

Unique or Universal – is the comparison between the Baltic states and Southeast Europe worthwhile?

**Remarks by Mr Carl Bildt at International OSCE Conference
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Mr President, Dear Friends,

It's an honour me to be invited to make some remarks to the conference, and a pleasure to be back in Croatia.

I guess the reason why I have been invited is the fact that I have had the opportunity to deal rather extensively with a wide range of issues – those related to minority protection not the least – in both the three Baltic states, then primarily in my capacity as Prime Minister of Sweden, and in the different countries of South-eastern Europe, then wearing successive hats as European Union Special Representative to Former Yugoslavia, High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Special Envoy of the Secretary-General of the UN Secretary General to the Balkans.

There are thus only few issues in these different parts of Europe that I have not had the occasion of dealing with during the past years.

And these have been important, dramatic and truly historical years. We have seen the breakdown of one order in Europe, and the beginning of the creation of a new and far better one.

With the end of the extended Soviet empire came not only the end of the Soviet Union itself, but in this part of Europe also the end of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Suddenly, we were confronted with profound issues of state creation or re-creation in Europe, the internal order of these states as well as the overall order of Europe as a whole. Issues that history had struggled with for centuries, political scientist had debated endlessly and the dreams of peoples had been preoccupied with suddenly come to the forefront of the European agenda.

In my opinion, there was and is only one answer to the issues that the changes associated with the year 1989 placed on our agenda – the creation of a federation of nation states, encompassing all of Europe to the West of Russia and the Ukraine, stretching from the Arctic Ocean in the North to the Mediterranean in the South, in a close security partnership with the United States, and an increasingly close relationship with the Russian Federation.

Today, we might be half the way towards that goal. Among the ten countries entering the European Union as well as NATO by May 1st next year are all of the three Baltic countries, and Slovenia as the avant-garde of the countries of South-eastern Europe.

But the tasks ahead are as important as the tasks we have already accomplished. As the process of enlargement moves ahead, it is the countries of South-eastern Europe, including Turkey, which very much will be in focus.

But before looking forward, it is useful to look back to the experiences we have had in the Baltics as well as in the Balkans.

In principle, some of the key issues that we faced in these two very different regions were the same.

States had to be created or re-created, and in practically all of these cases we had to deal with nationality issues that did not conform to either the 1920 borders in the Baltic region or the borders between the then constituent republics of Socialist Yugoslavia.

In all of these cases, we saw once nationality seeking to establish itself as the constituent nationality, more often than not being perceived as a threat to individuals of those nationalities that suddenly found themselves as minorities in states they felt no loyalty to. And we saw the politics of fear used by politicians primarily interested in power.

But there the similarities end. Events took very different turns in these two parts of Europe.

If an observer had arrived from another planet, untainted by all of the experiences and prejudices guiding us, and looked at the two different situations, it is not inconceivable that he – or she? – would have arrived at the conclusion that a non-violent outcome was less likely in the Baltics than in the Balkans.

The three Baltic nations had been deprived of their independence in a very brutal manner. Hundreds of thousands of their inhabitants has been deported to Siberia and killed. In both Lithuania and Estonia, an armed struggle against the occupation had lasted into the 1950's. Their national heritages had been suppressed. They – primarily Latvia and Estonia – had been subject to a policy of attempted large-scale change of their demography. There were clear-cut cases of pure ethnic cleansing. And they had been used as a base area for both substantial and important military assets for decades.

There is no doubt that the international factor was of critical importance in facilitating the transformation of this area from a potential area of dangerous strife and

confrontation towards the membership of both the European Union and NATO that is now imminent.

But this international factor would hardly have been successful had there not been political leaders in all the relevant capitals ready to take its advice into account. In all three nations, and although there were exceptions, those aspiring for political leadership were more focused on the issues of the future – integration with the rest of Europe – than on issues of the past.

The policies pursued by the international community followed two inter-related lines.

First, a firm and principled support for the national efforts of Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians to re-establish their states, including the speedy withdrawal of Russian military forces and installations.

Second, a firm support for a policy that sought to reassure the minority populations – mainly Russians – that these new states would adhere to high European standards for human rights and minority protection.

The OSCE Missions in first Estonia and then Latvia were instrumental in giving advice on how this could be done, in giving reassurance to the minority populations and in making it possible to have an objective assessment of the situation when faced with different sorts of allegations, often those drummed up for political purposes in Moscow.

While not universally popular when first established, I believe it is safe to say that they are now universally seen as having performed a critically important task during a critically important period.

The immediate focus of international efforts might fall more into the category of conflict-prevention, but soon focus turned into facilitating the speedy integration of all three countries in both the European Union and NATO, which in its turn of course gives these countries increased security, stability and possibility for prosperity.

In retrospect, it all sounds very simple. At the time, it was far from it. We had to answer the question what to do with all those Russians that had been brought to these countries by a criminal Soviet policy of demographic occupation, thus changing the very nature of their societies.

