

The Latest Balkans Breakdown is None of Washington's Business

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The Balkans has regained its reputation as a geopolitical black hole. Kosovo recently deployed armored vehicles to arrest ethnic Serbs in the north for alleged smuggling. Ethnic Albanian police, meanwhile, have clashed with ethnic Serb civilians, which Serbian government official Marko Djuric called a threat to stability and peace. Belgrade has put army units on alert. Russia, Serbia's ally, has criticized Kosovo's "provocation."

Germany's famed Otto von Bismarck once warned that war in Europe would be triggered by "some damn foolish thing in the Balkans." He was proven right when three decades later, the continent plunged into the abyss of World War I. Out of that conflict emerged what the Germans called *Saisonstaaten*, or "states for a season": small, undemocratic, and mostly ethnically based nations that proved vulnerable to rising totalitarian powers. Most were in or near the Balkans.

The Cold War largely froze these national disputes. But once the Soviet Union dissolved, multiethnic Yugoslavia joined it in history's trash can, and the Balkans again became a fount of conflict.

However, the extended combat and outside intervention that followed were not inevitable. In 1992, Bosnia and Herzegovina's Alija Izetbegovic accepted the Lisbon Agreement, which would have granted Croats and Serbs the same right of secession as his dominant Muslim community claimed from Yugoslavia. Then at the urging of the U.S. ambassador to Yugoslavia, Warren Zimmerman, Izetbegovic reversed himself and decided on war. Three years of brutal conflict ensued, killing tens of thousands. Ethnic Serbs committed noteworthy atrocities, but so did Bosnian Muslims and Croats.

Washington took a reflexive anti-Serb position, supporting anyone who sought to leave a Serb-dominated government while denying ethnic Serbs the same right to secede from other regimes. The Clinton administration would not even call the expulsion of 150,000 to 200,000 ethnic Serbs from their ancestral homes in Croatia's Krajina region ethnic cleansing. Moreover, the U.S. counted as a great achievement bombing the Bosnian Serbs into the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement, which preserved a multi-ethnic Bosnia against the wishes of most Serbs and Croats.

What of Washington's handiwork today? Bosniak journalist Aleksandar Brezar complained that "this multicultural, multi-ethnic project is under serious attack." But why hold it together with international baling wire and duct tape if so many of its people reject it? (Ironically, Bosnia has not recognized Kosovo, presumably fearful of encouraging secession by the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska, which, along with the Muslim-Croat Federation, makes up Bosnia.)

Bosnia is no model of nation-building. Freedom House rates it as only “partly free,” and notes, “Politics are characterized by severe partisan gridlock among nationalist leaders from the country’s Bosniak, Serb, and Croat communities. Corruption remains a serious problem.” Freedom of expression is “limited in practice.” So is religious liberty. The judiciary is weak and “guarantees of due process are inconsistently upheld.”

The State Department’s latest human rights report cites “harsh prison conditions; restrictions of freedom of assembly and expression, and the press; widespread government corruption; [and] crimes involving violence against minorities” and LGBT persons. Human Rights Watch reports similar problems.

American officials took a similarly biased approach to Kosovo, an integral part of Serbia rather than a separate state. The population there had shifted over the years, aided by the anti-Serb policy of Yugoslavia’s post-World War II dictator, Josip Broz Tito, and the growing ethnic Albanian majority discriminated against Serbs. Then Milosevic played the ethnic card to vault to the top of the Belgrade leadership after Tito’s death.

As the central government took control, the Kosovo Liberation Army arose, kidnapping and executing Serb officials and ethnic Albanian “collaborators,” and bombing police stations and cafés. The group financed itself through drug smuggling and other criminal activities, as well as contributions from the ethnic Albanian diaspora, including in America. The Clinton administration’s special Balkans envoy, Robert Gelbard, described the KLA as “without any questions, a terrorist group.”

The Yugoslav government responded in kind, inflaming resistance. At the Rambouillet conference, Washington attempted to force Belgrade to sign away its independence, granting NATO free transit throughout the entire country to occupy Kosovo. When Milosevic refused, the U.S. initiated a bombing campaign, after which Serbian troops forced hundreds of thousands of ethnic Albanians from their homes and committed other atrocities.

Yugoslavia finally agreed to withdraw from Albania, which then was occupied by NATO forces. Led by the victorious KLA, ethnic Albanians kicked out 200,000 or more ethnic Serbs, Roma, and other minorities while allied forces stood by.

