

Kosovo: Mission Not Yet Accomplished

Six years ago, a U.S.-led military intervention ended ethnic violence in Kosovo. International peacekeepers have patrolled the province ever since. Now Kosovo has reached a turning point. Without America's continued leadership, Kosovo could reignite, spreading new conflict throughout the Balkans.

by Martin C. Sletzinger and Nida Gelazis

Throughout the 1990s, Yugoslavia was the world's nightmare. Today, the pleasant lethargy of the seaside has returned to the Adriatic coast that forms the western borders of Croatia and Montenegro. This past summer *The New York Times* proclaimed Croatia "a new Riviera," where celebrities such as Gwyneth Paltrow take their ease. Farther east in Belgrade, open-air cafés, throbbing nightclubs, and plentiful restaurants do a brisk business. And on most evenings, residents and visitors stroll about in downtown Sarajevo, the Bosnian capital where snipers once picked off people in the streets.

Democratically elected governments are installed in every one of the western Balkan countries—Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Albania. Some, notably Bosnia and Herzegovina, have managed to return significant numbers of refugees to their homes. All aspire to join the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Yet this bright picture belies the bleak reality. High unemployment rates, rampant crime and corruption, unreformed political institutions, and lingering ethnic tensions continue to afflict the region. The Yu-

goslavia crisis is not quite over; neither, it seems, is the process of the former country's disintegration. By far the biggest question mark remaining in the Balkans is Kosovo, a desperately poor province the size of Connecticut, composed of small farms and towns scattered across the forested mountains that make up the southern portion of Serbia. The fate of Kosovo is intertwined with that of all its neighbors, some still recovering from their own ethnic conflicts.

Six years after a NATO bombing campaign against Slobodan Milosević's Yugoslavia to end violence against Kosovo's ethnic Albanians, Kosovo remains a political and economic morass. Barely half of the 200,000 Serbs who inhabited the province in 1999 remain, and those who do are guarded by United Nations peacekeepers and live for the most part in isolated enclaves, fearful of reprisals by the province's two million ethnic Albanians. Kosovo remains a UN protectorate, neither an independent country nor a directly ruled province of Serbia. Before its status can be resolved, a host of tough questions will need to be addressed.

The Balkans, relatively peaceful and largely out of sight for the past few years, have also been out of mind in the United

States. Now the Bush administration would like nothing better than to diminish America's remaining commitments in the region and concentrate on its other state-building efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Although publicly neither endorsing nor rejecting independence for Kosovo, the United States is pushing for a course that could lead relatively quickly to Kosovo's independence and to EU membership. But neither Kosovo nor the EU is ready for such a move.

At a time when anti-Americanism is the political sentiment du jour around the globe, the Balkans are one of the few areas where the United States is popular. Virtually everyone in the region wants the United States to remain in the Balkans, as do America's European allies. The United States enjoys a unique position of trust there. Albanians trust it because U.S. leadership in the bombing of Serbia enabled Kosovo to escape the control of Milosević once and for all. Croats and Bosniaks—as Bosnia's Muslims are known—are grateful because they perceived the NATO bombing as retaliation for Milosević's earlier attacks on them. America's credibility also stems from its remove across the Atlantic—it does not carry the burdens of historical involvement in the region that make each Balkan state suspicious of European countries such as Britain, Germany, and France. And even though the U.S. military bombed Belgrade, Serbs appreciate its protection of the Serb enclaves in Kosovo as well as the Serbian part of Bosnia.

Yet the United States has already significantly pruned its commitments in the western Balkans, where U.S. peacekeepers serve beside about 25,000 troops principally from the EU and NATO countries. U.S. peacekeepers now number just over 2,000; at the height of American involvement in 1996, there were nearly 20,000. U.S. aid—mostly for state-building efforts such as civic education, the development of political parties, and market reform—has been scaled back dramatically as well. In 2002, the western Balkans received \$441.8 million, while fiscal year 2005's estimated assistance is \$264.4 million.

This is as it should be, many might argue. The United States faces greater threats and challenges outside Europe, where only a few of its European allies have been eager to help. Why not hand off the problems in the western Balkans to the EU? When it led the NATO bombing campaign in defense of human dignity, however, the United States took on a responsibility that can only be discharged when human dignity is restored. The current situation in Kosovo indicates that this mission is far from complete.

