

Ahead of the status decision:

KOSOVO BETWEEN NEW VIOLENCE AND VOLATILE PEACE

The fate of Kosovo will be determined in the near future. The stabilization of this restless province is a crucial component of establishing a new order on the Balkans after the breakup of Yugoslavia. It is a key challenge for European security policy and a test for relations between the West and Russia. Serbs and Kosovar Albanians have not agreed on the peace plan elaborated by UN Special Representative Martti Ahtisaari. As far as the West is concerned, all indications point towards independence.



Protester with Albanian flag near Pristina, Kosovo

Hazir Reka/Reuters

Eight years after the NATO bombing campaign compelled the armed forces of Yugoslavia to pull out of Kosovo, a stable peace remains a distant prospect in the province, which has since been under UN administration. Inter-ethnic coexistence is hardly more than wishful thinking. Since 1999, the Serbs living in the north of the province have been ignoring the political institutions dominated by ethnic Albanians and have created parallel institutions. NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR) is engaged around the clock in protecting villages and religious buildings in order to prevent new outbreaks of ethnic violence like the one in March 2004. As there has been no economic rebound, the population suffers from more than 50 per cent unemployment. More importantly,

there is a lack of political determination to achieve reconciliation and to shape the future together.

The Kosovar Albanians, who make up about 90 per cent of the population, demand that the province be split off from Serbia. They point not only to the demographic situation, but also cite abuses of Kosovar Albanians by the armed forces of former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic, who died in 2006 in the detention center of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague, Netherlands as an accused war criminal. A small minority of Kosovar Albanians continues to demand that Kosovo be merged with Albania as well as the Albanian-dominated areas of

Macedonia. The remaining approximately 100,000 Serbs in Kosovo are just as opposed to secession from Serbia as the government in Belgrade is. For many Serbs, Kosovo – which has belonged to Serbia since 1912 – is the center of Serbian identity. The battlefield of Kosovo Polje, where Serbian troops were defeated by an Ottoman army in 1389, is regarded in their collective consciousness as the place where Christian Serbia tried to defend Europe against Islam. Also, the most important Serbian Orthodox monasteries are located in Kosovo.

The Ahtisaari Proposal

For a long time, the international community pursued a policy of "Standards before Status" for Kosovo, which was intended to secure minimal standards regarding good governance and coexistence of a multiethnic society before a decision was reached on the future status of the province. However, since the end of 2005, the status question has returned to the focus of discussions, not least because the uncertain future of Kosovo is preventing foreign investment. No breakthrough has been reached in the status negotiations that were begun in Vienna in February 2006, despite intensive efforts undertaken by the contact group (Germany, France, Britain, Italy, Russia, and the US) in particular.

In February 2007, chief mediator Ahtisaari presented a plan that was to serve as the basis for a final round of talks between Serbs and Kosovar Albanians. In late March 2007, after negotiations had failed, he

transmitted it to the UN Security Council. The plan anticipates de-facto separation of Kosovo from Serbia, thus valuing nations' right of self-determination higher than the principle of maintaining territorial integrity. To be sure, Kosovo is to enjoy limited sovereignty, and would thus continue to be under international tutelage to some extent. The Serbs of Kosovo would receive protection by strengthening the rights of a greater number of Serbian-dominated communities, by the possibility of close contacts with Serbia, and from KFOR, which plans to remain on the ground for a while yet. The plan also excludes the prospect of a "Greater Albania". However, Kosovo is to get its own constitution and national symbols such as a flag and a national anthem, and will be allowed to set up a small (2,500-strong) armed force equipped with light weapons.

While the Ahtisaari plan has been accepted by the Kosovar Albanian negotiators, it has been rejected by Belgrade. The Serbian constitution of October 2006 names Kosovo as an integral part of Serbia. In parliamentary elections in January, the nationalist Serbian Radical Party won the most votes. However, it is not inconceivable that a coalition of the Democratic Party, the Democratic Party of Serbia, and smaller parties will accept Kosovo's independence as the price of rapprochement with the Euro-Atlantic system. The blame might then be passed on to the "international community" and Slobodan Milosevic. A majority of the Serbian population is already convinced that Kosovo will win independence. However, in February 2007, the Serbian parliament passed a resolution on the territorial integrity of the country.

The role of Russia

It is unsure whether the UN Security Council will be able to reach agreement on the status question. The US has committed itself fairly early on to the independence of Kosovo. Washington regards Serbia as being mainly responsible for the wars of the 1990s, and in view of the current negative perception of the US in many Muslim countries, the Bush administration hopes to be able to capitalize politically from according formal recognition to Kosovo. Russia, on the other hand, is Serbia's most important international ally and has often emphasized that it would veto any plan rejected by Belgrade in the UN Security Council. Relations between the two countries have historically been close, not least because Russia re-

gards itself as the defender of the interests of Orthodox believers against Catholics and Muslims in the Balkans.

Moscow argues that any non-consensual alteration of Serbia's borders would create a precedent and would contribute to the disintegration of other multiethnic states. Russian President Vladimir Putin has indicated that under such a scenario, he would also be in favor of considering independence for the secessionist territories of the Southern Caucasus and Moldova. For the

terms of military capabilities. The progress made in the past few years in the areas of Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) are ultimately an outcome of European impotence at the time. From the EU's point of view, a successful engagement in the pacification of Kosovo today is essential, not just due to security policy considerations. Rather, it is the credibility of CFSP itself that is at stake. The EU must show that it is capable of providing security in Europe.



Kosovo and the Western Balkans

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West, on the other hand, Kosovo constitutes a special case. The issue has become a burden on relations between the West and Russia, which have already noticeably deteriorated due to discussions over the Russian stance vis-à-vis Iran's nuclear program, NATO's eastward expansion, US plans for a missile defense shield, and Russian energy policy.

