is that by a series of coincidences I found myself thrown into the turmoil that began in Europe in the fall of 1989.

I was in Berlin in the middle of the euphoria after the Wall fell and I spent many nights in a Prague theater where Vaclav Havel directed "The Velvet Revolution." But I was also in Bosnia in the middle of bombings and ethnic cleansing. I also spent a lot of time in Geneva and in Brussels, where the Western community showed its impotence and disarray.

I've followed many of the developments from the early days of the triumphant celebration over the end of communism to the outbreak of the most violent European conflict since the end of the Second World War.

And I would like to share with you some of my experiences and thoughts about these developments and the consequences of some of the misperceptions about these events on the part of Western leaders.

The Cold War had accustomed generations of policy-makers and reporters to analyze world events almost exclusively in terms of the bi-polar confrontation where good and evil were easily defined and identified. This mind-set often proved unsuitable to try to make sense of the disorder created by the collapse of communism.

Indeed, with the end of the Cold War a whole set of principles and analyses had become useless and, as reporters, we had to confront new problems that most of us had never explored before, such as ethnic self-assertion, tribalism, religious conflicts and the rights and limits to self-determination.

I would like to begin with an episode that occurred four years ago. On June 25, 1991 — the day the Republics of Slovenia and Croatia declared their independence from Yugoslavia — I left Ljubljana to visit what was to be the new international border between the two new states.

Workmen were hammering markers into the ground and assembling a prefabricated building that was to serve as the new customs office. It was already noon, but no flag had been hoisted on the flagpole because it wasn't yet ready.

The reason it wasn't ready was because the Slovenian Parliament had debated long into the night whether the new flag should include some of the symbols of the old Republican flag that had emerged from the partisan struggle against Nazism.

At the border, several people were milling around. They were curious but also perplexed, wondering what would happen to friends and relatives who lived beyond a nearby field but who had suddenly become foreigners, citizens of another country.

Meanwhile, the new border guards were hard at work. They stopped cars, inspected baggage trunks, and asked for passports.

One guard proudly told me that earlier he had stopped and sent back to Croatia a Tunisian citizen who — the guard said — had been "trying to get into Europe."

Several months later, I returned to the border area and a heated dispute was under way in a Slovenian village. The local parish priest, a Croatian, had continued to recite mass in Croatian. The Slovenian faithful had deserted the church in large numbers and the Vatican appeared unable to resolve the conflict in the

parish.

Slovenes have a language of their own, but in the old Yugoslavia nearly all of them knew the dominant language — what was once known as Serbo-Croat.

Slovenes near the border could still watch neighboring Croatian TV but they were beginning to have trouble understanding what was being said because Croatian authorities had ordered the adoption of long-forgotten words — many dating from the Middle Ages.

It was called “novy yazik” — the new language — a linguistic cleansing effort to purge the language of all foreign influence, particularly Serbian.

In a few short months, nearly all signs of a centuries-old coexistence in the border area had disappeared.

Later, as Yugoslavia violently disintegrated, I covered the ravages of war and mass rapes of Muslim women, I saw concentration camps and witnessed ethnic cleansing.

But that day in June 1991 left a very strong impression on me: The calm atmosphere contrasted with what I felt was a very dramatic event. New markers were being set up to separate people — often relatives — to separate ideas and destinies, and a Tunisian was not allowed entry into Slovenia in defense of European security.

The rhetoric of membership in the Club of Europe was being used to legitimize ethnic separation.

I later saw that day as a symbol of the political and cultural confusion and contradictions left by the end of the Cold War. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 had been celebrated as the triumph of liberal thought, as the victory of the need for freedom and civil and political rights. Nationalism had appeared to be a demon of the past, a relic of feudalism.

But, five years later, we see that the post-Cold War period has brought about a flourishing of new nation-states, a new political geography that has even revived old religious dividing lines — the line between Western and Eastern Christendom and between Christendom and Islam.

Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union and even Russia have disintegrated or splintered and the list of new nation-states may yet get longer.

Scholars and experts have offered different explanations. Some say that the decades of communism had frozen old ethnic tensions and nationalist aspirations which have now re-emerged intact, that ancestral and tribal hatreds have been re-awakened.

Others interpret the new nationalism as a step forward toward a sense of identity and modernity, as a last stage in the process of nation-state building, a catching-up with Western Europe by creating political borders that coincide with ethnic borders.

