

# ICWA LETTERS

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*Christopher P. Ball is an Institute Fellow studying and writing about Hungarian minorities in the former Soviet-bloc nations of East and Central Europe.*

## Introducing Myself and My Region

BUDAPEST, Hungary

August 1996

By Christopher Ball

### MY PRE-HUNGARIAN HISTORY

Not much spectacular happened in my early childhood. I was raised in Huntsville, Alabama with a pretty traditional family consisting of my parents, an older brother and sister. We were regular church-going Lutherans. My father is a physician and mother a nurse. My teenage years were likewise fairly typical: uncontrollable hormones, girls, mild rock-star aspirations, lots of confusion. When I was sixteen, however, I became interested in business, of all things, initially envisioning myself as some kind of up-and-coming Donald Trump. Pretty quickly though, I realized that my interests were not so much in being a rich capitalist, but in how the capitalist system itself works. That happens to lead right into the field of economics, although now I realize the field is much broader than that. I fell in love with the field of economics early on and in subsequent years have tried hard to find an area of economics I don't enjoy.

I attended the University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAH) and feel as though I really came into myself there. My goal became firmly set on getting my Ph.D. in Economics and then teaching and researching in an academic environment for the remainder of my life. As I now know, and many older people told me then, you cannot really plan your life, which is full of unexpected twists and turns, often making

planning seem futile. Sure enough, my second major twist — the first being my falling in love with economics — came when I got a chance to study at the London School of Economics the summer semester of 1992. In London I met outstanding minds, both young and old, from around the world, attended classes with leading world economists, got my first taste of transitional economics, and came to the realization that all of the theory I had learned has real meaning, changing millions of lives daily. Suddenly the world opened up to me and I learned that not only was the world much larger, but also drastically different than I had ever imagined. First and foremost, it comprised people, people who live in little worlds all around the globe, and each world is unique in its own special way. I knew then that I wouldn't fit back into the same old mold in Alabama, but didn't know yet what that would mean. Returning home, I



isolated myself somewhat, becoming closer friends with the members of my family and spending the rest of my time working and studying, with countless hours of free time in the university library. Thinking back on it now, I was partially preparing myself, or just passing time in waiting, for the third twist, which was about to come.

## TWIST NUMBER THREE

For weeks I had been waiting for graduate school replies when the fax came through. It was a bit cryptic and probably not enough for most thinking individuals to rely upon. "Dear Mr. Ball, Please you come Hungary. You no worry we help you study, researching the economics or what you want in Hungary. You not need the worrying on living costs, we give you scholarship to pay all living costs." I still have the fax and in reality it was a bit longer, but that was the essence.

In the last year of my undergraduate studies at UAH I had met a girl from the University of Florida who was going to Hungary to work on human-rights research. Personally I had little interest in traveling to Central East Europe. At the time I was on my way to getting a Ph.D. in Economics, putting off my travels until some time in the indefinite future. I had spent the previous two years at UAH earning a German minor after realizing in London how much I was missing by not understanding any foreign languages or cultures. At some point during my graduate studies I hoped to go to Germany and work on economic research. I had even chosen graduate programs that allowed a year or semester abroad. The girl and I met when she came to UAH to lecture on the changes in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) since 1989. The university had asked me to be her host since I had interests in similar issues. I agreed, and we got along fabulously. Over lunch and dinner we chatted endlessly. This was early Fall of my senior year, 1993/94.

We agreed to maintain a mutually beneficial exchange of information in the coming years. Again my naiveté had fooled me into believing that I knew where I would be for the coming years. I sent out graduate-school applications in the field of Developmental Economics. She called me just before leaving for a research trip over the Christmas holiday. She would be going to Denmark to meet a research group there, then to Hungary and Romania where she would meet with several groups and individuals. She offered to take my resume with her "just in case" there was an opportunity for me to go as well. I figured it couldn't hurt, though, I really didn't expect much to come of it and went on saving money for graduate school.

