

## A Quarter Century After Liberation, Kosovo Suffers from America's Tight Embrace

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March 7, 2024

A quarter century ago, Kosovo, part of ever-shrinking Yugoslavia, was ready to explode. An ethnic Albanian insurgency burgeoned, fed by Belgrade's brutal military crackdown. Not eager to jump back into the Balkans militarily, the Clinton administration temporized.

Ambassador Robert S. Gelbard, Washington's special envoy, criticized Yugoslav government violence but dismissed talk of independence, condemning the Kosovo Liberation Army as "without any questions, a terrorist group." Around that time, summer 1998, I visited Kosovo, traveling with a Serb military patrol and later wandering into a KLA checkpoint. Kosovo evidently was headed toward full-scale war.

By the following year, proposals for Western intervention were proliferating. Ultimately, Gelbard's superiors abandoned any reservations about the KLA. In March 1999, the U.S. started bombing Belgrade and pushed Kosovo's independence in the ensuing peace. The ethnic Albanian majority declared the new nation of Kosovo in 2008. Some 4,500 NATO troops remain on station, officially for peacekeeping but sometimes performing what amounts to international social work.

Washington is Pristina's most important patron. Wrote POLITICO's Matthew Karnitschnig, "The country is full of monuments, avenues and squares dedicated to American officials who helped win its independence, from former President Bill Clinton to his secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, to [Gen. Wesley K.] Clark, who was NATO's supreme allied commander during the Kosovo War. At one point, the government seriously contemplated naming a lake after Donald Trump."

Nevertheless, Pristina's development has not been easy. Even today Kosovo is rated as only "partly free" by Freedom House, collecting 60 out of a possible 100 points. (Serbia is slightly behind at 57, but hasn't been a Washington dependent for the last quarter century.) Kosovo's leadership has been anything but Jeffersonian as former insurgents turned their talents to crime and corruption, and their country became known as a black hole in Europe. A couple hundred thousand ethnic Serbs were driven from their homes after the war. Extremists even launched a second round of ethnic cleansing against ethnic Serbs in 2004.

Western aid poured in, but much of the cash ended up back in America with U.S. companies. Former officials such as Clark, who was prepared recklessly to risk Armageddon to prevent any Russian post-conflict role, returned to Kosovo to turn their contacts into cash.

Karnitschmig observed, “By most objective measures, the American engagement in Kosovo hasn’t been much of a success. While the U.S. threw plenty of money at the country, a closer look suggests that Washington’s priorities were informed more by short-term American business interests than providing the country what it really needed to develop.” Kosovo remains relatively poor, with many of its young—the country’s future—heading elsewhere in Europe in search of better economic opportunities.

Moreover, Serbia, which resulted when Montenegro seceded from Yugoslavia in 2006, refuses to recognize Kosovo, which no one imagines will ever return to the former’s orbit. Alone, Belgrade could not stop the new country’s progress, but only about half of the world’s nations recognize Kosovo. Even five European states say no, fearing adverse border changes and secessionist movements. Most important, Russia and China block the new country’s entry into the United Nations.

Although Belgrade realizes that Kosovo is lost, the status of the Serbian ethnic minority, victimized by violent retaliation after the 1999 war, remains at issue. The Wilson Center’s Julie Mertus acknowledged: “To the extent that the NATO campaign sought to promote a multiethnic and human rights-abiding society, the campaign was a dismal failure. As long as revenge attacks continue against Serbs and the occupying international force fails to stop it, the result of NATO action in Kosovo cannot be called ‘humanitarian.’ The failure of international forces to protect against revenge killings negates a humanitarian result.”

Some 100,000 Serbs still live in Kosovo, half of whom are concentrated in the north in the city of Mitrovica. This remains a territory effectively apart and they want to join Serbia. Pristina refuses, backed by Washington and most of Europe. Having successively dismantled Yugoslavia and Serbia, the allies conveniently claimed to oppose changing borders in Europe. Such unashamed hypocrisy only fuels Serbian anger.

Kosovo’s Prime Minister Albin Kurti is determined to establish his government’s authority over Kosovo’s north, in which ethnic Serbs make up roughly 90 percent of the population. Pristina and Belgrade have sparred over the local population’s use of Serbian license plates, smuggling of goods across the border, protests against the imposition of ethnic Albanian mayors, and resistance to Pristina’s mandate that ethnic-Serbian areas use European euros instead of Serbian dinars. Last October a gunfight erupted between ethnic Serbian gunmen and Kosovar policemen, leaving several casualties and as yet unfulfilled allied demands for accountability by Belgrade. As both sides postured, Serbia’s President Vucic President Aleksandar Vucic increased Serbian troop levels along the border, causing NATO to add 1,000 soldiers to its peacekeeping mission.

American and allied officials have responded with a flurry of pleas for everyone to be nice to one another and stop causing trouble, with little effect. Europe has promoted a regular “dialogue” for years, but the objective, Serbian recognition of Kosovo, requires Belgrade to concede Pristina’s primary demand while receiving nothing much in return. So the EU treats membership and economic aid/sanctions as inducements. The Crisis Group proposed some “good government” measures, such as improving policing in the majority-Serbian north. Such steps might reduce

hostility but would do little to address the most obvious and important reasons ethnic Serbs want to remain in Serbia.