It is still hard to say which side is right. The real test will be in the area of minority rights, of which I will speak later. What I want to stress now are two things. First, strong ethnic and nationalistic pressures — together with the disappearance of the Cold War enemy — have provoked crises in all the international institutions that developed during the Cold War.

Second, nearly all those East and Central European intellectuals who had helped topple communism and had come to power promoting a “return to Europe” — in the name of civic and individual rights (and not in the name of the rights of the nation) — have disappeared from the political scene.

To understand the implications of the new political debate in Western and Eastern Europe it's useful to look back at some of the key events of the last few years.

I will begin with the disintegration of Yugoslavia.

An important date is December 16, 1991. On that day, then-German Foreign Minister Hans Dietrich Genscher announced that Germany would recognize the independence of Croatia and Slovenia two days later, breaking ranks with the position held up to then by the European partners.

War had been raging in Croatia for six months. The town of Vukovar had fallen after a three-month-long Serbian siege, and Croatian Serbs, assisted by the Serb-dominated Yugoslav

Army, had won control of about one-third of Croatia. Throughout the previous summer, Germany had been pressing for recognition but had agreed to the principle of a “joint European decision.”

Given the reticence of the main actors, it is difficult to reconstruct exactly what happened, what kind of debate took place among the European leaders during those months.

But some facts have emerged. France and Britain and to a lesser degree Italy were reluctant to recognize the two former Yugoslav republics and were seeking a negotiated solution to the war. This was also the position of the United States.

Lord Carrington, former British foreign minister and former NATO secretary general, had been entrusted by the European community with the task of drawing up a constitutional framework that would gather the six Yugoslav republics in a loose confederation — and whose acceptance by all the parties was a condition for recognition.

In September, another European community committee, headed by former French Justice Minister Robert Badinter, had set a list of criteria whose application was considered a vital condition for recognition. These included respect of minority rights. A later report by the Badinter committee found that Croatia — among other republics — had not met that criterion.

But German pressure for recognition continued to grow.

Germany asserted that since its right to self-determination had been granted, such a right could not be denied to others, and it claimed that only recognition could bring an end to the fighting.

A European diplomat who took part in the negotiations told me that Germany’s strongest ally during that period was the Vatican, which, through its diplomatic envoys, mobilized ruling Catholic parties in Italy, Germany and Austria to rally for recognition of Catholic Croatia and Slovenia.

Today, it is broadly agreed that the hasty recognition of the two new states was a major mistake that accelerated the violent unraveling of

the Yugoslav federation. The international community yielded its most important leverage and the war soon spread to Bosnia.

The violence of the fighting and the reciprocal cruelty led many politicians to believe that the old ethnic hatreds of the region made war inevitable.

This question about the inevitability of war still haunts me as I think back over the many episodes and people I encountered over the last seven years since I first began covering the Balkans.

And all I’ve come up with is many conflicting answers.

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The old Yugoslavia had a long history of foreign domination and internal ethnic rivalries. During the Second World War at least one million people died — and it is believed most were Yugoslavs killed by Yugoslavs in the civil war.

After the war, Tito ordered mass transfers of population, uprooting hundreds of thousands of people and thereby creating, in some communities, new ethnic disputes.

For 45 years all nationalistic impulses were severely repressed. Even old folk songs were banned.

Nevertheless, over the years, multi-ethnic coexistence became a fact of life and a high degree of tolerance developed, particularly in urban areas.

And 13 percent of Yugoslav marriages were mixed.

When Tito was alive, he wielded total power through his strong personal charisma.

But his death in 1981 left an immense institutional vacuum. For his successors, he had created an intricate system of regional controls — including the power of veto — that deprived the central federal government of any effective power.

After Tito, the leaders of the republics, who had been powerless for decades, filled the political vacuum — with devastating economic and political consequences.

The republics began printing the federal currency in their own territory without informing

the Central Bank, triggering a spiral of hyperinflation. The republics also began borrowing abroad without informing each other or the federal government.

As republican authorities began to assert themselves and local interests began to prevail, even transport links broke down. Train trips between republics underwent long delays because local locomotives had to be installed and new crews took over at each republican border.

The architects of these newly assertive regional policies were the same bureaucrats of the Communist regime.

In a few short years, the old *nomenklatura* simply changed ideological hats in order to keep its power intact and to avoid political and economic reforms.

The result was a jump from communism to nationalism, sidestepping the notion of democracy.

The most powerful tool of this strategy was the media, which were controlled by the republican governments.

