

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Is a new partition of Europe ahead?

The Alpbach Forum is seeing question marks over the future of Russia and eastern Europe.

The prestigious European Alpbach Forum, held in the Tyrolean village of Alpbach toward the end of August each year, met under the theme, "Time and Truth," for its 50th event. The forum concept was born in the summer of 1945, from an impulse to make a special effort to build a better and more integrated Europe after the Second World War. The crucial role of the United States in securing the peace in Europe after 1945 has been in evidence throughout the 50 years the Alpbach Forum has existed.

Now that the Iron Curtain that came down over Europe in 1946 has been removed, the Alpbach Forum has good reason to look back at its five decades of work and at the history of Europe during this century, and to dare take a look into the near future.

One of the questions posed by speakers—from Europe, Russia, and the United States—and among the audience in discussions was whether international diplomacy has learned anything from the largely catastrophic 20th century, whether one could look into the next century with the confidence that this would be an era without wars, without major political and military crises, without dictatorial regimes.

This question remained open, not least because of the uncertainties that overshadow Russia and the rest of the former Soviet bloc. As space does not allow a representative account of all the speeches and other contributions, the author may be allowed to select some of the speeches for a condensed summary here.

The keynote address by Austrian Foreign Minister Alois Mock to the European Panel (Aug. 29-31), which was the centerpiece of the entire two weeks of forum events, gave a somewhat optimistic outlook on the future of Europe, based on the process of the European Union integration strategy, which the Austrians will join next January. But a different view came from Chester Crocker, the senior official of the U.S. State Department, who said not to take lightly the European strategic situation after the dissolution of the U.S.S.R.

Crocker told the Europeans not to expect the United States to keep the same depth and scope of military presence on this continent as during the Cold War, and to think rather about new concepts that would let Europe shoulder more responsibility than before, including in the Balkans conflict. The ensuing debate on prospects of a genuine European contribution to peace and stability no longer dependent on American support, turned more and more pessimistic.

The big shock came with the speech delivered on Aug. 29 by Yuri Afanasyev, a longtime adviser to the last Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachov. He urged the audience to take the Great Russian trend seriously, to acknowledge as a "historical fact" that Russia has never really been a part of the western world and will, therefore, never become integrated into a new strategic and economic architecture of the European continent. Afanasyev said that the aggressive "pro-Asiatic impulse" was gaining more and more

influence in Russian politics, and that against this background, new coup attempts in Moscow cannot be ruled out, nor can a return to the Soviet era's aggressive strategy to dominate the European continent. The continued influence of parts of the old *nomenklatura* in the military and state administration, and the way Russia's present government is engaged in regaining political control in the so-called Near Abroad outside Russia's borders—all that signals, Afanasyev warned, that the threat to Europe from the East has not been lifted at all. Russia would never even want to be part of a "Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals," he said.

Unfortunately, neither Afanasyev nor any of the other Alpbach speakers paid much attention to the few but important signals pointing to a better future, for example, Yeltsin's call, during his June visit to Germany, for the project of a trans-European high-speed rail link from Berlin to Moscow, or, President Clinton's call, in Berlin in July, for a new strategic U.S.-German partnership in the economic development of the East.

Due to that crucial omission, former German Assistant Defense Minister Lothar Rühl seemed to be "realistic" in his speech on Aug. 30, when he warned that in the end, the West might have no alternative other than to accept a new partition of the European continent into a sphere of western influence—encompassing the three eastern states of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, plus maybe Slovakia—while Russia would have hegemony over all Europe east of that. A gray zone in the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania would remain, and the status quo (to the benefit of the Russian-backed Serbs) in the Balkans would be the "best" that the West, if it wants to avoid taking strategic risks, could achieve.