The responsibility of the EU

The EU has long grappled with the adoption of a common position on the question of status. While the UK was sympathetic to the US stance, other countries like Germany stressed the importance of arriving at a negotiated solution. However, in February 2007, the EU foreign ministers announced their full backing for the Ahtisaari Plan. The Kosovo issue is a central challenge for the EU. In the 1990s, Europe failed to stabilize the Balkans due to discrepancies in the various national stances and shortcomings in

The EU is currently preparing to take over the lead in the successor body to the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK). The new International Civilian Representative will also represent the EU, similar to Bosnia-Herzegovina, and serve in this function for as long as deemed necessary by a steering group, which is yet to be created. There are also plans for a civilian ESDP operation that is between 1,300 and 1,500 strong (police officers, judges, customs agents, etc.). The EU is particularly well suited for the stabilization task in the Western Balkans since it has at its disposal a large selection of civilian and military instruments for conflict prevention and post-conflict operations. At the same time, Brussels is faced with enormous difficulties in Kosovo, even if the size of the province (which is 40 times smaller than Iraq) and the geographic proximity to the EU make the task easier. The military stabilization of Kosovo will remain the responsibility of KFOR, as this task would

overburden the EU at this point. However, the Kosovo mission is an opportunity for the EU to diminish the latent competition with NATO and at the same time to advance ESDP.

Europe's most important lever in stabilizing the Western Balkans is to bring the region closer to the EU. For decades, the EU expansion process has released powerful dynamics in the candidate countries long before their actual accession, as seen most recently in Bulgaria and Romania. By offering to resume negotiations over a stabilization and association agreement and other steps towards integration, the EU might be able to soften the blow suffered by Serbia in losing Kosovo. Some within the EU would not necessarily make the extradition of accused war criminal Radko Mladic to The Hague a precondition for closer ties between Serbia and the EU. A similar pragmatism has been displayed by the North Atlantic Council, which accepted Serbia and Bosnia in late 2006 into the alliance's "Partnership for Peace" program.

Scenarios for Kosovo

Three main scenarios are conceivable: If the Security Council agrees to the Ahtisaari Plan, Kosovo could elaborate a constitution. Based on a new UN resolution, an EU-led successor organization could take over from UNMIK after a transitional phase. Countries would then be able to accord bilateral recognition to Kosovo once it had declared independence and applied for membership in international organizations. However, in such a case, the Serb-dominated north of Kosovo might secede from the rest of the province and join Serbia. This would likely lead to an exodus of many Serbs living in other parts of the province, possibly in conjunction with violent conflicts. Agreement in the UN, therefore, would not guarantee stability in Kosovo.

Should Russia cast its veto in the Security Council, the US and other countries could still accord recognition to Kosovo. The legitimacy of the new state would be questionable from day one, however. Should some EU members recognize Kosovo and others refuse to follow suit, that would even jeopardize the future of the EU mission and therefore of Kosovo's administration. Unity within the EU and among the transatlantic partners is also a prerequisite for the presence of international armed forces, which would have to remain stationed in Kosovo for decades to come, albeit in smaller num-

bers and possibly, some day, under EU command.

As a third and final scenario, it is not inconceivable that the status quo will continue, i.e., that the status question will remain unresolved. If Kosovo does not become independent this year, however, an escalation of violence can hardly be avoided. Conversely, it seems unlikely that Serbia will make good on its threat to break off diplomatic relations with all countries that accord recognition to Kosovo. If Belgrade should continue further to isolate itself politically, the country's economic development would be severely impeded.

Swiss contributions

The stabilization of Kosovo and Serbia is of great importance to Switzerland. According to the Federal Office for Migration, in the year 2006, more than 190,000 or 12.5 per cent of foreigners living in Switzerland came from Serbia (including Kosovo), making it the second-most important country of origin (after Italy) for immigrants to Switzerland. Also, many people of Southeastern European descent have been awarded Swiss citizenship in the meantime. In terms of requests for political asylum, Serbia and Kosovo led the field in 2006 with 1,225 applications. The citizens of Kosovo, for all practical purposes, have no legal options for job migration to Switzerland. However, if economic and political conditions in Kosovo should further deteriorate, it would be difficult for the province to take back asylum seekers that had been rejected by Swiss officials, and migration would increase again (there were more than 30,000 asylum requests in 1999, when the war was still under way). There is also the danger that emigrants could become radicalized. Furthermore, it is important to stabilize Kosovo and to build political institutions in order to combat illegal drug trafficking and other areas of transnational organized crime in Southeastern Europe.

Consequently, Switzerland is one of the most important donor countries for Kosovo. It supports political institutions, reconstruction, economic and social development, and the regional integration process. In 2006, the Deza and SECO agencies invested CHF8.4 million in the future of the province. Together with the contributions of other federal agencies, the Swiss federation spent approximately CHF50 million in the past year. This is complemented by Swiss programs within the framework of

the Stability Pact and other initiatives, such as the work of Caritas Switzerland.

Another important contribution to military peace support in Kosovo is the mission of the Swiss Company (Swisscoy). The Swiss armed forces has so far sent 15 successive contingents of up to 220 troops to support KFOR in the larger area of Prizren, where Swisscoy is under the command of the German Bundeswehr. The continuation of this mission is in the interests of Switzerland, as it constitutes a major contribution to national security. It is also an opportunity for the army to gain experience in real-life missions as well as insights for the transformation of the national armed forces. Furthermore, the mission enhances the legitimacy of the armed forces and underlines Switzerland's commitment to solidarity and reliability in foreign affairs.

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