But in order to promote nationalistic ideas, the authorities had to fire hundreds of TV journalists who still believed in the concept of a multi-ethnic Yugoslav federation.

They were replaced with loyal propagandists — often poorly educated people from rural areas where old ethnic animosities were still latent.

This period was the beginning of what has been called the extreme emotionalization of public life in Yugoslavia through vicious manipulation, propaganda and outright lies in the Serbian and Croatian media.

Once war broke out, a famous writer, Philip David, said “Before anyone was killed by bullets, people were killed by words.”

I remember that, in early 1991, the Serbian government-controlled television began broadcasting old war documentaries depicting the atrocities the Yugoslavs had inflicted on each other during World War II and which had been banned during the decades of the Tito regime.

By selecting only excerpts and adding a new narration, Serbian emotions were inflamed by descriptions of war crimes committed by Croats

against Serbs.

The Croatian media responded in kind. And during the war, Croatian and Serbian TV often showed the same pictures of decapitated bodies — Zagreb claiming the victims were Croats, Belgrade saying they were Serbs.

This stage-managed emotionalization left a large sector of Yugoslav society marginalized during that tormented period. In particular, urban professionals and skilled workers — members of what could be called the middle class. Many of them began to emigrate abroad in the months leading up to the outbreak of war in June 1991.

Three years later, perhaps as many as half a million people had fled from Belgrade alone.

There have been similar exoduses from Sarajevo and Zagreb.

Each time I went to Belgrade, there were fewer and fewer young people in the cafes and restaurants. I was told many had gone abroad to escape the war. And there were long lines of people hoping to get visas at foreign embassies — even at the Albanian embassy.

The flight of the urban middle class — that sector of society that could have acted as a counterpoint to the nationalistic frenzy — has given the Yugoslav conflict a particular connotation.

It has been described as a war of the mountain against the city, of a rural mentality against urban sophistication. This can best be seen in the savage destruction of cities — the three-month-long siege of Vukovar, now leveled to the ground, the bombardment of the Renaissance jewel Dubrovnik, the three-year-and continuing siege of Sarajevo — for centuries the symbol of ethnic tolerance and coexistence among four religious faiths.

All these developments — the opportunistic passage from communism to nationalism, media manipulation and the stifling of the middle class — were to a large degree underestimated — if not ignored — by the international community.

I remember that in the late '80s, when Serbia's Communist apparatchik Slobodan Milosevic — the major culprit in the

disintegration of Yugoslavia — began to implement his greater Serbia strategy by exploiting and inflating Serbian insecurity over Kosovo, the weekly *The Economist* was hailing him as the new Tito. And Lawrence Eagleburger, a former American ambassador to Belgrade and later secretary of state, described Milosevic, his friend, favorably as the “Gorbachev of the Balkans.” Two years later, he branded him a war criminal.

At the same time, many commentators interpreted the independence drives of Croatia and Slovenia as motivated purely by democratic aspirations.

The importance of another event leading up to the outbreak of war was also seriously underestimated and its full impact is only now beginning to be understood.

I’m referring to at least one not very secret meeting between Croatian President Franjo Tudjman and Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic where they agreed to carve up Bosnia between them.

And even after the war had broken out in 1991, while Tudjman was urging recognition of Croatia, he said publicly several times that the solution to the Yugoslav conflict was the partitioning of Bosnia between Serbia and Croatia.

And in 1992, after war had broken out in Bosnia, Tudjman told reporters that the western community would never allow the creation of what he called a large Muslim state in the heart of Europe.

The Croatian president insisted that only a landlocked Muslim statelet in Central Bosnia was permissible — preferably under Croatian protection.

That description is not very dissimilar to what is developing now under the U.S.-brokered Muslim-Croat federation in Bosnia.

The international media also paid little attention to developments in 1990 in the mountainous Krajina region of Croatia, the majority of whose inhabitants were rural Serbs. After Tudjman’s election victory that year, street signs in the Serbs’ Cyrillic were replaced with the Croats’ Roman alphabet and a series of bombings

destroyed monuments of the World War II partisan struggle, particularly dear to the Serbs.

And many Serbs were fired from state jobs, particularly the police force, where they were represented in large numbers.

Serbs’ collective memory of brutal World War II atrocities were further re-awakened by the Croatian government’s adoption of a flag that recalled that of the Nazi puppet state of the Ustasas.

Once it was installed, the Tudjman government was unwilling to make concessions to the cultural and political rights of Croatia’s 12 percent minority Serb population.

