

Nation Creation

Nation Creation: Kosovo's Rocky Road to Independence

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Published in Slate.com, 2 March 2006

Creating new states is a tricky business at the best of times. The delicate crust of stability, both within the putative new state and among those countries that must recognize it, can easily be sundered. Nowhere is that crust more fragile than in the Balkans, as recent history has all too bloodily demonstrated.

Today, Kosovo stands on the cusp of statehood. Still legally a province of Serbia, since 1999 Kosovo has in all but legal form been separate and administered by the United Nations, which late last year initiated a process to decide Kosovo's final status: Will Kosovo be an independent state, and, if so, what kind? Comprised of the usual closed-door meetings and shuttle diplomacy, this process is led by a U.N. special envoy trying to find agreement on what to do, not only among those most concerned—above all the inhabitants of Kosovo itself—but also among the diverse interests of the "international community."

Among the diplomats dealing with the issue, there is wide private consensus that the time for Kosovo's independence has come. But that consensus is accompanied by concern that the process be executed peacefully. In these days of global threats and Middle East turmoil, no one needs another Balkans war.

Kosovo's indeterminate status since the 1999 war has done little to settle relations between the majority Albanian and minority Serbian communities, not least since their alienation has much longer roots. For Kosovo's ethnic Albanians, the war was painful and traumatic but ultimately a release from what they saw as decades of Slav domination. When Serbian President Boris Tadic publicly proposed that he attend the Jan. 26 funeral of Ibrahim Rugova, Kosovo's president and icon of national self-determination, the Kosovo government brusquely rejected his suggestion. In his statement, Tadic had unwisely mentioned that Kosovo is still part of Serbia and Montenegro, a red rag to the Kosovar-Albanian community even in less emotional times. For a small nationalist minority in Kosovo, even participating in the U.N. process is too great a concession. Ubiquitous graffiti in Pristina, Kosovo's capital, demands no negotiation in the U.N. talks. For these hard-liners, Kosovo has been independent since 1999; what, therefore, is there to talk about? Meanwhile, the resignation of Kosovo's prime minister is but one sign of the internal and international pressures on the government to perform effectively in this critical period.

For Kosovo's other communities, above all the Serbs, the U.N. talks cause different anxieties. There is still sporadic violence against them (a grenade was recently thrown

into the garden of a prominent Kosovo Serb politician), and even if the hostility is much less violent than in the past, many Serbs still do not feel safe to work and travel around their own country. The U.N. process asks what legal protections, monitoring, and other guarantees need to be put in place to ensure their long-term safety. The other core issue is how local government should be restructured to allow maximum self-government for the Serbs and other minorities within the confines of an independent state.

Things are not much more straightforward in the broader "international community" (or, at least, the big powers whose secretive Contact Group controls diplomacy over the Balkans). The United States, Britain, France, Italy, and Germany have more or less decided that independence is the answer for Kosovo's and the region's long-term stability: The overwhelming aspiration of Kosovo's majority could not be clearer; no one in the United Nations or NATO wants to perpetuate the expensive international presence there. The violence of March 2004, when rioting mobs turned on U.N. police and offices, as well as Serb enclaves, showed the international community that its welcome had worn thin (see the International Crisis Group's excellent report). Since the '99 war, a return to Serbian sovereignty has been out of the question. Independence is the only credible option.

Russia, the final member of the Contact Group, may recognize this inevitability, but its representatives have begun to talk about the "universal" applicability of Kosovo's final-status process. Perhaps Moscow intends to bargain Kosovo's independence for concessions elsewhere (Central Asia, Iran?), or, more likely, it is worried that Kosovo's independence might encourage other secessionist movements, perhaps in Russia's own backyard, to accelerate their own struggles for self-determination. For this reason, the United States, Britain, and others have been careful to classify the Kosovo process as "unique."

At present, Serbia, weakly governed by an uneasy moderate coalition and pressured from the nationalist right, is emphatic in its rejection of independence for Kosovo. Remember that the ancient battlefield of Kosovo Polje, outside Pristina, is where Slobodan Milosevic began his nationalist crusade with a provocative speech before half a million Serbs in 1989. Today, nationalist politicians line up to denounce anyone who even contemplates ceding the province (even if many Serbs privately accept this looming reality). If this rejection doesn't elide into acquiescence (no one expects the Serbs to welcome it), the "international community" has a problem. For at the end of all this, the U.N. Security Council, which supervises the U.N. process, must endorse whatever outcome it produces (and must, moreover, vote for a new state to be accepted into the United Nations). China and Russia, both of whose vetoes can summarily block any decision, have said clearly that they will only agree if Belgrade does, too.

Russia and China are worried about their peripheries and "near-abroads"—the Chechnyas, Tibets, and Abkhazias. They are determined to uphold the principle that a state must agree before seceding parts of its territory. In principle, this sounds entirely reasonable. In practice, it may mean that Belgrade is given an unwarranted veto over the whole process. And if independence is blocked for long (say, much beyond the end of

this year), violence in Kosovo, and perhaps elsewhere in the Balkans (both Macedonia and southern Serbia have similar tensions), won't be far away.

For the moment, diplomacy proceeds quietly and smoothly, with little drama or press attention. The U.N. special envoy, former president of Finland Marti Ahtisaari, is a wise and experienced operator, but if he—with the backing of the Contact Group and dollops of European Union and American money—cannot persuade (or, more realistically, force) Serbia to accept Kosovo's independence, then expect the dispute once more to march rapidly up the international agenda, to the place where crises and imminent wars dwell. It hasn't happened yet, and the diplomats hope it won't, but when practice and principle come into conflict, in diplomacy as in life, trouble is often the result.

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