Reported Human Rights Watch: “The KLA was responsible for serious abuses...including abductions and murders of Serbs and ethnic Albanians considered collaborators with the state. Elements of the KLA are also responsible for post-conflict attacks on Serbs, Roma, and other non-Albanians, as well as ethnic Albanian political rivals.” HRW also noted that “widespread and systematic burning and looting of homes belonging to Serbs, Roma, and other minorities and the destruction of Orthodox churches and monasteries...combined with harassment and intimidation designed to force people from their homes and communities...elements of the KLA are clearly responsible for many of these crimes.”

Amnesty International’s Sian Jones reported on the allies’ failure to investigate the abduction and murder of Serbs at the conflict’s end. These acts “constituted a widespread, as well as a systematic, attack on a civilian population and, potentially, crimes against humanity” and “contributed to the climate of impunity prevailing in Kosovo.” A second round of ethnic and religious cleansing occurred in 2004, also on the allies’ watch. Dozens of people were killed; thousands of houses and stores were wrecked; dozens of churches and monasteries were

destroyed. Thousands of ethnic Serbs were injured and thousands more were forced from their homes.

Freedom House only rates Kosovo “partly free.” Notes FH, the entity’s “institutions remain weak, and rampant corruption has given rise to deep public distrust in the government. Journalists face serious pressure, and risk being attacked in connection with their reporting. The rule of law is inhibited by executive interference in the judiciary.” Moreover, travel is “difficult for many Serbs.” Property rights “are inadequately enforced in practice.”

The State Department points to human rights problems including “refoulement; endemic government corruption; crimes involving violence or threats of violence against journalists; and attacks against members of ethnic minorities or other marginalized communities, including by security forces.” Other issues include a lack of legal due process and poor prison conditions. Moreover, “many in the government, the opposition, civil society, and the media believed that senior officials engaged in corruption with impunity.”

Yet the Americans and Europeans have insisted on independence for Kosovo while barring self-determination for ethnic Serbs, concentrated in the city of Mitrovica, north of the Ibar River. In 2008, Kosovo declared its independence over Serbia’s opposition. Only Russia’s veto blocked Pristina’s membership in the United Nations.

Serbia and Kosovo have since maintained a cold war, with the Serbs in Kosovo’s north resisting Pristina’s rule. The European Union has sought to induce recognition on Belgrade’s part by promising EU membership if they comply, but the Serbs have refused to trade territory for euros and various rounds of talks have failed to make progress. Last November, Kosovars imposed a 100 percent tariff on Serbian goods.

Last month, in an attempt to enforce its legal boundary with Serbia, Pristina arrested alleged smugglers operating in Kosovo’s north. The Serbian government responded with the implicit threat of force. If there are hostilities, it will invite NATO and Russian intervention.

Serbia has its own human rights issues, and no one imagines that it will reestablish its authority over Kosovo. Indeed, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic recently acknowledged that his country had to accept that it had lost control of Kosovo. Still, he predicted that a compromise settlement could take years to reach.

There are alternatives to deadlock. Last year, the Kosovo and Serb governments considered land swaps, allowing ethnic Serbs to remain with Serbia while shifting the majority ethnic Albanian Presevo Valley to Kosovo. A similar border adjustment in Bosnia—breaking apart the unloved state—could normalize relations in the face of intractable hostility.

Brussels and Washington appeared supportive of the Kosovo initiative, but Germany did its best to block any territorial shift. Berlin’s malign role goes back to 1991, when it accelerated Yugoslavia’s break-up, encouraging the tsunami of violence. After wrecking and creating states with wild abandon, Germans now complain about the precedent of “changing borders.”

The U.S. should remain aloof from the latest Balkan follies. Edward P. Joseph of SAIS recently proposed that the Trump administration “demand” that Kosovo and Serbia “end the cycle of provocation,” “produce a detailed framework” for war crimes prosecutions, “seek the long-term basing of U.S. troops” in Serbia, “offer Belgrade a vast upgrade in the military and civil

relationship, potentially to the level of strategic partnership,” and provide “both Serbia and Kosovo a generous development package.”

These ideas are frankly mad. The U.S. has nothing at stake that warrants further meddling in this graveyard of good intentions. Nor does Washington have any idea how to fix the region.

Geopolitical social engineering has consistently failed in the Balkans. Forcing antagonistic peoples to live together generated disorder, chaos, violence, and slaughter. If the Europeans have a better idea, let them try it. The Balkans should be their responsibility.

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