When she returned in January she brought news that some people in Hungary had expressed an interest in helping me go to Hungary. They offered to associate me with economic researchers in the region so I could assist in their research. Studying transitional/developmental economics first-hand was nearly a dream come true, but it was still too distant a dream for me to fully grasp. I requested something in writing from the Hungarians, buying some time in hope of receiving a good graduate-school reply. A month later she called again with more of the same information. By this time I had received acceptances to some of my top-choice schools, but without financial support. I had to turn them down. We carried on this way for a few more weeks and months until I fi-

nally received the "something in writing" I had requested in the form of that very cryptic fax. At the same time I received an acceptance with a teaching fellowship from one of the graduate schools. It was not the best nor the worst of my choices. For a week I spent sleepless nights and long days talking with professors, friends and family. In the end I decided I would take the chance and go to Hungary.

The offer was good for one year. In the best case, I would spend a year living in Central and Eastern Europe studying economic changes first-hand and learning a new language/culture. I would re-apply to graduate schools and have an even better chance of getting into some of my top-choice schools, with money. Even if everything went wrong in Hungary I could stay for three months on a tourist visa, gain a wonderful experience similar perhaps to the one in London, and then look the exact same on paper to the graduate schools when I re-applied. What did I have to lose? As one of my economics professors told me at the time: "Chris, you're 21 years old. One year is nothing but a rounding error in your life." He was right.

I bought a one-way plane ticket to Hungary, departing August 17, 1994. The girl from Florida would be going for a year as well, studying Hungarian and taking some graduate classes. She had received a government grant. She offered to let me stay in her apartment if all went badly.

## LESSON ONE

I had no expectations. As a matter of fact, as hard as I tried I could not even pretend to imagine what Hungary would be like. Before I went to study in London I had several illusory images of foggy streets and movie-style cafes. My expectations turned out to be completely wrong. London was simply different from the Hollywood fantasies that I had grown to know so well. I suspect this happens to many first-time travelers. The truth is that no matter how many movies you watch, books you read, or people you talk to, you can never imagine a place and/or people you have never seen first-hand. Actually, I believe that you almost should not even try to imagine the place before you go, because it is sure to be different. I considered myself lucky then, and still do today, that I had no preconceived notions about Hungary before I left. I didn't know the history, people, Budapest. I really didn't know anything except that my German professor laughed when I said I would learn the language; something about Finno-Ugric being a difficult combination. In reality, I could do nothing but learn there. Starting from ground zero, you can go nowhere but up. Everything would be an educational experience. No matter what I did or didn't do, I would learn.

On the plane ride over, Kelly, the girl from Florida, began to educate me about the region. I knew a bit about the economic transition Hungary had undergone, but as for the political and historical side I knew nothing. It turned out that there were, and still are, ethnic

problems between Hungary and Romania. Many of them revolve around the Hungarian minority in Transylvania, which is in the western part of Romania bordering Hungary. That was the first time I had ever heard of Hungarians outside Hungary's borders. The number of them in Romania turns out to be around two million.

As history would have it, the region known as Transylvania was given to Romania under the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, following World War I. Up to that point Transylvania had either been a fully independent region or under the Hungarian crown (not necessarily a part of the Hungarian state proper). This is actually a point of much debate today. The Romanians have a historical theory that puts them in the region in history, before the Hungarians arrived, thus giving them legitimate claim to it today. The typical "I found it first" argument. The theory seems to have developed at the end of the last century and then been further developed by Ceasescu's minions in order to legitimize nationalist claims. At the moment I make no statement concerning the validity of this or the Hungarian version of history, but plan to take a serious look into this debate during my fellowship here.

What I can conclusively state at this point is that Transylvania has historically contributed significantly to the cultural, artistic, political and other development of both Hungary and Romania. It has always been mixed ethnically, chiefly comprising Saxons, Romanians and Hungarians as well as a host of other small ethnic groups. For much of the time, it served as the easternmost border of Hungary and then of the Austro-Hungarian Empire since the Carpathian Mountains form a natural border. A warrior class along the eastern border (the Szeklar, *Székely* in Hungarian) enjoyed special tax, legal and social status as defender against invasions from the East. During times of peace the Szeklar regions were havens of culture and contributed to the musical, dance and artistic culture of Transylvania and Hungary. No one is sure where the Szeklars come from, but they were discovered by the Hungarians well before the first millennium and were already found to speak Hungarian. They are considered to have broken off from the main Hungarian groups when the historic seven tribes came over from northeast Asia in pre-Historic days. Today, the Szeklars still live in Transylvania and those areas, aptly called Szeklar Land (*Széklalföld*, in Hungarian) constitute the largest blocks of Hungarians in Romania, often constituting up to 80 percent of the population in the regions (Maros, Hargita, Kovászna, in Hungarian) where they live.