These were among the original causes of the rebellion of the Krajina Serbs who feared loss of their cultural identity in nationalist Croatia.

This was all Milosevic was waiting for and he soon began to supply the Krajina Serbs with large quantities of weapons. This was stage two of Operation Greater Serbia.

A year and a half later, in December 1991 — seven months into the war and when the Europeans were debating the recognition issue — the picture on the ground was very clear: Two rival nationalisms — one with the backing of the Yugoslav army — were fighting each other; their two leaders were mirror images of each other, in a battle for territory. But they were also secretly united in their goal of carving up Bosnia.

It was therefore clear to the presidents of the two weakest republics of Yugoslavia — Alija Izetbegovic of Bosnia and Kiro Gligorov of Macedonia — that recognition of Croatia would endanger their republics.

For months before the Croatian war broke out, Izetbegovic and Gligorov had been in the forefront in promoting a loose confederation of the republics.

For this reason, Izetbegovic — who once said that choosing between Milosevic and Tudjman was like choosing between leukemia and a brain tumor — traveled to Bonn to try to convince Foreign Minister Genscher not to recognize Croatia.

Izetbegovic was not alone. The anti-recognition position was shared by the

ambassadors to Yugoslavia of all the European community countries. One of these ambassadors later told me that the entire Western diplomatic corps was united on this issue, including the German Ambassador Hans Jörg Eiff.

I was told about a stormy EC foreign ministers meeting in Venice when Eiff forcefully — and undiplomatically — upheld this position before his boss, Hans Dietrich Genscher.

But several other factors that had nothing to do with the Yugoslav conflict would prevail.

European leaders had no intention of allowing war in the Balkans to upset negotiations between them over what came to be known as the Maastricht Agreement on Economic and Monetary Union.

There was widespread concern among the EC members that the European Union would be dominated by a reunified Germany. France was the most alarmed and wanted to tie Germany down with as many conditions as possible, including virtually giving up sovereignty over the mighty deutschemark, the pride of the nation. And Britain was more concerned about securing broad concessions in the agreement to appease Euro-skeptics at home.

When the European leaders met in the Dutch town of Maastricht in early December 1991, the fate of Bosnia was at the bottom of the agenda. The recognition issue was dealt with briefly. Britain yielded first. France was more reluctant, but then it also gave in. They agreed to put off recognition to January 15. And they did not oppose Germany's insistence that it announce its recognition of Slovenian and Croatian independence before Christmas.

In its first foreign policy sortie after unification Germany revived the concept of self-determination, which had been frozen by the Cold War.

As I said earlier, Germany's official reason was that since its right to self-determination had been granted, such a right could not be denied to others.

The problem here is that in the complicated ethnic and religious mix of the Balkans, when one national group sets about creating its own state this will be perceived as a threat to other national

groups who also aspire to have a state of their own.

The Wilsonian concept of self-determination was one of the cornerstones of the Versailles Treaty that redrew European geography after the First World War and which gave birth to the first Yugoslavia.

The wisdom of this concept has often been questioned — particularly by Europeans — but it has remained intact in all international charters that have not resolved the inherent contradiction between self-determination and respect of territorial integrity in the form of internationally recognized borders.

And little attention has been given to the fundamental issue of minority rights. In the case of the former Yugoslavia, the Serbs of Croatia and Bosnia asked themselves: If the Slovenes and Croats have a right to live each in their own state, why don't we have the same right?

At the same time, within Serbia, the Albanians of Kosovo are making that same demand.

In each of these cases, what we have is one territory and two or more conflicting national dreams.

And in the world of international institutions, no one has yet answered the question, "What if any are the limits to self-determination?" and whether this principle must be upheld at all costs, even when its application will lead to bloodshed.



All these issues were being hotly debated in March 1992 when I traveled to Sarajevo. Following the Serb-Croat ceasefire negotiated by Cyrus Vance, UN peacekeepers were about to be deployed in the one-third of Croatia controlled by the Serbs. The tension had somewhat subsided there. By then, it had already shifted to Bosnia.

In the previous months, Bosnian Serbs had created several autonomous republics and hardline Croats had formed a few separate communities of their own.

The Bosnian Serbs had already walked out of the collective government and the Bosnian Parliament.

Numerous bloody skirmishes had already broken out in Sarajevo and elsewhere. I remember stepping on hundreds of spent cartridges while crossing the old Turkish bridge in Mostar — that five-hundred-year-old monument of Turkish architecture that the Croats blew up a year-and-a-half later.