None of this should matter much to the U.S. Even Europe would be better off distancing itself from the Balkans' eternal quarrels. As Imperial Germany's famed Iron Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, remarked more than a century ago, "The Balkans aren't worth the bones of a single Pomeranian grenadier." The region certainly isn't worth any American deaths, especially in a world so full of messy conflicts calling on Washington to stay out.

Nevertheless, having helped blow up Yugoslavia, the allies arguably have some obligation to encourage peace and stability in Kosovo. What to do? The best outcome would be allowing the ethnic Serb dominated north to join Belgrade, in return for which Serbia would recognize Pristina.

The authoritarian government of President Slobodan Milosevic bears the greatest blame for the Kosovo war and Serbia's loss of Kosovo. The territory has special significance in Serbian history, and in 1987 Milosevic played on Serbian nationalism to seize power. He won, but his violent oppression of Kosovo's majority—admittedly exaggerated by Belgrade's enemies—drove the independence movement domestically and generated decisive support for it internationally. There is no going back.

However, if ethnic Albanians can legitimately escape majority rule in Serbia, why can ethnic Serbs not escape majority rule in Kosovo? They never supported secession from Yugoslavia and are concentrated in territory adjoining Serbia. If Brussels and Washington want local ethnic Serbs to accept the end of Belgrade's rule over Kosovo, the latter should be allowed to choose Belgrade's rule instead of Kosovo's.

America's social engineers and Europe's ruling Eurocrats insist on federalism, but only when friendly forces are in control. In this case, the allies said yes to ethnic Albanians but no to ethnic Serbs. This position is as unprincipled as that of Milosevic's government.

Is a federal system the best form of government? For some, certainly. But not for everyone. Especially not for groups that see nationalism as the best, and perhaps only, means to survive in a hostile world. As evident in Bosnia as well, attempting to force different communities to live together is often destabilizing. Even people of goodwill might prefer to be among perceived friends. And few rulers on either side have much goodwill. Better to allow people to choose their own countries.

The silliest objection to giving ethnic Serbs a choice is that changing boundaries invites more boundary-changing. The allies have ruthlessly destroyed old nations, created new ones, revised borders, rearranged communities, and changed names to fit their whims. More serious is the argument that yielding Kosovo's north to Serbia is rewarding the aggressors. As noted earlier, Belgrade was responsible for the worst of the abuses. Yet Gelbard called the KLA a terrorist organization for a reason. There is more than enough tragedy to go around. Ethnic-Serbs today should not be punished for the sins of their elders. Especially since most everyone in Kosovo would benefit from separation.

Indeed, under the auspices of the Trump administration, Vucic had conversations with Kosovo's then-President Hashim Thaci over "border correction," which offered an opportunity to swap territory and population. Of course, this challenge to the conventional wisdom caused hysteria among the usual suspects. Alas, the Trump administration's efforts collapsed after Thaci ended up indicted for war crimes and out of office.

This approach deserves international support since the status of ethnic Serbs in Kosovo inflames politics in Kosovo and Serbia alike. Kurti wins political points by cracking down on recalcitrant northern ethnic-Serbs. Remove them and his country's politics would calm.

Vucic, during the war an extreme ethnic nationalist who was Milosevic's minister of information, is an opportunist who manipulates ethnic tensions. "Border correction" would minimize his ability and incentive to stoke antagonism toward Kosovo. Moreover, allied support for shifting north Mitrovica to Serbia could be traded for Belgrade's recognition of Kosovo's independence.

Finally, dampening both Serbian and Albanian nationalism would reduce Russia's opportunity to foment unrest. Some analysts with vivid imaginations warn that the Balkans could become the next front in a larger war with Moscow. David Shedd, a former Defense Intelligence Agency head, and Ivana Stradner, a Foundation for Defense of Democracies research fellow, claimed, "By pushing the Balkans to the brink, [Putin] also hopes to show that NATO is a paper tiger and will not act if truly tested. Even if NATO does fight back against Serbia, Putin could still win. By opening another front, the West would have less capacity to help Ukraine."

This makes for a great conspiracy theory but doesn't look very much like the Balkans today. There is nothing mysterious or nefarious about Putin's interest in Serbia, which goes back to imperial times. Moscow's role in the region today is modest and primarily defensive. Russia enjoys favor by employing its veto to prevent Kosovo's membership in the United Nations. Normalize relations between Pristina and Belgrade, and that factor disappears. Beyond that Serbia wants to preserve west-leaning ties: At the UN, it voted to condemn Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Analysts who act like the Balkans matter to America have proposed frenetic activism to fend off Russia. Frankly, nothing about Kosovo should be considered "essential" for America and there is little that Washington "must" do. It would be best to emphasize ending the dispute between Kosovo and Serbia. Almost anything would be more effective than following Shedd's and Stradner's advice for NATO propaganda teams to "target far-right Serbian groups" with an anti-Russian message, as if the latter would be inclined to trust those who bombed and dismantled Serbia.

A quarter century after Kosovo's bitter civil war, its residents enjoy a better future. Nevertheless, their opportunities remain constrained by contending nationalisms in both Kosovo and Serbia. Washington and Brussels should stop pushing their vision for the Balkans and allow the people living there to negotiate their own futures.

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