This division of the Hungarian nation, giving part of it to the Romanians, is actually one, or perhaps the main, reason the Hungarians sided with Hitler in WWII. They could not bear the "unjust" division and the phrase "*Nem, nem, soha*" (No, no, never) was often chanted in repetition, referring to the Treaty of Trianon during the inter-war period and the resultant borders. In the schools during that time the children even recited

daily that they believed in the Hungarian nation, truth and justice. Hitler's wild card to get the Hungarians to side with Germany was then merely to offer them the realization of the "just/truthful" borders of Greater Hungary, thus brilliantly playing on the poorly drawn borders of the international community after WWI.

Hungary got the lost territory back, for a while at least. They re-acquired it during the Second World War only to have it given back to the Romanians when the Romanians switched sides at the last minute, supporting the Allied Powers. After WWII not much renegotiation of the borders was allowed under Soviet domination, leaving history frozen during the Cold War to be thawed only with the changes of 1989.

## A ROUGH START

It took no time at all to realize that the agency that originally offered me money, research opportunities and a place to live had little or no interest in me at all. Elections had been held in Hungary between the time I accepted the offer to come and the time I arrived. With a change in government came a complete change in the flow of available money, leaving the agency strapped for cash and with greater concerns than helping out some kid from Alabama. Moreover, as fate would have it, the man who runs the agency, a well-known Transylvanian poet, has a reputation for being greedy and an unreliable liar — not what one might call a good combination.

On the brighter side, one of the young men at the agency, Sándor Mezei, and I became very good friends. He was a history student from Transylvania studying in Budapest and working at the agency as assistant to the great poet himself. He was also the one, it turned out, who sent me the cryptic fax that "the poet" had graced with his signature. Sándor took it upon himself to introduce me to everyone he knew in Budapest in hope of finding some employment for me. From August to mid-December we went all over town together. I worked on a few small contracts to help pay for a small room I was then renting in a family's apartment. My parents were able to sell my 1985 Oldsmobile Calais and I managed for a while longer. Although I lost well over 20 lbs. during the first half year and never knew if I could afford the coming month's rent, I would not trade those months for the world. I learned what it truly meant to live like a Hungarian during the transition: broke, hungry and in a crowded apartment. I also found a life-long friend in Sándor and fell in love with Hungary, Transylvania and the Central-East European region with all its good and bad points.

It should be noted at this point that Sándor is sure to reappear in my monthly reports. During those early months he taught me history and some Hungarian, informed me about regional politics and was always there to help. He never asked a thing in return. He wanted me to form my own opinion about Hungary, offering me a wealth of information with as little bias as possible. He is the only person I know in the region who gives me

both the Hungarian and Romanian versions of history and when I go to Romania insists that I talk not only with Hungarians, but Romanians as well. I owe him more than I could ever repay. Since those early months, he has moved back to Romania, taken a job in the RMDSz (Romanian Hungarian Democratic Alliance political party) political office and was recently elected city councilor in his home town.