I believe that at the time no one could have imagined that war would still be raging today, but it was clear to everyone in Bosnia that the situation was about to explode.

Bosnia Herzegovina had never been an independent state and its fate had always depended on outside empires and powers.

In its complicated ethnic and religious mix, Bosnia had often been called a mini-Yugoslavia. 41 percent Muslim, 33 percent Serb and 17 percent Croat.

In recognizing Croatia and Slovenia, the international community had by now decreed the big Yugoslav federation a thing of the past. Nevertheless the Western community believed that multi-ethnic Bosnia could exist as a viable state.

Western politicians paid little or no heed to proposals made by political analysts and experts in Sarajevo who were urging that Bosnia be made into an international protectorate in order to avert war.

Rather, the European community persuaded President Izetbegovic to hold a referendum on independence — guaranteeing recognition as long as at least 51 percent of the population voted in favor. The Bosnian Serbs boycotted the referendum, while Muslims and Croats voted overwhelmingly for independence.

On April 6, the European community and the United States announced their recognition of Bosnia. On that same day, Bosnian Serbs began their assault on Sarajevo and the war erupted.

But as we all know, the international support for an independent Bosnia which Izetbegovic was sure he had been promised never materialized.

From the outset, the Bosnian Serbs and their brethren in Serbia have been rightly denounced as by far the major culprits in instigating the war and carrying out atrocities. But a large portion of

political blame for the outbreak of war in Bosnia, in my opinion, lies with the international community and especially with Europe's irresponsible handling of the issue of recognition and its offhand treatment of the issue of minority rights in such a potentially explosive region.

Much has been written about the United States' policies — or lack of them — from Presidents Bush to Clinton, and I don't think I need to go into that here.

The major failure of the West was its inability to perceive the consequences of recognition and how the wars in Croatia and Bosnia would undermine the credibility of Western institutions.

European leaders dealt with the Yugoslav tragedy as something distant, involving backward tribes reverting to primitive feuds, perhaps unwittingly echoing Chamberlain when in 1938 he dismissed Czechoslovakia as a "far away country of which we know nothing."

I followed at length the international negotiating process over Bosnia. I remember negotiators in Geneva often voicing their frustration at the uneven and intermittent attention European leaders gave to Bosnia — an issue on which they would take a position or make a statement only when TV pictures of horrors there forced them to do so.

But if the international community thought Bosnia could be kept on the sidelines it seriously underestimated the radical effects the war would have not only on the political map of Europe but also on the stability of international institutions and on transatlantic relations.

One of the less-noticed side effects of the post-Communist period in Europe has occurred in the language of political analysts.

All of a sudden, we started hearing about "the great powers" and their "spheres of influence" — expressions that hark back to before World War I.

And today, the great powers of the so-called contact group trying to find a negotiated solution in Bosnia — the United States, Britain, France, Germany and Russia — are each accusing the others — behind the scenes — of promoting their own sphere of influence.

From the outset of the crisis, Britain and France have been alarmed about Germany's powerful influence in Catholic Croatia and fear the creation of a German sphere stretching from Eastern Europe to the Adriatic.

For its part, the United States has never hidden its suspicion that Britain and France have leaned too often towards the Serbs, their historical allies in the past.

London and Paris respond — not very privately — by accusing the United States of encouraging Bosnia's Muslims and thereby prolonging the war. They believe that the U.S. position is aimed at courting the favor of oil-rich Arab regimes in the Middle East by promoting Muslim ambitions in Europe.

And Russia's inclusion in the contact group has raised yet another fear — the possible development of a Slavic Christian Orthodox axis stretching from Moscow to Belgrade to Athens.

All these fears, misperceptions, and mutual suspicions among the big powers are the clearest sign of the absence of a united strategy on how to end the war. These divisions have grown steadily in the last two and a half years, leading the negotiating process to paralysis.

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At one time or another in the last four years every Western partnership has been shaken by recriminations over the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Between the United Nations and NATO, between the United States and Europe, between Germany, Britain and France.

Jonathan Eyal, director of studies at the Institute of Strategic Studies in London, says that "the Yugoslav conflict has revealed Western institutions as bungling, incompetent and powerless." He says, "we thought we could bark and the people in the Balkans would listen, but they defied us and found us naked."

With the collapse of communism and the demise of the common enemy, it was inevitable that the Atlantic alliance would have to redefine itself and that Europe would seek a new and more prominent identity on the world stage.

