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The Balkan Conundrum: Kosovo and Regional Ripple Effects

Deep-seated ethnic and religious tensions continue to complicate Kosovo's transition from former Yugoslav republic to fully-fledged democracy. Worse still, warns Regina Joseph, additional threats are now starting to coalesce within and around its borders that could keep the country locked into insecurity and instability for the foreseeable future.

By Regina Joseph for ISN

Eight years on since the announcement of Kosovo's independence, the Balkan enclave finds itself at critical junctures both domestically and regionally. Global attention might have turned away to the crises in Ukraine and the Middle East, but the fact that policymakers do not currently deem the topic of Kosovo critical enough does not diminish the likelihood that decisions over the next few years regarding the former Yugoslavia will yield international ripple effects. As the post-Cold War stasis between Russia, Europe and the US fragments into destabilizing and divergent political and commercial objectives, the struggles of Kosovo and other Eastern European states create vulnerabilities that may yet be exploited.

Revisiting the 90s

At the domestic level, Kosovo's rift between its Albanian majority and Serb minority—exploited more than two decades ago by former Yugoslavian president Slobodan Milosevic—remains intact, with the specter of the brutal war of the late '90s still hanging heavy over this small country. In the last week of July 2014, the chief prosecutor for the European Union Special Investigative Task Force (SITF) Clint Williamson [affirmed](#) a [2011 report](#) alleging the complicity of Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) members in such war crimes as human organ trafficking, ethnic cleansing, sexual violence and abductions. Kosovo's Prime Minister Hashim Thaçi, the former political leader of the KLA, was not identified by name in the SITF report as one of the perpetrators among members of the now-disbanded paramilitary insurgency. However, [allegations of his involvement](#) in the 2011 report led to threats back then against anyone who participated in the report's information-gathering process. Anticipating intimidation of the like that surrounded the release of the 2011 report, Williamson declined to provide any names in the SITF document prior to an upcoming indictment—which will take at least another year due to the necessity of establishing a special court to adjudicate these crimes against humanity. Given the sensitivities, [Williamson asserted](#) that the majority of the work will be conducted outside the country; however, some aspects of the court will remain in Kosovo.

The logistical debate over the creation of the special tribunal underlines just how far Kosovo has to go in its bid to become a mature and fully-functioning state. In the effort to cease hostilities in Kosovo, the United States and the European Union (EU) initially attempted to rapidly transform what was once a poor Yugoslavian province into a fully-fledged democracy. As a result, several of Kosovo's future leaders emerged from the ranks of the KLA once the miasma of war cleared. Thrust suddenly into political roles, few of these new politicians could claim experience in fashioning and adhering to democratic institutions and the rule of law, a situation which led to the criticism of US and EU stakeholders as favoring stability over justice.

Present day problems

Consequently, corruption developed through ethnic and family connections continues to characterize many facets of Kosovo's governance. Politics in Kosovo frequently appears to be less about running the country and more about the pursuit of power and personal wealth. Transparency International's 2013 [Corruption Perceptions Index](#) ranks Kosovo 111th out of 177 countries, placing it on a par with the likes of Ethiopia and Tanzania.

The clientelism and cronyism that permeates Kosovo's political sphere has not only stalled the installation of effective legal structures, it has also impinged on the outcome of the recently-held elections. While these resulted in a majority victory for Hashim Thaçi's ruling PDK party, the leaders of three opposition parties vowed to challenge the results in a bid to prevent the incumbent Prime Minister and his party from governing for a third consecutive term. This led to the LDK, NISMA and AAK parties pooling their [electoral percentages](#) in an attempt to create an ex post facto coalitional majority, a move which plunged Kosovo into an all-too-familiar period of protracted party infighting.

Unsurprisingly, this type of fractious behavior extends beyond the political sphere to the schism between Kosovo's Albanian majority and Serb minority—a split physically embodied by the NATO-guarded barricade along the Ibar River that separates the town of Mitrovica and Kosovo itself into northern and southern enclaves inhabited by majorities of Orthodox Serbs and Muslim Albanians respectively. North Kosovo Serbs' mistrust of Kosovo's Albanian-led governance leads them to look instead to political and social initiatives originating from neighboring Serbia, which officially refuses to recognize Kosovo's independence. In June 2014, [the bridge barricade erected by Kosovo's Serbs to draw a line between the northern enclave and the rest of Kosovo was ordered removed](#) as part of the Brussels Agreement of 2013 accord brokered by Brussels between Kosovo and Serbia—an accord which requires the dismantling of all separating institutions and barriers in Kosovo. As soon [as the partition was disassembled](#) by citizens and overseen by Kosovo authorities and NATO troops, northern Kosovo Serbs, led by Serbian political party officials, unilaterally [erected a new barrier consisting of potted plants and declared the alternative partition a "peace park," thus sparking new confrontations](#).