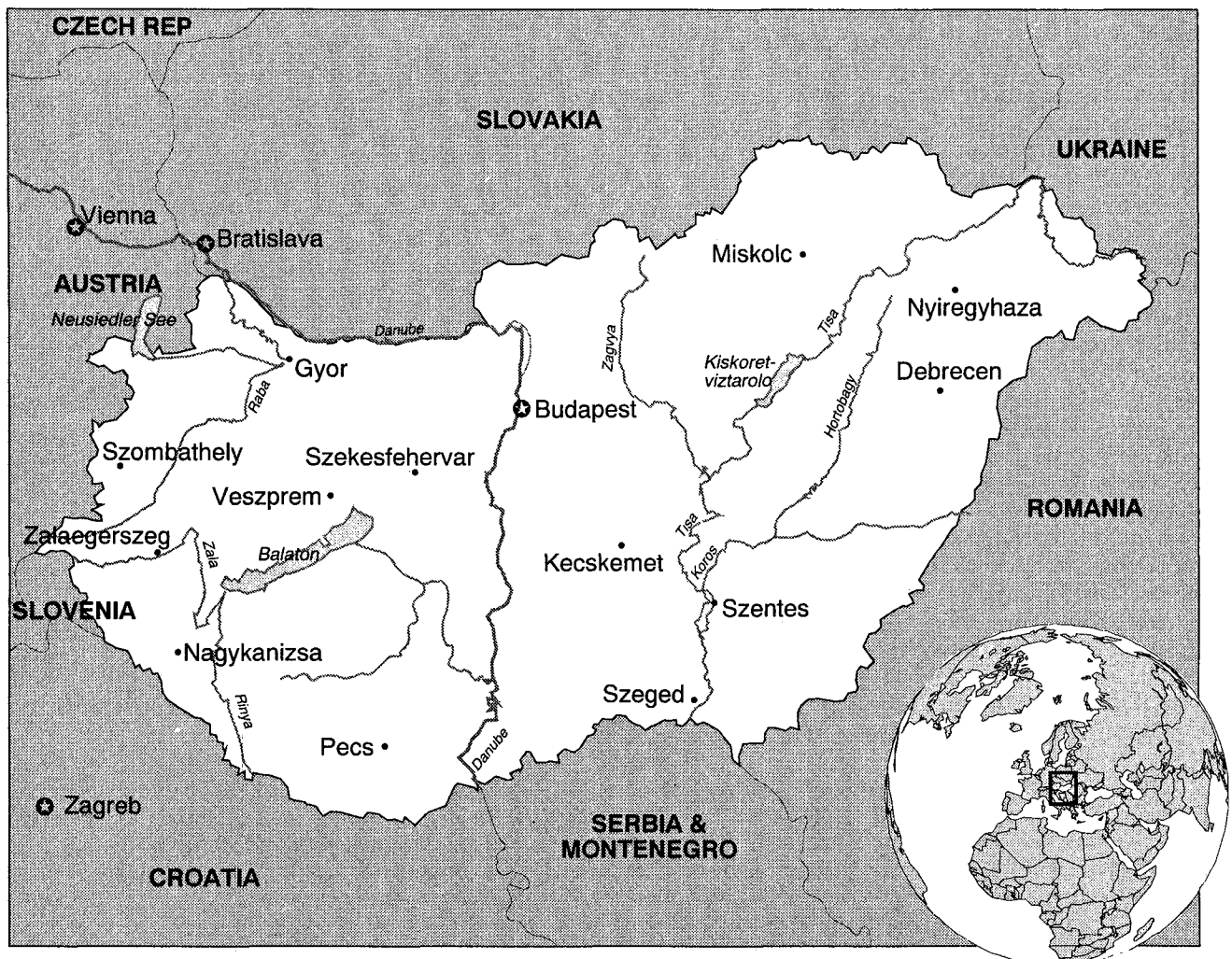
## NATO AND ALL THAT

One of the places Sándor took me was the Hungarian Atlantic Council. I worked on a few contracts with them, writing various proposals, reports and letters in English. They hired me in January of 1995 to help organize a conference for June of that year as well as assist with their foreign correspondence. I knew nothing about NATO, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or the region, so I spent the first 6-10 months reading everything possible on the subjects in my free time. By the time the conference came around, I was fairly competent in the field of foreign policy, especially as it re-

lates to NATO, and was managing several projects at the Council.

Each NATO-member country and Partnership for Peace (PfP) country has an Atlantic Council. The Atlantic Council of the US is, in my opinion, the best. It works on research related to US foreign policy, of which a part is devoted to NATO. The European Councils, however, tend to be prolific conference organizers and produce little substantive research. They tend to promote NATO in their countries and host many educational activities. The British Council is somewhere between the US Council and the European ones, doing some outstanding research although it is largely NATO-related. The Central European Councils are almost exactly alike; they spend 99 percent of their time pushing for admission to NATO and the European Union, and the remainder of their time promoting NATO in their home countries.