But the acrimonious debate over Bosnia has made it increasingly clear that Europe and the United States are beginning to have divergent

national security interests. And never has NATO been so divided. Europe's view of the crisis in Bosnia is very different from Washington's. The Europeans see it strictly as a civil war that can only be prolonged by U.S. demands for air strikes and a lifting of the arms embargo against the Bosnian government. In reality, Europe is less afraid of a greater Serbia than of a continuation of the war and its possible spill-over into other Balkan countries.

And Bosnia is not the only source of transatlantic friction.

The U.S. and its allies are differing more and more publicly over sanctions against Iraq and over the recent Turkish incursion against Kurds in Northern Iraq. Europe also feels that its proximity to Russia makes it more vulnerable to instability in that region and that U.S. policy toward Moscow does not necessarily coincide with European interests.

For the same reason, the Europeans do not share the U.S. position favoring a speedy expansion of NATO to include East-Central European countries.

The real challenge facing the alliance is how to revitalize NATO, identifying common interests and forging coherent transatlantic policies.

It will not be an easy task.

In my opinion, what has emerged from the Bosnian failure is not only different strategic interests but also different historical and cultural perspectives which like so many other things had been frozen during the Cold War period.

I think the most important of these are two very different attitudes toward nationalism.

The United States is a multicultural society formed in great part by people who left nationalism behind them.

Modern Europe, on the other hand, was formed on the concept of the nation-state. Ethnic cleansing and expulsions of national groups were not invented by the Serbs in Croatia and Bosnia.

They have a long history in Europe — and they occurred even after the Holocaust and the end of the Second World War, when Czechoslovakia forcibly expelled two-and-a-half million Germans from the Sudetenland, and Poland got rid of twice that many from its

territory.

While never proclaiming it publicly, even West Europeans believe that ethnic purity is the best guarantee for political stability.

To put it bluntly, in Europe, ethnic problems are often perceived as issues of national security.

I believe one of the causes of the international community's disarray over Bosnia lies in these conflicting perceptions about nationalism and ethnic conflicts.

Writing about the furies of nationalism in *The New York Review of Books* a year ago, Tony Judt said, "the one option that scholars and diplomats alike do not now have is to ignore the problem of nationalism or call it something else and pass by on the other side.... We need to learn not only how to understand nationalism but also when and by what criteria to encourage or curtail its aspirations."

And the issue of nationalism is not restricted only to the Balkans. It has re-emerged as well in many parts of East-Central Europe which has myriad potential ethnic, religious and territorial disputes. It is a region where political borders rarely coincide with ethno-linguistic borders. Many analysts believe that the violence of the Yugoslav conflict has acted as a deterrent to the explosion of other ethnic disputes — for example between Hungary and Romania over Transylvania, between Slovakia and Hungary, between Lithuania and Poland, and between Bulgaria and its Turkish minority.

But the potential for conflict is there, simmering under the surface. And in a part of the world seeped in historical grievances it takes very little to inflame nationalistic violence — even apparently trivial actions such as renaming a street or closing a minority school.

Nationalist aspirations did not break loose just after communism's collapse in 1989. As ideological consensus began to wane in the '80s in a large part of the Communist bloc, many regimes began to see the usefulness of nationalism.

In East Germany, Erich Honecker rediscovered German history and rehabilitated Martin Luther, the Prussian warlord Von Clausewitz and even Wagner.

In Bulgaria, Teodor Zhivkov took part in processions with the icons of saints Cyril and Methodius. In Romania, Nicolai Ceausescu ordered the razing of Hungarian and German villages. And in Hungary, Communist authorities re-installed in a Budapest park an old statue of the Austro-Hungarian Empress Sissi that had been gathering dust in a warehouse.

However, the dissident-intellectuals who helped topple communism and who then came to power in several countries were convinced that democratic principles and civic society would be rapidly adopted and would prevail over ethnic rivalries.

But today, those philosopher-kings — such as Vaclav Havel — are on the margins of political life and their utopian vision of post-Communist society has been all but defeated.

The West had shared their illusion. But both the dissidents and Western politicians underestimated not only the power of nationalism but also the profound social and psychological changes that nearly five decades of communism had brought about in the societies of East-Central Europe.

Westerners believed that the free market and democracy were God-given principles that would be immediately embraced. But they probably underestimated how deeply the Communist concept of egalitarianism had taken root in those societies.

I remember an elderly couple who made picture frames in Prague.