Today, ethnic Albanians make up 90 percent of the population of Kosovo, while the remainder consists primarily of Serbs, Roma, and Turks. The hatreds that divide the Serb and Albanian ethnic communities are founded on a bloody history of conflict and the scars of recent violence, as well as language and religious barriers. Most ethnic Albanians are Muslims, while the Serbs are Serbian Orthodox, members of a branch of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Under the rule of Marshal Tito, the Communist leader who managed to keep Yugoslavia whole from the end of World War II until his death in 1980, Kosovo was part of the Republic of Serbia, as it had been earlier. In 1974, Tito granted Kosovo autonomy almost equal to that of the six republics within Yugoslavia, but when Slobodan Milosević became president in 1989, he stripped the province of that freedom. As Yugoslavia disintegrated in the early 1990s, civil war erupted in Croatia and Bosnia, but in Kosovo the ethnic Albanian majority pressed for independence from Serbia more or less peacefully—until the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords, which ended the violence in Bosnia but did not address resolution of the issue of Kosovo.

In 1997, the Albanian-led Kosovo Liberation Army launched a guerilla campaign. Serbs, led by Milosević—who is currently standing trial at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY)—retaliated with violent mass expulsions. With the Clinton administration in the lead, NATO member countries—by then familiar with Milosević's ethnic cleansing tactics in Srebrenica, Bosnia, where 7,000 Muslim men and boys

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Children trail a peacekeeper in the outskirts of Kosovo's capital, Pristina. Since NATO bombs ended Serbia's aggression in Kosovo, international troops have been protecting Kosovo's Serbian minority.

were killed in July 1995—launched a bombing campaign designed to force Serbs to stop the expulsions. It was NATO's first attack on a sovereign European country in its 50-year history.

NATO planners expected the bombing, which began on March 24, 1999, to last less than a week. Instead, it continued for 78 days, even as Milosević's army continued its expulsion campaign, driving nearly 800,000 of Kosovo's two million Albanians into Macedonia, Albania, and Montenegro. Milosević's ground war against the guerillas cost several thousand lives on both sides.

The war finally ended when Milosević agreed to an international military presence in Kosovo, led by NATO, and a political framework headed by the UN. When the bombing stopped, President Bill Clinton declared in an Oval Office address, "Because of our resolve, the 20th century is ending not with helpless indignation, but with a hopeful affirmation of human dignity and human rights for the 21st century."

As Albanians returned to Kosovo, however, there followed a retaliatory round of forced migration of the province's Serbs, despite the fact that Kosovo was a protectorate under the UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo, known as UNMIK. Red Cross and UN estimates put the number of Serb refugees from Kosovo at just over 100,000. The fires of ethnic hatred, banked to varying degrees in other Balkan countries, continue to burn with intensity there. In March 2004, the worst violence since 1999 broke out when radical Kosovar Albanians damaged or destroyed three dozen churches and cultural monuments—some of them centuries old—in Prizren, Peć, and other Serbian enclaves.

A resolution of Kosovo's future status is vital to energizing economic and political development and fostering greater stability in the region. But the two sides are so far apart. The Kosovars, led by President Ibrahim Rugova, want independence from Serbia now, and will accept—so they say

publicly—nothing less. The Serbs' formal position, as expressed by Serbian president Boris Tadic and prime minister Vojislav Kostunica, is adamantly to rule out independence for Kosovo, which to many Serbs represents the historic cradle of their nation. Straying from this party line is political suicide in Serbia. Recently, when parliamentarian and former foreign minister Goran Svilanovic suggested that Serbs needed to come to grips with the impending loss of Kosovo, he was thrown out of his voting bloc in parliament.

In an unconvincing effort to demonstrate flexibility, the government in Belgrade has proposed a new formula for Kosovo's future status: "More than autonomy, less than independence." This clever slogan can be interpreted in many ways. To the international community, it hints at some flexibility in Serbia's anti-independence stance. To the Serb population, it shows that independence for Kosovo is unequivocally off the table.

Recently, some in the region have expressed new interest in a plan to give local governments in Kosovo greater power, which would provide varying degrees of autonomy for areas populated by Serbs. But the Serb proposal for this decentralization plan is based on the premise that Kosovo will remain part of Serbia. The Kosovars, unsurprisingly, envision decentralization as a step toward independence. Here is yet another illustration of the distance between the two sides.

UN policy dictates that negotiations on whether Kosovo remains a part of Serbia and Montenegro or becomes an independent state hinge on the ability of the Kosovars to meet a series of democratic standards. This policy is referred to in shorthand as "standards before status." UNMIK must work with Kosovo's elected leaders to establish functioning democratic institutions under the rule of law, a competitive market economy, conditions that facilitate the return of refugees and ensure the protection of minority rights, and a constructive dialogue with Belgrade. The fragility of the current government was highlighted last spring, when the elected prime minister, Ramush Haradinaj,

resigned and surrendered to the ICTY, where he was charged with 37 counts of war crimes allegedly committed during the 1990s against Serbs.