The Hungarian Atlantic Council was formed under the last government by members of a few selected "elites" in Hungary. Some were cabinet members of the



government, some were heads of companies, others were prominent academicians. It is fairly typical of other Central European Councils in that the common element that brought it together was the belief that Hungary should join NATO and other western alliances, namely the European Union, thereby reunite itself with its long-lost western family. It also included an interesting clause in its founding document, however. It says that only persons who never spoke out publicly against NATO could become members. This seems innocent and reasonable enough for a pro-NATO organization, but in reality it kept former Communists of any importance out of the organization. The provision didn't seem all that radical during the first post-communist government, when hopes of a free-market, democratic state and an overnight transition still ran high. But it definitely has caused some problems since the former Communists were voted back into power.

The "elite" founders made two major mistakes in the beginning. First, they never made up their minds whether the Council would be a social club or a serious, active NGO. Second, while they were, and are, an official NGO that turns in official grant proposals and operates on a budget, all of their money came directly from government grants that are exceptionally easy to receive when your members hold government positions. Those same government funds are very difficult to receive when elections vote your party out of control, which is exactly what happened. To this day I honestly don't believe they ever anticipated this.

In Central and Eastern Europe long-term planning is just now coming to be understood and applied by some. There has always been a good deal of talk about the future, but it seems usually just to be talk and not much more. On the one hand, immediately after the so-called revolutions, euphoria ran so high that most people could not foresee things going wrong or the democratic government being voted out. On the other hand, there was a suppressed fear that this was all sort of a dream and that any moment the tanks would roll back in as they did when each of these countries attempted previous revolutions (for example, in Hungary in 1956). I believe that for these two reasons the people just lived for the moment and the Council members in particular didn't ever imagine that they might have to function under a different government. If they did imagine it, they surely didn't seem to know what that meant.

When new elections were held in 1994 and the friendly, revolutionary government was voted out, the money coming to the Council was cut and its founders had to try and exist as a "real NGO." Suddenly that seemingly innocent clause excluding former Communists excluded all important members of the new government. Only now that the Council is almost completely bankrupt are its members beginning to come to grips with the fact that mistakes were made, and in the real world NGOs must find a proper mix of private, foundation and some government money. I think that the lesson was a good and much-needed one, albeit a

hard one. Sadly, though, I think some of the members still entertain the delusion that if they just manage to survive until the next election, then surely the Communists will be voted out and everything will be okay.

As I wind up my work with the Hungarian Atlantic Council, I'd like to vote in favor of Hungary's admission to NATO and discuss the two debates about it. The first debate is the "Russian debate," which claims that expansion of NATO would anger Russia and end its chances of moving along the path to democracy. To begin with, NATO is a defensive and not an offensive alliance, therefore posing no direct threat to Russia. It is a threat to Russia only if Russia attacks. Second, the issue of whether Russia will or will not become a democracy does not depend on NATO, but on Russia, its leaders and above all its people. Third, Russia cannot turn back toward Communism. It is a totally bankrupt system that would take them nowhere. A different country might experiment with it and make some progress for a while, but a country like Russia that has allowed Communism to run its course all the way into the ground cannot return to it immediately. It is like a car or an airplane that not only ran out of gas, but crashed so completely that it is now a worthless pile of scrap metal. It is absurd to fear the Russians can possibly get back in that car or airplane and go anywhere. They may deviate from the path of democracy, which is bad, but I am fully confident that they will not and cannot return to Communism in the near term.

Fourth, Russia is not a great military power any more and was even foolish enough to make the strategic mistake of engaging in the Chechen war, showing the West how truly pathetic its forces are today. As for nuclear weapons, they matter only because the West is worried that Third-World countries may buy them from former Soviet countries. In sum, I do not see Russia as a major threat and feel the West, led by the USA, should expand NATO now, adding former Soviet-bloc countries and thereby enabling the West to carry on with other tasks like helping Russia, restructuring NATO, the EU, etc.