They refused the government's restitution of an old castle that had belonged to the woman's family before the war. They refused to take possession of it because they were afraid of losing their friends and of changing their status in a society based on the bond of lowest common-denominator equality.

In other words, everyone had been badly off but they were badly off equally.

And in Warsaw in 1992, opinion polls suggested that 80 to 90 percent of the Polish people said living conditions were better when they lived under communism.

A sociologist told me that, on these kind of issues, opinion polls were unreliable because the

Polish people had become so accustomed to complaining and lamenting their fate under communism that they were reluctant to say things were better now for fear of sticking out and provoking the envy of their friends.

He said that complaining was a means of social communication that would be very hard to eradicate.

It is also partly due to the pervasive effects of egalitarianism that post-Communist societies have been so slow in implementing the privatization process. Restitution to individual citizens of property confiscated by the Communist regimes has been carried out very reluctantly and very slowly, with the exception of the Czech Republic.

In Slovakia and Romania restitution is all but non-existent. In Hungary, the nationalist parties that first came to power opposed restitution on the grounds that it would benefit only what they called the cosmopolitan urban class and only a few Hungarians have received more or less symbolic vouchers of little monetary value.

Privatization of big obsolete factories has been delayed nearly everywhere in the region due both to fears of triggering massive unemployment and social unrest as well as to a strong reluctance to sell off to foreign buyers what are perceived as the nation's resources. In other words, the effects of egalitarianism and nationalism have joined forces in resisting the Western transition model based on a full-fledged free market economy.

Already, with the loosening of the safety net, the post-Communist transition has brought enormous hardships to many people in East-Central Europe — widespread poverty, unprecedented unemployment rates and the new phenomenon of homelessness.

At the same time, corruption and crime have soared. Throughout the region, many former party bureaucrats — members of the *nomenklatura* — were the first to take advantage of the new economic potential, and rapidly installed themselves — at best — as the new managerial class, and, at worst, as bosses of the increasingly powerful mafias.

But, precisely because it is a transition period, the last five years have seen a variety of paradoxical and contradictory trends. In spite of the rise in poverty, there haven't been any popular revolts. And in spite of cultural and psychological resistance, private enterprise and businesses have mushroomed. It has been in great part a do-it-yourself recovery with some stunning results. Right after the collapse of the Communist regimes, production dropped in the region from 15 to 30 percent. Now, some of these countries have the highest growth rates in Europe. Last year, Poland had the highest growth at 4 percent. And hyperinflation has been drastically reduced everywhere. But the unavailability of government loans and extremely high tax rates — sometimes as high as 50 percent — forces private entrepreneurs to operate within the underground economy.

To Westerners, perhaps the most mystifying development has been the return to power, through free elections, of a younger generation of reformed Communists in parties with new names. The phenomenon began in Lithuania, and it then spread throughout the region — with the exception of the Czech Republic. Reform Communists are in government in Bulgaria, in Hungary and even in Poland, which for centuries has considered itself the easternmost bastion of Christian civilization.

Many analysts say the main reason for the Communists' return to government was a widespread rejection of what was perceived as extreme and doctrinaire economic reforms imposed by the West and which had brought so much hardship.

An equally strong motivation was a rejection of domestic forces that had provoked splits and conflicts within society.

In Hungary, the extreme right-wing nationalists who had railed against what they called a cosmopolitan conspiracy against Hungary's Christian values, did not win even one seat in Parliament in elections last year.

And in 1993 in Poland, the reformed Communists defeated the political parties that had evolved from the independent solidarity trade union movement.

The reformed Communists' victory in Poland was seen in part as a rejection of an increasingly invasive Catholic church which had used its pressure on Parliament for passage of many laws, including a very restrictive abortion law as well as a bill that obliges the media to respect Christian values.

The church — which has taken a strong position against the excesses of free market capitalism — also wanted to amend the constitution to include the defense of Christianity and to abolish the separation between church and state.

Polish writer Alexander Smolar has said that many Catholic bishops had begun to behave like the old Communist party bosses.

Opinion polls showed that the Polish people overwhelmingly opposed the church's involvement in politics.

And today, Lech Walesa, the electrician from Gdansk who rose to the presidency, is the most unpopular politician in Poland.

The paradox is that in the cases of Hungary and Poland, the nationalists and the church hierarchy — the forces that had been in the forefront in the struggle against communism — came to be seen as the most divisive and backward forces.

