

Kosovo: the road ahead

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Is the independence of Kosovo the end of the former Yugoslavia's disintegration or simply the beginning of a new chapter in the same book? In the US and most of Europe it is believed to be the former. Others, foremost Serbia and Russia, claim the latter and even go further by arguing that a Pandora's Box has been opened that will result in upheaval and unilateral declarations of independence everywhere from the Basque country in Spain to Chechnya in Russia, Transnistria in Moldova and Kurdistan in Iraq. The international community had set out to find a solution for Kosovo's status that would be functional, final and fair but failed to foster any agreement between Kosovar Albanians, who had received informal independence assurances from the US and hints of approval from some EU member states, and the Serbs, who had de-facto already lost the province but argued from a strong legal basis with Russian backing. What are the likely implications and scenarios now that independence is a fact?

At the international level there will be implications for the relations between Russia and Euro-Atlantic nations as these slide back into Cold War rhetoric. The United Nations will also be affected by this new blow to the weakly functioning and outdated Security Council's authority. Just as NATO bypassed approval of the Security Council in 1999 to stop the Milosevic regime's ethnic cleansing campaign in Kosovo, almost a decade later most NATO members felt they needed to accept Kosovo's independence to avoid mass violence and an indefinite deadlock over the province's status. The UN has been indecisive on Kosovo, while on the ground UNMIK's massive efforts resulted in little practical reform or development.

The UN is packing its bags while another hesitant player is taking over. The European Union is setting up a rule of law mission consisting of 1,900 police officers, customs officers, judges and prosecutors. The European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) mission will be backed by the 17,000 NATO troops already there. The EU's track record of 19 ESDP missions is mixed and has yet to prove it can link security and governance to long-term development. With the US role further declining in Kosovo implications for the EU are increased commitment and responsibility. Whereas the EULEX mission will have "correctional" powers it should above all avoid turning Kosovo into an EU protectorate where responsibility for failure is shifted between the EU and Kosovar officials. The problematic relationship between the High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina and local rulers has not offered a good example to follow.

The regional implications are likely to be mixed. Negative implications in Macedonia are likely to be smoothed over by a NATO membership offer in April. Speculation over demands for independence or border changes by Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina seems unfounded. The main risks of violence and threats to regional security will originate from internal developments in Serbia - the further infusion of national sentiments and possible unrest in the southern Presevo Valley that harbours a large Albanian minority - and Kosovo, which may suffer ethnic tensions in the weeks to come and might see an exodus of Serbs moving north to Serbian controlled Mitrovica and beyond.

Two scenarios could unfold. In the positive scenario Kosovo is recognised by a large number of countries, the EU stands firm on support and assistance and the newly attained independence spurs economic development of the new country. In Serbia, the country's democrats will blame the loss of Kosovo on the EU, US and NATO for internal political purposes and thereby take the wind out of the nationalists' sails. After a cooling-down period accompanied by substantial EU engagement, Serbia might come to terms with the situation it is confronted with and make a fresh start in moving closer to developing as a modern European democracy. It could do so fairly quickly, given that the most populous Western Balkan country can boast a well-educated population and an economy that is varied and reasonably competitive. Serbia could catch up quickly with neighbours that are on track for EU membership. Along with acceptance of Kosovo's loss, a final prerequisite for Serbia coming to terms with a troubled and war-torn past would be the extradition of General Mladic to the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia in The Hague - an issue that could be solved quickly if Serbia's leaders demonstrate the political will to make sure the police and intelligence services follow through with the political command to apprehend Mladic.

In the negative scenario the EU would be half-hearted in its support of Kosovo's independence and development. Weak international support could temper local enthusiasm for making a fresh start. Prospects of a Kosovo that is a black hole, rife with crime and corruption would become a self-fulfilling prophecy. In this scenario Serbia and Russia would hinder Kosovo's efforts to become a full-blown state in every possible way, including by blocking membership of international organisations. Frustration in Kosovo and Serbia could lead to violent incidents that in turn could escalate into a crisis with NATO troops in the middle.

In both scenarios the northern part of Kosovo, Mitrovica, where most Serbs live would continue to follow Belgrade's lead as it always has done. Belgrade will not stop support of parallel structures, including paying wages to local officials, now that Kosovo is independent. Kosovo's birth is likely to be marked by the creation of a new frozen conflict resembling the Abkhazia and South Ossetia case in Georgia. The Mitrovica area would formally be part of Kosovo but remain under Serbia's rule in practical terms. This situation could block development in both countries, just as before when Kosovo formally belonged to Serbia but was presided over by international bodies. The development of the economy and good governance would still be blocked by ethnic tensions. The question asked by Kosovar Albanians and Kosovar Serbs - "why would I be a minority in your country when you could be one in mine?" - seems to remain. In the coming weeks and months it will be up to the Pristina and Belgrade governments to prevent violence, while it will fall to international stakeholders - primarily the EU - to avert a (frozen) conflict over Mitrovica. With Kosovo's independence now a fact Mitrovica's status is sure to be problematic; but surely both Serbia's and Kosovo's future lies in the EU.

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