The second debate, which deals with the cost of expansion, is largely American in character and basically claims that the costs of expansion are too great to justify it. As an economist, I can't help but love debates dealing with costs and benefits. Here, the argument is extremely weak. To begin with, the budgetary cost for the US is insignificant at best. The cost of expanding the Alliance now is nothing more than paying for regional stability or, in other words, paying for the avoidance of risk. This needs a little explaining.

Should Russia turn out to be a real threat, then the alternative to expansion would be to use "Partners for Peace" to keep the CEE countries close to the west for now and then, in the case of Russian aggression, expand NATO quickly and fully. The expenses of expanding all at once and in full force (*i.e.* massive troop movements and setting up of bases) would be far greater than those with gradual upgrading now. Furthermore, if the former



bloc countries are not in NATO, then they are, by definition, outside of NATO, which is a dangerous thing. The Central European countries are a no-man's-land between east and west, which leaves them nervous pawns in the international game of security, trade and politics. That is an unstable arrangement on the face of it. The best way to guarantee that these countries do not turn into rogue states constantly warring with each other is to provide them with the secure environment required to make the transition. Then they will not only serve as examples to other aspiring countries, but will also be in a position to help, rather than compete with, their neighbors. A Hungarian thinker named István Bibó, writing in 1946, offered the great insight into this issue:

"Being a democrat means, primarily, not to be afraid; not to be afraid of those who have differing opinions, speak different languages, or belong to other races; not to be afraid of revolutions, conspiracies, the unknown malicious intent of enemies, hostile propaganda, being demeaned, or any of those imaginary dangers that become truly dangerous because we are afraid of them. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe [are] afraid because they [are] not fully developed mature democracies, and they [can] not become fully developed mature democracies because they [are] afraid."<sup>1</sup>

Thus, Bibó explained Central Europe's Catch-22 situation 40 years ago. Today, I think that NATO inclusion of these countries is a way out of that Catch 22. After expansion, they can help their neighbors, including Russia, out of similar Catch 22s. We lost them 40 years ago; let's not lose them again.

## COMING FULL CIRCLE

One of the less frequently discussed issues that arises when discussing NATO is that of the region's minorities, particularly Hungarian minorities. There is a fear in the west that by including Hungary in NATO, the West would import Hungary's problems with neighboring countries over Hungarian minorities. I feel that if democracy can continue to take root, in Central Europe, and if democracy is better at handling minority-majority relations than other systems, then the future may be bright. Unfortunately, I don't know if that is true. I suspect it is, but have no real evidence to support that suspicion. Concepts like democracy often work better in theory than in practice. Many claim that democracy would not be enough to settle ethnic problems in, say, Romania, but that some form of autonomy for minorities is required. At this point I really don't know. Indeed, the issue, in part, led me to apply for a fellowship from the Institute of Current World Affairs to live in

CEE and study the economics and status of Hungarian minorities in other countries.

Once again, I have a lot of learning to do in the coming two years. To begin with, I need to learn the Hungarian language adequately. Up to now I have studied it in my very limited free time. I am at a functional level, but am still a long way from where I need to be for my fellowship. I also need better understanding of the intricacies of history in both its Hungarian and non-Hungarian versions. This will, of course, be ongoing during my two years here, but I intend to concentrate on background study and language training for the coming six months. After that time, I plan to be looking at several issues. Is autonomy really a good idea? Is it better than decentralized democracy and freer markets in managing ethnic differences in, say, Romania? If it is theoretically better or worse, then is it realistically more or less feasible than other alternatives? If it is better and more feasible, then how would it be structured? And on a different note: What do terms such as history, culture and tradition *mean* in an ethnic context? These are only a few of the issues I hope to be looking at while here.

Mainly, however, I want to keep these issues in the forefront of my mind, while remaining flexible enough to follow any other strands of interest I'm sure to encounter. For once in my life I intend not to overplan what may be the freest time in my life, so that I can better incorporate any upcoming twists and turns into my fellowship.

