

Editorial: The Kosovo Trap

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In February 2006, talks began in Vienna to decide the status of Kosovo. The solution was forecast in several statements: instead of officially remaining a province of Serbia, considering that 90% of the population of the area is Albanian, mostly Muslim, and want independence, independent statehood might be granted to Kosovo. Kosovo enjoyed an autonomous status under Tito (abolished by Milošević) and thus has the legal right to decide on independence.

Serbia wants to keep its authority over the province, which is considered to be the ‘cradle of Serbia,’ a sacrosanct place in Serbian history. However, the Serb population has gradually decreased and become a small minority. This happened due to a huge Serb emigration after the Ottoman conquest of the region, a spontaneous, sometimes forced emigration, which gained special impetus during the Second World War, when the region became part of ‘Great Albania,’ and Serbs were killed and chased out of the province. The tension and violence of the post-war decades made emigration advisable for Serbs. Milošević’s Kosovo war-and-rape campaign made the Kosovars victims of exalted Serb nationalism in the late 1990s. The NATO bombing stopped this but the Serb minority declined into an unbearable situation. The Kosovo Liberation Army’s violent actions, killing Serbs, burning their houses, shooting at school buses, continued until recently and led to the flight of half of the remaining Serb population, and ‘cleansed’ Kosovo of 80% of the Roma population.

Is it a *fait accompli* or not exactly? The visiting Czech prime minister suggested that Kosovo should be divided into an independent Albanian state and a northern Serbian part, united with Serbia proper. Most of the Serb refugees could then be resettled. The Kosovars don’t want to hear about such a solution and the United Nations and the Great Powers have rejected the division of Kosovo. Instead, the Great Powers want to add a minority clause to the agreement, which would guarantee minority rights and important autonomy for the Serb minorities in their own affairs. Does this cut the Gordian knot? Hardly. The Versailles Treaty system already had this kind of minority clause and all of the newly independent countries had to sign it, but discrimination, ethnic cleansing, and killing followed. It is

certainly true that a Kosovar government would affirm an intention to abide by this clause. Agim Ceku, the prime minister of Kosovo since March, gave his inaugural speech in the Kosovo assembly in Serbian to emphasize this. But would they be able to stop violent paramilitary units from abusing the minority? The Rugova government was unable to do so.

The 'evident' decision on Kosovo independence has a major negative international impact as well – its total lack of consistency in settling ethnic-territorial problems. Of course, nobody asks any longer why the border solutions of the post-Second World War Peace Treaties were forgotten, or why the Helsinki Agreement of 1975, which again guaranteed the post-war borders, was put aside. They belong to the past. But the inconsistency regarding the Yugoslav question is more outrageous than the decisions of the Versailles Treaty, which sowed the seeds of new conflicts. In 1991, the Great Powers accepted Slovene, Croat, Bosnian, and Macedonian independence (without asking guarantees for the minorities); regarding Bosnia-Herzegovina, however, they did not accept the right for self-determination for the Serb minority, which wanted to join Serbia, nor did they question the Croat decision not to give autonomy for the 12% Serb minority, living next to the Serbian border. There was inconsistency in accepting the division of Yugoslavia, but not of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo.

Granting independence for Kosovo is seemingly evident. But doesn't this decision retroactively justify the use of force and military actions to change borders and status? What message does this decision give the Hungarian minority in Voivodina, which enjoyed autonomy under Tito, or in southern Slovakia, living next to the Hungarian border, or to the Transylvanian Hungarians, who once also enjoyed autonomy within Romania, although it was abolished and never re-established. What is the message for the Albanians in Macedonia, the Bulgarians in Dobrudja, the Russians in Estonia, Latvia, and Moldova? To take arms to succeed?

This is a policy without good, consistent principles and universal justice. It does not mean that it endangers the European peace. In the hot spots in Kosovo, no less than 17,000 NATO and/or European troops keep the peace. They are present in Bosnia and Macedonia and have to stay there. Furthermore, the European Union plays a bigger role than the troops themselves. The number one goal of all of these newly independent countries is joining the EU. To be accepted, they have to realize all of the requirements of the so-called *acquis communautaire*, among many others, giving and practicing equal rights for minorities and rejecting any discriminatory rules. It has already worked in Slovenia, Macedonia, Estonia and Latvia, and could work even in Kosovo. Nevertheless, there is no really good exit from the Kosovo trap.