

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Rough awakening to war danger

Germans activate diplomatic channels to Russia, to de-escalate the NATO war in the Balkans.

Russian Prime Minister Yevgeni Primakov had barely left Bonn on March 30, where he had found Chancellor Gerhard Schröder “unenthused” (to put it mildly) at the Russian mediation effort between NATO and Serbia, when the stubborn pro-NATO line of the Germans began to sober. Some among the elites, especially outside the government, realized that this repudiation of Primakov’s offer was a “grave mistake.”

As requests from London and the U.S. State Department and Pentagon for additional troops and combat equipment began pouring into Bonn, the German government at first did not smell the danger of military escalation: It chose to show “solidarity” with the escalators, okaying a change of consultative mechanisms inside NATO, so that the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, U.S. Gen. Wesley Clark, was relieved of “time-absorbing” consultations with the ambassadors of all 19 NATO governments at the alliance headquarters in Mons, Belgium. Instead, Clark got a blank check, authorized by a select group of Western governments (the United States, U.K., France, Germany, and Italy), for a “no-holds barred” war against Serbia. This also implied upgraded preparations for a ground war, for the next phase of military operations against the Serbs.

This escalation, senior politicians warned, would provoke Russian reactions—not immediate military measures, but ones that would damage relations between Russia and western Europe, particularly Germany, for a long time. A coincidence had it, that a delegation on a four-day visit to Rus-

sia, headed by Bavarian State Gov. Edmund Stoiber, was given a surprise request by Primakov for a meeting in Moscow, on April 7. And, Stoiber found that the diplomats at the German Foreign Ministry were interested in employing him to help mend fences with the Russians.

In his meeting with Primakov, Stoiber encouraged Russian diplomacy. He spoke out against deployments of German ground forces for Kosovo combat missions, on grounds that they had no mandate for such an escalation, which could have global strategic consequences that were not in German interests. He also said that Russian soldiers should play a role in a Kosovar international peace force, after a cease-fire. This peace force, Stoiber stressed, would have to be mandated by the UN Security Council, so that the Russians (and Chinese, too) would be re-invited to help find a political solution to the conflict. The message Stoiber delivered to Primakov was diametrically opposite to the one that Primakov had received in Bonn. And the message that Stoiber brought home, also from his other meetings, with Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov, Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, Deputy Prime Minister Yuri Maslyukov, Chief Speaker of the State Duma Genadi Seleznyov, and Grigor Yavlinsky of the Duma opposition, found a much more receptive audience in Bonn, than at the time Primakov was there.

Meanwhile, the German government was beginning a dual-track policy: showing “full solidarity” with the NATO air war against Serbia, but activating all diplomatic channels into Russia, to de-escalate and get out of

the NATO Balkans trap. When Stoiber returned to Germany, Deputy Foreign Minister Wolfgang Ischinger arrived in Moscow, to continue talks.

Meanwhile, the executives of all parliamentary parties in Germany were already in the process of passing resolutions, which categorically ruled out the deployment of German troops for combat missions against the Serbs. The Christian Social Union party (CSU), the Bavarian state section of the Christian Democracy, which Stoiber chairs, voted against ground forces at its executive session on April 12, after Stoiber had reported on his talks in Moscow.

But after this CSU session, public discussion of the Balkans turned even more spectacular, when Stoiber declared at a press conference in Munich on April 12: “The deployment of ground forces could lead to a third world war!” So far, Stoiber said, Russia has explicitly refrained from military assistance to the Serbs, in order not to risk direct confrontation with NATO, which could lead to unpredictable consequences. Stoiber said that he agrees with his Russian discussion partners that an international force, not exclusively under NATO command and including Russian military units, should be mandated for Kosovo, after the strikes are halted. Conditions to end the air strikes should be found as soon as possible, he added.

On April 13, Ischinger, having returned from Moscow, said in a radio interview with the national DLF station, that on condition that the Russians were not requested to “play the reserve wheel” on a NATO cart that would not stop its air war, a diplomatic solution could be found. Ischinger, and Stoiber, indicated a preference for a renewed Russian role in the peace process. But, NATO’s buildup is continuing. The threat of an international escalation has not yet been contained.