When Norwegian diplomat Kai Eide was appointed in March as the UN envoy to review Kosovo's progress on standards, most specialists believed that his report would quickly lead to formal status negotiations, resulting in eventual independence for Kosovo, albeit with strings attached. In May, R. Nicholas Burns, U.S. under secretary of state for political affairs, said that the administration was aiming to begin negotiations on Kosovo's status by the end of 2005. "We and our allies are entering a new stage in our policy toward the Balkans, one that will accelerate the region's integration into the European family and Euro-Atlantic institutions," he told the House Committee on International Relations.

At the time, the administration's hopes did not appear misplaced. After the March 2004 violence, the UN revised its plan so that the Kosovars would be required to show *progress toward* adopting the UN standards, rather than actually adopting them. Given these lower standards and evidence that Serbia is increasingly cooperative with the ICTY, last spring it seemed probable that status talks could begin soon, allowing the United States to begin wrapping things up in Kosovo.

Now it seems likely that Eide will report that evidence even of progress is insufficient, since the safety of Serbs and their cultural monuments in Kosovo is still guaranteed only by the presence of foreign troops. Nonetheless, diplomats and analysts expect the start of negotiations on status to move forward, perhaps with a brief delay until early 2006, because the uncertainty about who will govern Kosovo in the future means that no one is governing it effectively today. Organized crime is largely unchecked, delivery of electricity is intermittent, and basic social services are lacking. The stakes are too high to permit Kosovo to continue languishing in limbo.

Independence for Kosovo would have wide-ranging implications for the entire region. All the countries of the western Balkans are linked by geography and history, and the two things they most desperately need—peace and economic development—will be difficult to achieve if even one country falters.

Unless all affected countries are brought into the status dialogue, the inviolability of borders and other issues that are considered settled at this point could be called into question, not just in Serbia but in Macedonia and Montenegro, where significant Albanian minorities reside. In addition, if Kosovo becomes independent before its government is strong enough to function effectively, the corruption and organized crime that already flourish there could become entrenched and spread to the wider region. These potential pitfalls are part of the reason UNMIK imposed “standards before status” in the first place.

The United States has ruled out the possibility of partition—adjusting Kosovo’s borders, which could allow part of it to become independent while some Serbian enclaves would remain in Serbia. The argument is that dividing Kosovo would neither represent a just solution (since it would reward expulsions by both Serbs and Albanians) nor offer a lasting peace (since a large number of Serbs in Kosovo live far from the Serb enclaves near the border). Many Kosovars see America’s push for accelerated negotiations and its rejection of partition as tacit support for independence. But imposed independence, achieved after a brief charade of negotiations, could very well leave the region even less stable than it is now.

Because countries in the Balkans are so intimately connected, and because Kosovo’s status so desperately needs to be resolved, an international consensus is building that the best course is the eventual inclusion of Kosovo and its neighbors in the EU. Only the EU can provide the financial and political support to foster economic development and to bring Kosovo’s Serbs and Albanians together in a manner that could make independence less contentious.



The fate of the Albanian-dominated province of Kosovo is linked with that of its neighbors. Kosovo abuts Albania, and significant ethnic Albanian populations also live in Macedonia and Montenegro.

The general idea is that the countries of the western Balkans can follow the path paved by the eight postcommunist countries admitted to the EU in 2004: the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Before the EU began in earnest the process of admitting postcommunist Europe in 1997, the applicant countries had been struggling to achieve consensus on political and economic change. EU membership, which was contingent on significant government reforms, such as court reform, market standardization, and increased institutional efficiency, motivated the political parties in each country to cooperate.

Working toward EU membership broke the deadlock that prevented the adoption of reforms. The EU’s influence was far-reaching. Estonia and Latvia, which had long resisted international pressure to liberalize strict naturalization policies that left thousands of deeply resented ethnic Russians stateless, eased citizenship requirements. In all the new member states, EU-mandated political and economic reforms attracted previously reluctant for-



A Serbian Orthodox church in Prizren, Kosovo, bears the scars of violence that erupted in March 2004, when ethnic Albanian extremists destroyed churches and cultural monuments in Serbian enclaves.

eign investors, with double-digit economic growth rates the result.

For the first time, the international community had succeeded in fostering domestic reform without challenging a country's sovereignty or threatening force. Writing in *The New York Times* last year, British historian and foreign-affairs analyst Timothy Garton Ash praised the healthy "magnetic power" the EU has exerted on aspiring members: "This is regime change, European-style."