Outside forces

While ethnic and cultural schisms between Kosovo's Albanian and Serb populations have always defined the lack of cohesion among its citizens, an emerging sectarianism is now threatening to augment the grievances that trouble the country. It also links Kosovo to other regional conflicts.

Kosovo's Albanian population has been renowned for centuries for its secularism. However, outside forces have started to undermine the stability of the constitutional secularism that Kosovo's Muslims have traditionally supported. As a result of post-war reconstruction aid provided by Salafist charities, [radical Islam](#) has filtered into some of Kosovo's communities. The unity of the country's Muslim community has been tested by the rise of fundamentalist political parties such as Islamic Movement Unite (LISBA), as well as [reports](#) of Albanian Kosovar jihadists traveling to and participating in Syrian and other Middle Eastern conflicts. Indeed, the day after the release of the SITF report, NATO's

Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) General Philip Breedlove outlined his growing concerns over the spread of radicalized jihadist behavior among Kosovo and other Balkan citizens, saying “it is a danger to the entire region and beyond, not only for Kosovo.”

Yet the rise of political Islam in Kosovo is not the only emerging sectarian challenge. Orthodox Christianity, the principle religion followed by Kosovo’s Serbs, is also serving political agendas. The nationalism stoked by Serbian politicians in aid of rejecting Kosovo’s independence and government is often entwined with messages from revered Orthodox patriarchs who support the Serbian nationalist cause. The [disturbing modern precedent for using Orthodox Christianity](#) in the name of provoking nationalist conflict began with Slobodan Milosevic in 1989, when he invoked Serbian grievances at rallies throughout the former Yugoslavia by citing the 600-year old battle between Kosovo’s Orthodox Christian and Muslim communities.

Currently, Orthodox Christianity is being [harnessed by Russian President Vladimir Putin](#) and his supporters, not only to bolster his political plan to be seen as a nationalist hero restoring Russian greatness through conservative values, but also as a pretext for justifying his actions in Orthodox-majority societies within Crimea and Ukraine. Putin’s plan for manipulating Orthodox sentiment does not end with the conflict in Ukraine. He is also appealing to the “special relationships” Russia has with Orthodox-majority states like Serbia and Bulgaria in a bid [to turn weaker European states away from the EU](#) and towards his larger economic and political objectives.

Nowhere is this agenda more pronounced than in the energy sector. Russia’s need to preserve its market position as the largest oil and gas supplier to Europe has been challenged by EU and US sanctions and initiatives, especially with regards to pipeline projects that transit through the Balkans . [The Gazprom-led South Stream pipeline proposes to bring gas to Central Europe](#) via an overland juncture that begins in Bulgaria and transits through Serbia and Hungary, as well as other Balkan states. The former Yugoslavian states, whose weakened economies regard EU membership as a lifeline to prosperity, are being strong-armed on both sides, forcing them to pit Western-led economic survival against an antagonistic Russia that can use energy as a blunt-force weapon.

Bulgaria announced a halt to its South Stream construction in June 2014, which was swiftly followed by a similar announcement by Serbia. These decisions were due in no small part to pressure applied by the West in response to the Ukraine crisis. However, these developments by no means alleviate the energy poverty problems facing Kosovo and its neighbors. With climate change aggravating the catastrophic floods and droughts that Serbia, Kosovo and other regional states have experienced in the last two years, their current dependence on lignite coal for their ineffective power grids remains a serious stumbling block in overcoming barriers to healthier economies as well as membership within the highly environmentally-regulated EU structure. Over the long term, if European prospects dim or take an adverse turn, some Balkan states may find cooperating with Russia over energy—and more—strategically necessary.

Accordingly, while improvements within Kosovo continue to move forward - albeit agonizingly slowly -larger threats are starting to coalesce within and beyond its borders. Unless Kosovo’s citizens and leaders can overcome their own longstanding internal disagreements to confront the greater forces that pressure the region today, their future may remain inextricably linked to conflict, poverty and regional polarization.

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