And the former Communist enemies suddenly were perceived as more reliable and more in tune with society. They were elected for their pragmatism and experience in government.

The majority of independent observers see the reformed Communists as social democrats and rule out the danger of a return to the old Communist system.

However, in Poland and elsewhere, the reformed Communists have been given a very complex and contradictory mandate. They are called on to continue the reform process but at a much slower pace in order not to dismantle the welfare safety net.

And the Communists are expected to bring their countries closer to integration with Western Europe but at the same time to defend their national identity from foreign exploitation.

It will be a very difficult balancing act. And if they fail, nationalism could once

again become appealing, the natural refuge of a disillusioned electorate.

I believe the Western community has an important role to play now by overcoming the gap between words and practice. There is considerable resentment in East-Central Europe over the West's failure to come through on long-promised investments.

Contrary to expectations five years ago, Western investment has played a small role in the economic transition in East-Central Europe. Twenty-seven countries of the region will receive little more than \$5 billion in investments this year — roughly the same amount as the Philippines.

Keith Crane, an East Europe analyst with a Washington-based consultancy, told *The Guardian* that 90 percent of Western aid money goes to Western consultants and has had a "marginal impact" on the region.

The European union is seen as particularly guilty for not having opened its customs borders to the countries to its East.

Western Europe is seen as having given only verbal support for the economic transition in East-Central Europe, and as having acted predominantly in its own self-interest, raising its drawbridges against people and imports from the fledgling democracies.

The only Western offer of integration thus far has been NATO's partnership for peace — a halfway step toward full membership for some East-Central European countries in the military alliance — a move that has already angered Moscow and sparked caution in Western Europe.

And after the Bosnian debacle, there is a growing skepticism among the potential new members about what if anything NATO would be willing to do to defend their security.

While NATO is struggling to define its own future and identify its purpose in the new geopolitical climate, some of the countries to the east have already taken security measures of their own.

For instance, one highly praised move was the open-skies agreement reached by Hungary and Romania for mutual aerial surveillance. And Poland has struck several agreements on exchange of military information with Belarus,

Ukraine and Russia.

While NATO dithers, many East Europeans are beginning to question the advisability of entering the alliance if that will result in the creation once again of rigid borders that could further separate and alienate neighbors in the region. Potential NATO member Hungary has already bowed out of joint maneuvers with the alliance in order not to alarm Romania, which is not in line for NATO membership. Hungary has also decided to submit the issue of NATO membership to a referendum.

And in Warsaw, one commentator told me that Poland does not need an atomic umbrella. He said it's much more important that Western Europe open up its trade borders so that Poland can sell its products there. Many people in the region told me that NATO membership is not seen as an end in itself but as a short cut into the market of the European union.

In the current climate of skepticism, I would not be surprised if the peoples of East-Central Europe — should they be asked to choose — would vote against NATO membership.

While the West mainly dithered on investment aid and in creative thinking about a new world order, many East-Central European countries began to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps and to look to each other for mutual security arrangements.

And, left to their own devices, the East-Central Europeans are beginning to perceive their strategic interests may not necessarily coincide with those of the West. There is a great fear over instability in Russia. But there is also a growing conviction among East-Central Europeans that they should not take any steps that could aggravate relations with their Eastern neighbors. In other words, many analysts in the region

believe that Russia should participate directly with the West in designing the new security arrangements of East-Central Europe.

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In conclusion, five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it is clear that the situation in Europe has not always evolved as Western leaders had predicted it would.

The fall of communism has shaken many Western certainties.

NATO is in disarray. The European Union's goal of creating a federal Europe has been slowed down by German unification and the predominance of its powerful economic engine. And with Western Europe's present institutions appearing to lack legitimacy and purpose, national self-interest is on the rise in the member states.

Maastricht has lost its appeal. Many of the goals set in 1991 have been postponed, including the single currency which was supposed to rein in Germany's powerful deutschemark.

Western bureaucrats seemed to have been unprepared for the dramatic changes after 1989. For decades they had been drawing up strategies to cope with the Cold War and no one had worked out a possible scenario in which it would end suddenly and non-violently nor how to deal with its aftermath.

I remember being in Brussels in early 1990 when, both at the European community and at NATO, architectural expressions were very much in vogue. There were many blueprints on the drawing boards for the construction of a common European home to be built in concentric circles. Nothing has come of those grand designs.

Rather, Europe today appears much more fragmented, more uncertain, and with each of its members more inward looking than it was five years ago. □