

Sunday's presidential elections in Kyrgyzstan were the first held since the toppling in March of Askar Akayev's regime. The poll, which was won by Kurmanbek Bakiyev, marked tangible progress toward meeting the criteria the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe has established for democratic elections. Let's all hope that Sunday marks a turning point for this Central Asian republic's transition to a modern democracy with a vibrant market economy.

A few months back, the streets of Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, were overrun with protestors demanding accountability and change. However, the persistence of corruption and general lawlessness in certain parts of the country is worrying. The security structure in Kyrgyzstan is still weak, making the recent steps taken by the OSCE and supported by the U.S. and Europe to improve Kyrgyzstan's police forces more than necessary. Strengthening democratic governance and improving the economic conditions in the country should be the top priorities for the Bakiyev government.

One of the country's major problems is its limited governing capacity that's manifesting itself in the unfolding refugee crisis. I strongly believe that the recent case of 29 Uzbek refugees now in Kyrgyzstan should be resolved by extradition to a country outside the region -- and not back to Uzbekistan, where there is little chance that they'll receive a free and fair trial.

Democracy is the best long-term security policy and ensuring a free and fair presidential election in Kyrgyzstan is only the first step in what I call the Central Asian Democracy Project. The elements of state weakness that we are encountering in Kyrgyzstan are unfortunately endemic to the region. Tensions in Uzbekistan are increasing and President Islam Karimov has so far been less than cooperative with the international community. The massacre of civilians in Andijan this May is appalling and we need an independent international investigation.

In the age of globalization, neither national sovereignty nor security can be an absolute. We have an obligation today to ensure that all states exercise sovereignty responsibly. Those who shy away from their international responsibilities can expect to only deepen their isolation.

The solution to Central Asia's institutional underdevelopment will not come overnight. And our job will become even more difficult if we focus on individual cases and lose the regional perspective. Moreover, for this project to succeed, we need full cooperation and coordination between the U.S., the EU and Russia.

We have to make the necessary long-term political commitment to stabilize and democratize Central Asia. It's impossible to be serious about democracy and progress in this part of the world -- which many notable strategists have referred to as the "grand prize" in the grand game of geopolitics -- without actually putting the money where our mouth is. Some form of a reconstruction and development agency for Central Asia is an idea worth pursuing. This agency could be a fully independent entity, with its own governing board, president, and an independent budget, or it could be an arm of the World Bank, or even the OSCE.

Central Asia is a priority that we can no longer afford to sidetrack. This is a region where Russia's "near abroad" and EU's "new neighborhood" meet. It is a region of paramount strategic importance for the U.S., as it is interlinked with the Middle East. Sunday's election in Kyrgyzstan is a good stepping stone to spread democracy and stability throughout Central Asia.

---

*Dr. Dimitrij Rupel is Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia and Chairman-in-Office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.*