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Turn Tirana Around

Last year, when Sali Berisha won a tainted parliamentary election and then cracked down on peaceful opposition, neither the United States nor the European Union complained much. President Berisha, first elected in 1992, was an anti-Communist, after all, who had promised reform and support for U.S. efforts in the former Yugoslavia nearby. The West opted for stability over democracy. This week, with Albania spinning closer and closer to civil war, it is becoming clear once again that stability without democracy often is not worth much.

The proximate cause of Albania's unrest is the unraveling of a handful of financial pyramid schemes in which Albanians had invested more than \$1 billion of their savings. But because Mr. Berisha lacks democratic legitimacy in the eyes of many of his people, he has been unable thus far to contain the protests.

The fighting now taking place between Albanian troops and armed insurgents in the south could destabilize southern Europe. First in the line of fire is the Kosovo region of the former Yugoslavia, where ethnic Albanians could provoke unrest. Italy fears that thousands of refugees could flee in its direction from the fighting. Greece, too, could be affected.

The pyramid schemes that went bust have come and gone in every formerly

Communist country; Russia still has political parties of cheated investors. The schemes took advantage of people too naive in the ways of capitalism to recognize a confidence man, or too impoverished and desperate to listen to their better judgment. Many knew that the bubbles would burst but believed that they could get out in time, and with a fat profit. Corrupt and inexperienced governments offered no protection. Albania, which had been the poorest and most isolated of Communist nations, was particularly vulnerable.

The unrest underlines an emerging divide in the formerly Communist world. As Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic embrace democracy and become more prosperous, Albania, Bulgaria, Romania and Serbia fall behind in the south. "We all feel like we belong to the European losers' club," says a Belgrade think tank director, Predrag Simic. It is a dangerous situation.

Bulgaria and Romania now are working hard to right themselves, having finally elected pro-reform governments, and they deserve Western support. Mr. Berisha is going the other way, imposing censorship and limiting democracy. The West is now pressing him to open a dialogue with the opposition. That should be a first step toward coalition government and a legitimate election.

—THE WASHINGTON POST.