## BACK IN HUNGARY

Now that I have returned to Hungary as a fellow, some things have indeed changed. I am grateful that I made Hungarian friends early on, when they laughingly called me the only poor American they'd ever met. Already, other Hungarians have propositioned me with ways to cheat ICWA out of money. I will also surely have to deal with the CIA issue. Again. Within the first months of travel here in 1994 I was accused of being a CIA agent. At the time they told me "All you do is ask lots of questions, sit quietly listening, never take sides and then write things down at night and occasionally send them back to the States. To make matters worse, you're not that dumb." That was because I was trying to learn as much as possible during my early, unemployed days. I was making notes in a journal and did occasionally send them to a newspaper in Atlanta, which never published a word. Now, as a fellow, sitting, listening, remaining objective, keeping notes and sending reports to the US is actually my full-time job. Oh boy, they'll never believe me this time. □

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1. Bibó, István. "Democracy, Revolution, Self-Determination, The Distress of East European Small States", 1991, Atlantic Research and Publications, p.42.

## Institute Fellows and their Activities

**Adam Smith Albion.** A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is spending two years studying and writing about Turkey and Central Asia, and their importance as actors the Middle East and the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

**Christopher P. Ball.** An economist, Chris Ball holds a B.A. from the University of Alabama in Huntsville and attended the 1992 International Summer School at the London School of Economics. He studied Hungarian for two years in Budapest while serving as Project Director for the Hungarian Atlantic Council. As an Institute Fellow, he is studying and writing about Hungarian minorities in the former Soviet-bloc nations of East and Central Europe. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

**William F. Foote.** Formerly a financial analyst with Lehman Brothers' Emerging Markets Group, Willy Foote is examining the economic substructure of Mexico and the impact of free-market reforms on Mexico's people, society and politics. Willy holds a Bachelor's degree from Yale University (history), a Master's from the London School of Economics (Development Economics; Latin America) and studied Basque history in San Sebastian, Spain. He carried out intensive Spanish-language studies in Guatemala in 1990 and then worked as a copy editor and Reporter for the *Buenos Aires Herald* from 1990 to 1992. [THE AMERICAS]

**Sharon Griffin.** A feature writer and contributing columnist on African affairs at the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Sharon is spending two years in southern Africa studying Zulu and the KwaZulu kingdom and writing about the role of nongovernmental organizations as fulfillment centers for national needs in developing countries where governments are still feeling their way toward effective administration. [sub-SAHARA]

**John Harris.** A would-be lawyer with an undergraduate degree in History from the University of Chicago, John reverted to international studies after a year of internship in the product-liability department of a Chicago law firm and took two years of postgraduate Russian at the University of Washington in Seattle. Based in Moscow during his fellowship, John is studying and writing about Russia's nascent political parties as they begin the difficult transition from identities based on the personalities of their leaders to positions based on national and international issues. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

**Pramila Jayapal.** Born in India, Pramila left when she was four and went through primary and secondary education in Indonesia. She graduated from Georgetown University in 1986 and won an M.B.A. from the Kellogg School of Management in Evanston, Illinois in 1990. She has worked as a corporate analyst for PaineWebber and an accounts manager for the world's leading producer of cardiac defibrillators, but most recently managed a \$7 million developing-country revolving-loan fund for the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) in Seattle. Pramila is spending two years in India tracing her roots and studying social issues involving religion, the status of women, population and AIDS. [SOUTH ASIA]

**John B. Robinson.** A 1991 Harvard graduate with a certificate of proficiency from the Institute of Kiswahili in Zanzibar, John spent two years as an English teacher in Tanzania. He received a Master's degree in Creative Writing from Brown University in 1995. He and his wife Delphine, a French oceanographer, are spending two years in Madagascar with their two young sons, Nicolas and Rowland, where he will be writing about varied aspects of the island-nation's struggle to survive industrial and natural-resource exploitation and the effects of a rapidly swelling population. [sub-SAHARA]

**Teresa C. Yates.** A former member of the American Civil Liberties Union's national task force on the workplace, Teresa is spending two years in South Africa observing and reporting on the efforts of the Mandela government to reform the national land-tenure system. A Vassar graduate with a *juris doctor* from the University of Cincinnati College of Law, Teresa had an internship at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies in Johannesburg in 1991 and 1992, studying the feasibility of including social and economic rights in the new South African constitution. [sub-SAHARA]

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