There were strong - and understandable - voices that called for depriving them of all rights in an attempt to force them to leave again. But even if their presence was the result of a criminal policy, it had to be recognized that they as individuals were as much victims of these criminal policies as were the individual Latvians and Estonians, and that one crime could not be made good with another crime.

Soon, we will see more than a million individuals of Russian nationality becoming citizens of the European Union as the three Baltic countries enter. And you will have to be a very diligent observer to see any signs of day-to-day friction in a Riga where Russian is spoken in the shops more often than Latvians, and which shares with Brussels the distinction of being the only capitals of Europe where large national groups co-exist.

Tension over these issues with Russia has subsided, and the Russian factor in Estonia and Latvia is increasingly seen as far more of a potential than as a problem.

Thus, while the potential for conflict was high in the Baltics, but this has so far turned into far more of a story of success than of failure, the story in the Balkan is of course a different one.

I hope that historians one day will be able to describe the events of the dissolution of Socialist Yugoslavia and the wars that followed – from Slovenia and Croatia in 1991 to Macedonia in 2001 – in a way that will be broadly acceptable to all also in the region itself. Today, we are still far from that situation. The tragedies and the emotions of the wars are still far too close.

Thus, while we in the Baltics managed to preserve a situation of ethnic living together within the framework of independent national states, the record here has been one of ethnic separation, sometimes by brutal ethnic cleansing, sometimes by people

moving themselves out of fear and sometimes by international agreements just recognizing the realities that had been created. There were leaders on all sides excelling in a nationalism that turned aggressive against members of other nationalities.

Now, the wars are over, the forces of aggressive nationalism hopefully reduced, and a country like Croatia firmly on its way towards membership of the European Union, sooner or later being followed by the other countries of the region as proclaimed by the summit between the leaders of the European Union and the countries of the Western Balkans in Thessaloniki June 21.

But in much the same way as all the issues of minority rights were of decisive importance in paving the way for the EU and NATO membership of the three Baltic countries, I believe they will be of critical importance in the same process for Croatia and the other countries of this region. Here, as well as in the other countries or areas of the region, the emphasis is on the process of refugee return, on property rights and on citizenship issues.

It is important to understand, that when we are talking about these issues, we are talking about European issues.

Three days ago, I was in Istanbul discussing exceedingly difficult issues of minority rights associated with the efforts of Turkey to enter into membership negotiations with the European Union, but where the Union has taken a determined line, and we now see the prospect of truly historic shifts in the very nature of Turkish society.

Two days ago, I was in Germany, thus following the latest twist in the debates on the so called Benes decrees that legalized the cleansing of German minorities from then Czechoslovakia as part of the expulsion of app 15 million Germans from the countries of Eastern and Central Europe during and immediately after 1945. With the accession of the Czech Republic to the European Union, these issues of more than half a century ago are critical in the debate again.

The reason why these issues are considered so important are not only the sometimes urgent ones of conflict prevention, or the obvious ones of observing different European and international treaties, but a more fundamental one concerning the nature of our societies and the quality of Europe itself.

In the Thessaloniki declaration, the assembled leaders agreed that sustainable return of refugees and internally displaced persons is critical for ethnic reconciliation, thus repeating something stated many times before.

But they then added, that it also represents “*an index of democratic maturity*”, using a phrase with a strength I doubt we have seen before in documents of this nature.

The entire process of European integration is about nations that fought each other in the past, coming together and shaping the future together, thus preserving the peace and promoting the prosperity of its more than half a billion individual citizens.

But a Europe of open borders and open cooperation can never be a Europe where individuals of one nationality are restricted to the territory of only his or her own national state. By its very nature, the process of the nations of Europe coming together across the borders is based on the process of the nationalities of Europe and elsewhere coming together also inside its different national borders.

To integrate with Europe, and to discriminate against Europeans, is inherently contradictory.

I believe that I have seen nearly each and every field of atrocity and murder across this region, carried out under the one flag or the other. I know both Vukovar and Knin. Thus, I know the very real emotional and political difficulties that this process is associated with in this region.

But if we are not ready to turn the page in the book of history, we are likely to go back over the same story over and over again.

When Croatia applied for membership in the European Union, it sent a signal of its willingness to turn the page, and to reach out for reconciliation also with those Serbs or others who live or lived within its borders.

I know that the European Union will be as determined when upholding its values and standards as concerning Croatia and the other countries of the region as it has been on these issues with the Baltic States and is today with all other countries that are or are seeking to become part of the accession process.

To do so, is at the end of the day in the true interest of the possibilities of an independent and self-confident Croatia in being a full and active partner in European and Atlantic cooperation. The past as well as the present shows that there are few more certain recipes for enduring domestic and international problems than unresolved minority or return issues.

There are certainly remaining challenges also in the three Baltic countries. We have learnt, that issues of nationalities living together in a harmonious way can never be taken for granted. We have seen the potential of the politics of fear in the one European election after the other during the years that have passed.

But in the context that we are discussing here, they can still serve as something of a model of what can be achieved in terms not only overcoming national tension, but also achieving fast and full integration into the structures of European and Atlantic integration.

For Croatia and the countries of this region, there are important lessons to be learnt from the experience of the three small countries.