Given this success, it is easy to see why EU membership seems the panacea for the western Balkans. But the dream and the reality are far apart. The EU itself is struggling to absorb its recent additions—all of them much poorer than the western European average. And the stunning rejection of the proposed new EU constitution by French and Dutch voters earlier this year has halted the further integration of Europe, at least for the moment.

While the founding vision of the EU was to create a new borderless Europe free of ancient ethnic and national antagonisms, one need look no further than the Basque sepa-

ratists in Spain or the impasse in Cyprus to see that ethnic tensions are alive and well in the new Europe. While goods and labor may move freely, the human compulsion to erect divisions between "us" and "them" is difficult to eradicate. And there is no consensus among the EU member states on the principles or legal status of minority rights, in part because countries such as France and Belgium cannot reconcile the protection of minority rights with equality among all citizens. Without a clear set of principles, it will be very hard for the EU to address ethnic tensions in places such as Kosovo.

Perhaps more important, a strong state is needed to implement the measures required for membership in the EU. Effective government is not a hallmark of the Balkans. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, ethnic power allocations mandated by the Dayton accords create multiple layers of government structures and institutions, including several ethnically based universities, two pension systems, and 12 health care systems. While other postcommunist countries had weak institutions, the Balkan countries also are rife with border disputes. There is the uncer-

tainty about Kosovo's status as a Serbian province. And in Bosnia and Herzegovina, some Serbs and Croats still entertain hopes of eventual unification with their mother countries.

Some experts suggest that these obstacles could be overcome if EU rules are adapted to the specific problems in the western Balkans. Perhaps the EU could establish a "second-tier" membership option, allowing countries to become members before adopting all the required standards. Or perhaps troubled regions such as Kosovo could become EU "protectorates." But these ideas run counter to the EU's entire legal foundation. One of the EU's strengths is that it is a group of countries that have agreed to be equal partners in making decisions that affect the Union. The EU's concept of shared sovereignty means that no member state can control another.

Another obstacle to quick integration is that the EU's magnetic power is not universally attractive in the Balkans. Each of the post-communist countries now in the EU succeeded in overcoming internal opponents of membership, but in the western Balkans the opposition is much stronger. Croatia's case is illustrative. It has led the pack in the western Balkans in the EU integration process, but membership negotiations were postponed in March when unreformed nationalists strongly resisted the EU's demand that Croatia turn over to the ICTY Ante Gotovina, a Croat general indicted for war crimes against Serbs during the early 1990s. He remains at large, perhaps abroad.

The EU will of course play an essential role in Kosovo's future, but the United States cannot leave everything up to its allies. Indeed, the search for a "final status" is in itself unrealistic. The unhappy reality is that there is no quick or easy fix for Kosovo. Instead, the United States and its allies must focus on finding a way to *manage* Kosovo's difficult mix of ethnic tensions, social upheaval, and economic depression. The only realistic option today is a kind of incremental, conditional independence over a period of years, in lock-step with slow, methodical preparations for membership in the EU. Such a process toward peace would necessarily be lengthy and costly, requiring meaningful negotiations

among Serbia, Kosovo, and all the countries of the region as well as the United States and its European allies. Nothing should be ruled out—even the possibility of limited border adjustments to Kosovo and Serbia—if this will help bring the parties to political settlement.

This kind of negotiation process may seem too soft, too slow, and too sticky for some. But it may be the only way forward. As political scientist P. Terrance Hoppman has emphasized in his analysis of international peace-keeping efforts, success depends upon the willingness of international policy makers to recognize the psychological effects of ethnic violence. The embers of fear and anger left by ethnic violence encourage people to see themselves as victims of the "other." In a world divided simply into good and evil, compromise with, or even civility toward, the enemy is betrayal. And if people feel that they are still victims, they continue to dehumanize their enemies, thus increasing the likelihood of further violence.

If this cycle is to be broken, both Albanians' and Serbs' perceptions of themselves as victims must be overcome. The West may feel tempted to impose a solution, but only face-to-face negotiations between the two parties—even if protracted and, at least to outsiders, apparently tedious—will produce a solution that both Serbs and Albanians can call their own. Any imposed solution will not end feelings of victimization. The cycle of violence will continue.

Since the bombing of Serbia, the United States has adopted as its leading national security strategy the idea that protecting human dignity abroad will increase U.S. security at home. This theory is being tested elsewhere in the world, as the United States struggles with state-building in Iraq and Afghanistan. Through its chief role in the bombing of Milosević's Serbia, the United States gained credibility in the region. It stood up to a cruel regime that destroyed human dignity. But six years after the bombing, the conflict is far from resolved and human dignity is hardly restored. If anything, America's current foreign-policy goals should reinforce its commitment to stay in Kosovo, rather than provide an excuse for its early exit. □